

Mapping the Cultural Heritage and the Relevance of Mayon Volcano to the Locals of Santo Domingo, Albay, Philippines

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to document the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the communities surrounding the Mayon Volcano Natural Park (MVNP) in Sto. Domingo, Albay. Specifically, it aimed to 1) map the significant tangible immovable cultural heritage associated with MVNP; 2) map the significant tangible movable cultural heritage associated with MVNP; and 3) map the significant intangible cultural heritage related to MVNP such as, but not limited to, oral traditions, social practices, rituals, festive events and performing arts. The study employed a qualitative approach that used descriptive survey of research, utilized the standard method of survey of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and focus group discussion. Findings showed that MVNP is very significant to the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay. Though it is dangerous, MVNP's fertile soil helps them to grow rice, vegetables and fruit-bearing trees. In addition, the gravel and sand which came from the volcano are a major source of livelihood. All tangible and intangible cultural heritage such as practices and beliefs of the people were also associated with MVNP.

Keywords: *Heritage, Mayon Volcano, Santo Domingo*

Introduction

Fundamentally, cultural mapping is defined as “an approach used to identify, record and use cultural resources and activities for building communities, where communities map what is important to them” (Cook & Taylor, 2013). Through the conduct of cultural mapping, the local government unit (LGU) and other stakeholders can identify the distinct cultural resources of their community and at the same time can properly record a heritage resource for future reference. Moreover, the process can generate interest in heritage resources among users and non-users of cultural properties. Eventually, they can develop or establish a heritage conservation council who shall lead in the conservation of the local cultural heritage as well as develop legislation, bills and guidelines for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the community.

The NCCA is the overall policymaking and coordinating agency for culture and arts. Moreover, it is tasked under Republic Act No. 10066, or the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, through the appropriate cultural agencies and LGUs, to establish and maintain the Philippine Registry of Cultural Property (PRECUP).

LGUs are specifically mandated by the law to maintain an inventory of cultural property under its jurisdiction and to furnish the NCCA a copy of its local inventory. In order to help the LGU identify and account its cultural properties, the NCCA established the Cultural Mapping Program to assist them in this endeavor.

Mayon Volcano is the most active volcano in the Philippines that had its worst recorded eruption on February 1, 1814. This most destructive eruption witnessed by Albayanos killed roughly 1,200 people. According to Aries (2014), the second most destructive explosion of the volcano was recorded between June 4 and July 23, 1897, and killed 350 people in Sto. Domingo, Albay, due to pyroclastic flow characterized by hot water and rocks. During its most destructive phase, the explosion lasted for 17 hours and damaged the Sto. Domingo's seashore and its barrios (villages), namely, Sto. Niño, San Isidro, San Roque, San Antonio and Misericordia. The Basud River in Sto. Domingo was also hit with lava flow.

Mayon Volcano is the highest mountain in Southern Luzon. Its intertwined cultural and natural heritage values are manifested in the associative

relationship communities have with the active volcanic landscape. In this regard, the cultural fabric of the communities living around the site is inextricably linked to their interaction with the landscape, which can be characterized in two major ways: (1) the community's rich tangible and intangible heritage resources borne out of their lived experience of the volcanic landscape's aesthetic qualities and (2) the landscape symbiosis and community resilience in response to the geologic activity of the volcanic landscape. Thus, it can be said that communities around the landscape live in a cycle of creation and destruction, of flourishing and adaptation, in response to the regular but unpredictable changes brought about by the landscape's geological activity.

Mayon Volcano is situated in the southern part of the main island of Luzon in the province of Albay. Towering at a height of 2,462 m above sea level, it is known for its perfectly conical shape whose natural beauty has inspired a number of legends and art. The volcano with its surrounding landscape was declared a national park on July 20, 1938, the first in the nation. It was reclassified as a natural park and renamed as MVNP in 2000. It is the centerpiece of the Albay Biosphere Reserve, declared by UNESCO in 2016, and is currently being nominated as a World Heritage Site.

