



Biringan: A Folktale of the Invisible City of Samar

Maria Leonora N. Poe

Samar State University – Paranas Campus, Philippines

leonorapoe0@gmail.com

Larry S. Macapugas

Samar State University – Paranas Campus, Philippines

macapugas.larry@ssu.edu.ph

Julita P. Delacruz

Samar State University – Paranas Campus, Philippines

delacruzjulita89@gmail.com

Mario C. Daguinod

Samar State University – Paranas Campus, Philippines

mario.daguinod@ssu.edu.ph

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Abstract

This study explores the folktale of Biringan City, an invisible and mythical metropolis in Samar, Philippines, believed to be inhabited by enchanted beings known as engkantos. Despite advances in science and technology, certain phenomena like Biringan remain unexplained and persist through oral tradition as folklore. Using a qualitative approach with thematic analysis, data were collected from in-depth interviews with ten local participants aged 50 and above from Pagsanjan, Samar. The study uncovered four main themes characterizing Biringan City: (1) a Perfect Dwelling Place featuring advanced technology, overwhelming wealth, beautiful environment, and friendly inhabitants; (2) Deception, where the city's allure is used to trap visitors through enticing but dangerous offers such as eating black rice or accepting healing powers at a high cost; (3) Protection, including beliefs that the city shields locals from harm such as zero COVID-19 casualties and avoidance of conflict; and (4) Healing, involving mystical powers to cure diseases and even raise the dead. The folktale reflects a rich cultural narrative that blends wonder, caution, and mystery, illustrating how local communities interpret and preserve their heritage through storytelling. This research adds depth to existing accounts of Biringan, highlighting its significance in Philippine folklore and cultural identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world through Science has always had a way of describing phenomena, and the technologies of these modern times have made the pursuit of truth a lot easier. However, no matter how advanced all these technologies were, there are still occurrences in which science and modern technologies cannot explain a particular event.

According to Weinberg (2002), Science is incapable of explaining everything. Because there will always be ventures that no one can explain, not because we wouldn't be able to understand them if we knew all of the precise circumstances that led up to them, but because

we will never know all of them.

In addition, an article in Live Science (2016), states that Science can explain a lot, but it can't explain everything. When people see, hear, or believe something that cannot be explained, science is forced to strive to prove that it does not exist. As a result, in the vast majority of cases, unexplained happenings stayed unexplained, and they became hearsay or folktale as time passed.

Folktales, on the other hand, are believed to be stories of previous occurrences that have been passed down through the generations. A folktale is a form of the traditional narrative that contains legends, proverbs, songs, jokes, and stories about certain cultures or groups of people (Thompson, 1955). Even though folktales are not true accounts of actual events, they do contain elements of truth and the time period in which they were recounted (Bascom, 1965).

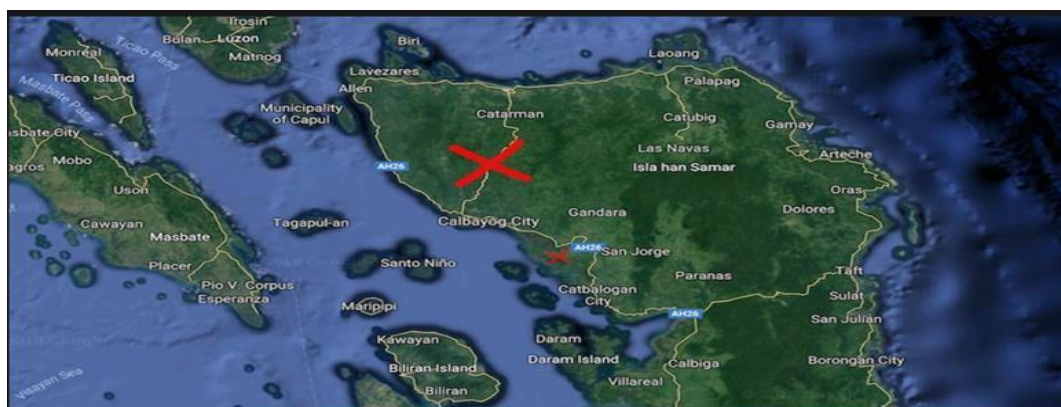
The Philippines because of the numerous diverse tribal people that dwell, has documented a limited amount of folk literature only (Famoso, 2021). Nevertheless, the country's dignified folklorists - storytellers, collectors, historians, and anthropologists -- make the preservation of folk literature feasible (Lopez, 2006). And folktale as part of folklore was seen to always includes mythical creatures and places.

Mythological places have captured human imagination across cultures throughout history (Wenzel, 2006). To name a few are the sunken city of Atlantis, the lost city of El Dorado, the Greek northland of Hyperborea, Shangri-La, Thule, and many more. The Philippines' "Biringan City" is one of the recent additions.