MVNP covers a total area of 5,775.70 ha. It is protected by virtue of Presidential Proclamation No. 413 signed into law in June 2000. The park is home to 156 floral species belonging to 36 families and 83 species of trees that include the single dipterocarp found in the area (*Hopea philippinensis*) and one near-threatened species from the rare family Nepentheceae, the pitcher plant *Nepenthes ventricosa*. The ethnobotanical plant biodiversity composed of 71 woody species belonging to 49 genera and 33 families has been recorded. Many are endemic (32%) while others are indigenous. It is also a habitat for 104 species of land vertebrates, including 57 species of birds, 10 species of amphibians, 24 species of reptiles and 13 species of mammals. Of the 13 mammal species, seven are endemic of which three are listed vulnerable: the Philippine Brown Deer, Philippine Warty Pig and Giant Golden-Crowned Flying Fox. The bird fauna includes 37 endemic species with three species listed in the IUCN red list: the nearly-threatened Luzon Bleeding Heart, vulnerable Philippine Eagle-Owl and critically-endangered Philippine Cockatoo. The 10 amphibian fauna are all endemic frog species with four listed in the IUCN red list: the nearly-threatened Luzon Fanged Frog, Luzon Forest Ground Frog and Guenther's Forest Frog and the vulnerable Banded Pigmy Tree Frog. The MVNP also houses one endemic butterfly, seven

endemic stick-insects and nine endemic spiders in the registered insect and arachnid fauna.

Currently, NCCA is in the process of conducting a comprehensive heritage mapping activity surrounding the circumferential base of the volcano in order to identify and validate the different natural and cultural elements related to the volcanic landscape. This is the reason why this study was made, the results of this study will be used not only in the nomination dossier but also to identify the appropriate actions needed to protect these values between culture and nature.

Materials and Methods

The study used a qualitative approach with the use of interviews and focus group discussions with the residents as participants. The interview is the most common qualitative method used in cultural mapping. It is a conversation between people, wherein a person (the researcher) asks pertinent questions related to the topic of the research. In this study, there were two sets of respondents: the key informants and the participants. The key informants were the officials or the persons taking charge of the edifice of the tangible immovable and movable cultural heritage. The participants were the residents who came from the different barangays of Sto. Domingo, Albay, which were identified as knowledgeable of the intangible cultural heritage as well as the significance of Mount Mayon to the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay.

To ensure that the researcher would be able to gather the necessary information, the researcher asked for the confirmation and cooperation of the chosen resident and the key informants. The standard face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion were used in collecting the data from the key informants and the residents.

All recorded and documented information on tangible and intangible heritage in Sto. Domingo, Albay, related to MVNP were collected. Primary data was gathered through focus group discussions with the residents and key informant interviews using the different survey forms from NCCA as guide.

Results and Discussion

Oral Testimony from Resident-Respondents

During the interview, the participants gave the same testimony on the question "What is Mayon for You?" All of them said that "Mayon Volcano is indeed beautiful but dangerous." According to them, her beauty is known not only in the Philippines but in other parts of the globe. This beauty helps their livelihood because of the tourists who visit their place. Some said that because of the growing number of tourists who visit their place, they decided to set up a sari-sari store selling food and drinks, which serve as their source of livelihood. Some also said their children were able to work as tour guides. The participants also said that another beauty of Mayon Volcano is its fertile soil. As farmers, according to them, the fertile soil that they have helps them a lot in planting fruits and vegetables which is also another source of livelihood. Aside from this, the gravel, sand and rocks that came from the volcano also helps them a lot in earning additional income as they also work as laborers for the quarrying industry in their place. In addition, the barangays surrounding Mayon Volcano also earned revenues from the quarry industry. This is the beauty that Mayon Volcano has, according to the participants.

But it is also dangerous, according to the participants. One of the participants said it is dangerous to their life and livelihood. Every time Mayon Volcano erupts, they voluntarily evacuate their place because of the danger they face. According to the participants, because of some hard-headed residents during Mayon's previous eruptions, injuries as well as casualties were recorded. These served as a learning experience to them, that's why according to these participants they immediately evacuate once authorities tell them to do so. Another participant said it was not only their lives but also their livelihood, their plants (vegetables and fruit-bearing trees) and some of their animals that get destroyed during an eruption. These are the dangers they face in an eruption, according to these participants.

Experiences About Mayon Volcano

There were different responses given by the participants on the question "What Are Your Experiences About Mount Mayon?" The following were the responses:

Ginang Matilde, not her real name, said that she first experienced Mayon's eruption back when she was in Grade 1. She remembered the danger brought by the volcano. She also said that all of them in their place were

evacuated. Some residents got wounded and there were also casualties. She added that she was really scared at that time. She further said that she remembered the boat called Sapyawan which served as their transportation going to the evacuation site in Mirisbiris. Though she had a frightening experience with Mayon, she also had beautiful ones with the volcano. According to her, as a mountaineer, she experienced climbing the tip of Mount Mayon. She further said that while you're at the top you can see the beauty of everything.

Another participant was Ginang Carmen, not her real name. According to her, she got really frightened when she saw their neighbours running to the poblacion to evacuate. They used to gather at Barangay Salvacion thinking that they were safe in that place.

The same statement was given by Ginang Amelia, not her real name. She said it was necessary to evacuate and stay with their relatives for their safety. Ginang Anonuevo, not her real name, also said they were forced to evacuate because they were within the danger zone. She added that their plants like vegetables, rice and fruit-bearing trees got destroyed. Those were their painful experiences during Mayon's eruption.

Benefits from Mayon Volcano

The same responses were given by the participants on the question "What Benefits did You Get from Mount Mayon?" They said that aside from being able to be physically fit, they were also able to engage in farming because of the fertile soil that they have. They were also able to establish a small business, which served as another source of livelihood because of the growing number of tourists (local or foreign) who visit their place.

These participants also said that the other benefits the locality gets from Mayon Volcano are the gravel, sand and rocks that are used as materials for the construction of infrastructure. The materials that came from the volcano contribute to the province's economy, particularly the municipality of Sto. Domingo, because of the shares received out of the income generated from the quarrying industries. Ginang Amelia also added that these quarrying industries also contribute to the daily income of some residents in their place because they work as laborers in these quarrying industries.

Beliefs about Mayon Volcano

From the interview conducted, there were participants who said that once an old man is seen

climbing up the tip of Mount Mayon, it is a sign that the volcano will soon erupt. Some also said that once the tip of Mayon becomes sharp and a red shadow looms over it, it is also a sign of an imminent eruption. Lola Carmen, not her real name, also added that another sign that Mayon Volcano will soon erupt is when animals living around it begin leaving the area. Some respondents also said that another sign is when the river along Mayon Volcano begins to dry up.

Religious Aspect

Based on the interview conducted, the researcher found that the residents are very religious. They always pray the Rosary and the *Horatio Imperata*. According to the participants, prayer makes them strong and takes away their fears, especially this time that Mayon Volcano is in an abnormal situation. Another religious activity being done by the residents is the so-called *Kristyanong Turog*, a religious rite usually done at 2 a.m. to push the bad spirit away and protect them from any harm that the volcano might bring. Another religious rite of the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay, is the so-called Procession in Foot and the Novena to Señor Sto. Domingo. According to them, this will prevent the eruption of Mayon Volcano.

Cultural Mapping of Significant Tangible Immovable Heritage

Based on the gathered data, there were two significant tangible immovable heritage related to Mayon Volcano. These were the Gabaldon Building and the Sto. Domingo Church.

Gabaldon Building. The Gabaldon Building (Figure 1) can be found at Sto. Domingo Central School. It is owned by the national government and the Department

of Education. It has a total area of 7 x 9 m, a standard size for the Gabaldon-type school building throughout the country and built in the 1930s through Act No. 1801, also known as the Gabaldon Act.

During the investigation and interview with the key informant, it was found that the building has an elevated ground floor, large awning windows with capiz-shell panels and wooden frames. It has a symmetrical and front elevation central porch and wide identical staircases. Its surrounding has been properly landscaped to exquisitely reflect the structure reflecting Spanish heritage while still embodying modern ideals.

The Gabaldons were built by the American colonial government with American architect, William E. Parsons as the designer of the blueprints of said buildings. A standard size of 7 x 9 m (23 ft x 30 ft) was conceptualized by Parsons for the school buildings regardless of the number of classrooms for swift construction of public schools. According to historians, the buildings are modern in design while drawing elements from the *bahay kubo* and *bahay na bato* common in most towns at that time. The Gabaldons were raised 1.2 m (3.9 ft) on a platform made of wood or concrete. The buildings also exhibit large windows and high ceilings for ventilation and lighting purposes (Lopez, 2019). The Gabaldon School Building or simply known as the Gabaldon is a term used to refer to heritage school buildings in the Philippines built during the American colonial era.

Originally, it served as a classroom to six classes, and as a hall for programs, training, seminars and other school gatherings. The building was also utilized as an evacuation center when disasters happened, like the eruption of Mayon. At present, the building is no longer



Figure 1. Gabaldon Building at the Sto. Domingo Central School

used as a classroom nor as an evacuation center due to the extended danger zone set by the government. The building was constructed within the 6 km-danger zone. The building is now being utilized as a hall for training, programs and school gatherings and an office such as principal's office, assistant principal's office, supply office and administrative office.

The building was associated with Mayon Volcano because the solid and concrete foundations, including its walls, were mixed with volcanic rocks and aggregates from Mayon. Its surrounding has been properly landscaped to reflect the structure reflecting Spanish heritage while still embodying modern ideals.

One of the legacies left by the Americans to the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay, was the Gabaldon school building that was built in the 1930s. This school building is significant to the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay, because it instilled a sense of pride among the teachers and students who used them. They also started to appreciate the finer things in life. Many children in Sto. Domingo, Albay, learned to read and write in these schools from the time it was constructed up to the present. The Gabaldon school building is a heritage structure that can serve as a reminder for us on the importance of education in uplifting the lives of the masses. Though at present it has been converted into offices and hall of Sto. Domingo Central School, it remains significant to the people of Sto. Domingo, Albay.

As to the status/condition of the structure of the building, the construction was excellent, it is maintained and is capable or good enough for any gatherings and activities. Though there were renovations made to the building, the original structure was maintained and it is still located in its original site. As to constraints, threats or issues, the present location of the building is vulnerable to Mayon eruption because of its proximity as it is located within the 6-km danger zone.

As to the conservation measures undertaken by the national government, provincial government and the community, the Gabaldon Building is protected by Philippine law under Republic Act No. 11194 or the Gabaldon School Buildings Conservation Act.

Under the law any "modification, alteration, destruction, demolition or relocation" of Gabaldon buildings are illegal (RA 11194). The particular legislation also designates the Gabaldons as cultural properties citing another legislation known as Republic Act No. 10066 or the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (Gita, 2019).

Church of St. Dominic de Guzman (Sto. Domingo Church). Another immovable cultural heritage in Sto. Domingo, Albay, is the St. Dominic de Guzman Church (Figure 2) located along the town's Market Site. The structure is owned by the Diocese of Legazpi and stands in an area of almost one hectare. St. Dominic de Guzman is one of two churches in the province of Albay with twin belfries. The twin belfries located at the front of the church give graceful symmetry to the church. The church was built through *Las Ordinanzas de 1573* or the Laws of the Indies. The church is now 199 years old, counting back from its construction in 1820.

The church was built on massive solid stone walls and supported by pillars. Two dome-shaped belfries frame the main structure and give its façade a distinctive symmetry. Since cement was not yet used during the construction, massive stone walls were built using a mixture of lime, egg albumin, and "*tangguli*" (molasses) that serve as binder and hardener. Atop the door at the main entrance is a coat of arms that symbolizes "*Piedras Labradas*" which means cut stone that has a symbolic meaning to the structure itself.

Inside the church can still be found an iron gate that dates back to 1889. This enclosed the baptistry at which threshold are preserved the church's original walls of tiled volcanic rocks. The "*retablo*" has been redesigned but the interior was relatively well-preserved. Part of the stone block fence was maintained, but a big portion had been renovated or already tampered.

A cemetery could likewise be found at the back of the church wherein lies remains which date back to 1868. Another thing about the church is the fact that there were priests buried within the walls inside the church. If you take a walk around, you'll see headstones built into the walls, and behind those headstones are the remains of various priests that were assigned in the parish.

The Parish of St. Dominic de Guzman is the most prominent landmark in the quaint and picturesque town of Sto. Domingo. The church was constructed under the close supervision of the Diocesan friars as shown by the coat of arms in the main entrance of the church. It was massively built but was constructed through forced labor. Men and women were made to work by gathering volcanic rocks from Maranlog, now San Isidro. The natives constructed this church with volcanic stone blocks, chiseled balustrades and the distinctive twin domes. It was a common fear among the people that anyone who failed to work would receive 12 hard beatings in public. It took the construction 10 years to



Figure 2. St. Dominic de Guzman Church and its stone walls (A), interior (B) and cemetery (C).

complete. From the time it was constructed in 1820 to today, the church was used for religious gatherings.

One of the stories associated with the structure and Mayon Volcano was its construction. As was previously mentioned, volcanic materials were used for the construction. Another was the bells that used to ring to warn the people of impending harm. This was called “Pangiritingiti.” Every time there was an impending disaster, the bells rang and people were warned to evacuate, just like the worst eruption in 1897 when the natives were immediately evacuated because of “Pangiritingiti.” The church also served as refuge for guerillas during the Japanese occupation.

As to the significance of the church, prior to its establishment, the early inhabitants of Sto. Domingo, Albay, have their own unique way of praise and worship through the so-called “*tarahadi*,” done especially during good harvests. With the growing population and spiritual life, they built the first chapel that later on became Sto. Domingo Church. In such a way the community evolved to what Sto. Domingo is now.

By observing the inside of the church, the researcher found several statues and figures of different patron saints. According to the key informants, these statues are already more than 100 years old. These images were taken cared of by the different religious organizations of Sto. Domingo, Albay.

Mapping of Significant Tangible Movable Heritage Background Information

Based on the data gathered, the researcher and his mappers found two significant tangible movable heritage: the Ethnographic Object known as “*Lubang*” and a Religious object known as the Image of Nuestra Señora de Sta. Misericordia.

Ethnographic Object “*Lubang*.” A *Lubang* (Figure 3) is a household item used for crushing and grinding food. The item was produced sometime in the 1970s with an estimated age of more or less 49 years old according to Manny, not his real name, who is the key informant. He is the owner of the household item which he inherited from his grandparents and has been with his family for about three generations.

According to the key informant, the “*Lubang*” was designed by his grandparents sometime in the 1970s to crush and grind food. This object is being associated with Mayon Volcano because it was intricately made from volcanic stone. It was carved manually from a boulder and measures about 17 in in height, with a diameter of 45 in. It’s generally stone gray in color and shaped like a mortar and pestle.

The key informant said that the *lubang* was very much significant to the people of the place since it was made for economic purposes. The key informant added that it was



Figure 3. *Lubang*

used to make recipes that were sold in the neighborhood. Selling helped develop good social relationships within the community resulting in close family ties.

At present, the *lubang* already has stains and small holes around its body. Because of its condition, it was no longer used for food preparation. Instead, the object was preserved and is now being displayed in the garden gallery of the family.

Religious Object “Image of Nuestra Señora De Sta. Misericordia”. Another significant tangible movable heritage found in Sto. Domingo, Albay, is the Image of Nuestra Señora De Sta. Misericordia (Figure 4). According to the key informant, a missionary priest brought the image that has a blue dress, kinky black hair like the *Aeta* with a small crown on the head and ring on the finger. The ring was made of gold with 12 very small stars also made up of gold. The 134-year-old image was brought to them in 1885. There is no record on who was the missionary priest who brought the image in their place.

The image is made up of wood of more or less one foot in height, and has four beautiful and colorful dresses. The blue dress measures 14 in in length and 12½ in shoulder, the shiny white dress measures 17 in in length and 12 in shoulder, the red dress measures 21½ in in length and 16½ in shoulder, and the dirty white dress measures 16 in in length and 13 in shoulder. The image is under the care of Barangay Sta. Misericordia, which was named in honor of this image.

The key informant said that at the time the image was brought to their place, it only measured one hand span (*isang dangkal*). Presently, it measures more or less one foot. He added that the image was said to be miraculous. According to the informant, once the dress of the image was spotted with *amorseco*, the people believed that Mayon Volcano would soon erupt. The people also believed that they were being warned by the image of an impending disaster/calamity. This was how the people associated the image to Mayon Volcano.

The key informant also discussed the significance of the image to the people of the place. He said that people prayed to the image, asking that they be put out of



Figure 4. Image of Nuestra Señora De Sta. Misericordia and its four dresses

harm's way in times of disasters, like Mayon's eruption. As to comparative criteria, the key informant said it was representative because the image represents religious belief of the people in times of disaster and the image showed a miraculous act based on rumors from those who experienced miracles.

Though it has been in place for 134 years, the image is still in good condition, and no damages were found on the body. The key informant said the image is taken cared of by this barangay and that they don't see any constraints or threat to the image since it is protected by the people and the chapel was built for the image.

Mapping of Significant Intangible Cultural Heritage

Kristyanong Turog (Figure 5) is a significant intangible cultural heritage of the municipality of Sto. Domingo. Based on the data gathered, *Kristyanong Turog* is a social practice and worship rites of the natives of Sto. Domingo, Albay. This social practice and worship rites was done in the form of a procession within the 8-km danger zone of Mayon Volcano. The related domains of this intangible cultural heritage is in the form of oral tradition and expression as well as knowledge and practices concerning nature of the universe since this was done regularly by the natives especially when natural disaster or calamity was soon to happen. The purpose of this social practice and worship of the natives was for them to be kept safe from the impending harm that might be brought by any disaster.

Based on the data gathered, it was found that the practice of *Kristiyanong Turog* is in the form of penitence because the natives believed they were being punished by God every time a natural calamity happened in their place, especially when Mayon Volcano erupts. As to the information given by the respondents, this practice is being done every year in August as they believe this is the month when they suffer most.

Culture-Bearer/s and Practitioner/s of the Element. According to the respondents, this practice is being participated in by residents (youth and elderly) or the local parishioners of the place. This religious practice has been passed on for four generations. The tangible movable heritage or object being used for this element is the crucifix which is made up of wood and paint and is said to be made by the natives of the place in 1905.

Stories/Narratives Associated with the Element. Based on the information given by the respondents, part



Figure 5. Kristiyanong Turog

of the practice is that the person carrying the cross during the procession is a male devotee who suffered from illness. The natives believe that he will be miraculously healed. People also believed that a continuous practice will spare the town from the wrath of any natural disaster like the eruption of Mayon Volcano and other calamities. They also believed that the continuous practice of this element will spare them from any disaster and result in close family ties because of their cooperation to this activity.

Constraints/Threats/Issues/Challenges of the Element. The key informant said that perhaps this social practice cannot be carried out in the future since the number of youth who participate in this activity is very limited. However, the respondent said the youth are being taught and encouraged to participate in the activity. Another measure done was the renovation of the chapel to protect the image. The parish pastoral organization (who leads the procession) is very active in recruiting and providing information about this religious faith.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the dangers posed by Mayon Volcano, residents still find it beneficial to live around it. It helped improve the economic status not only of those who live around it but also those who used to quarry in that place. The fertile soil and the immediate plains of the landscape have become a primary source of livelihood in the area. The volcanic deposits have also been identified and extracted for mining operations. The volcano's frequent activity regularly outsources volcanic deposits and supplies these sites with mineable materials that are used

for construction of structures.

Tangible immovable heritage was constructed out of the materials that came from Mayon Volcano. Further, both the intangible cultural heritage of the ethnographic and religious objects found in this municipality were associated with Mayon Volcano. As to the ethnographic object, this was made from materials that came from Mayon Volcano. Religious beliefs were maintained for them to be spared of any disaster, especially that which might be brought by Mayon Volcano.

It is recommended that the conservation of these cultural heritages be given importance through local, regional and national initiatives. While this study was limited in scope, succeeding studies are recommended for a full cultural mapping of the municipality. It is further recommend to capacitate local authorities with the ability to adopt people-centered framework to include both natural and cultural values and include the identification of significant deposits which can be utilized for geological tourism activities, with comprehensive training to narrate Mayon's heritage from the point of view of geological science, and from the community's perspective through stories about those historical eruptions. Lastly, it is also recommended that preparation of ordinance or action plan for conservation and protection of cultural heritage is necessary.

Similar studies may be consulted for this purpose for a comprehensive conservation plan in the province of Albay. Studies of Besmonte (2020) in Tabaco City, Ayo (2020) in Tiwi, Abante (2020) in Guinobatan, and Alfane (2020) in Legazpi City may provide a better perspective along this line.

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