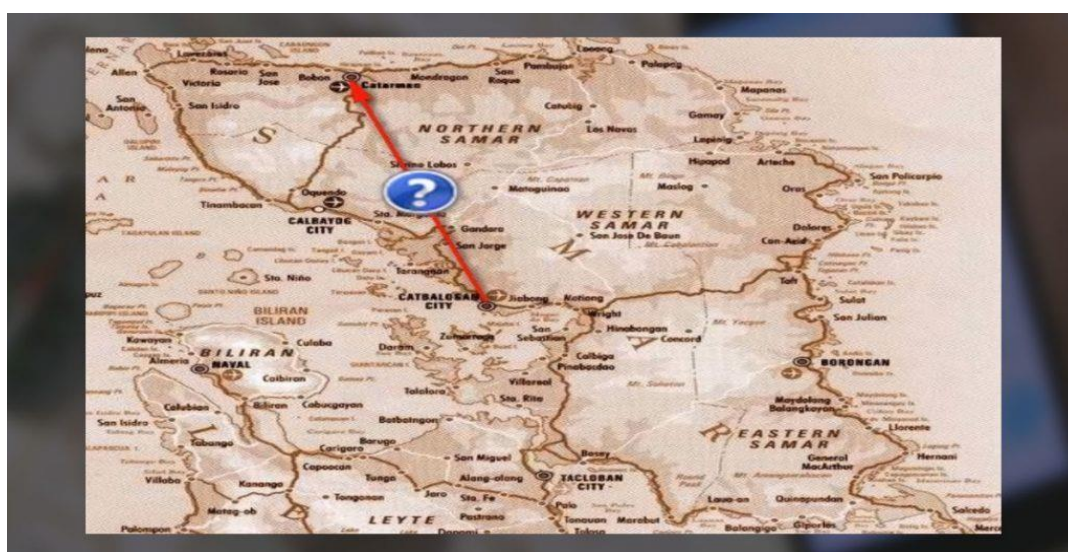
In an article in the Philippine Tales (2013), which was updated in 2018, *Biringan*, which is called "The Invisible City", "The Dark City", and "City of the Lost", is said to be where the *engkantos* (enchanted being) inhabit. It is described to be a technologically sophisticated metropolis with high-rise buildings and structures that no man can imagine. Moreover, Limos (2019) states that people who claim to have seen it describe it as a site of unrivaled splendor and architecture, surpassing even megacities like New York and Hong Kong. However, the ghostly metropolis never exposes itself to the naked eye, but only to those who are welcomed into the dark city.

There may be no one who can exactly identify the location of this city, as the only way to be there is to be lost (Spike, 2022). But there are some accounts stating the location of *The Invisible City* in the human world. Paciente (2022) states that, according to experts, records, seeing rates, and personal encounters, as claimed by some. It differs from person to person. Nevertheless, it is theorized to be located somewhere between Calbayog City and Catarman in Samar, though the precise site is unknown. In addition, various sources state that the city is said to be concealed somewhere between Gandara, Tarangnan, and Pagsanghan, Samar, in the Philippines, yet the human eye cannot see it, and it is impossible to find.

Biringan: A Folktale of the Invisible City of Samar



One of the alleged locations of Biringan City. Source: Philippine Tales



Another alleged location of Biringan City.

Source: <https://readph.com/discover-the-mysterious-underworld-city-of-biringan-only-in-the-philippines/>

Many stories have been told about the existence of Biringan City in Samar, and it is not known exactly why it allegedly exists or why lost people are believed to be trapped in the city forever. The city of Biringan is well-known all over Samar. In fact, it has made its way into numerous featured media stories and news headlines across the country and worldwide. Likewise, Biringan made its way to literature and art, where stories about those who were trapped on the island became stories and movie shows.

The Biringan City folktale is an expression of a culture whose reason for existence is because of its intriguing whims. There may or may not be truth to it, and people may or may not believe it, but if you listen to its stories, which are surprisingly similar even though they are told by different sources, you may wish to take a closer look and decide for yourself whether it is true or not. Whatever the truth regarding Biringan City may be, the beliefs and sensitivities it is associated with form a part of Philippine folklore. This shows how rich the Philippine culture is.

This article intends to explore the folktales of Biringan City. It seeks to discover untold and additional stories associated with the Folktale of Biringan City, which will add zest to the existing versions of it in Samar history. The focus is to know what the folktale illustrates as told by the locals near the alleged one of the portals to the invisible city of Samar.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach, using thematic analysis. The data was collected through in-depth interviews. There were a total of 10 participants in the study, and the number was identified after seeing patterns and similar responses from the participants. Each participant was selected based on a set of criteria. Participants must be 50 years old and above and must be locals/natives of Pagsanjan, Samar, or nearby towns to ensure the reliability of the responses. Participants are made sure to be physically fit so that imparted stories and responses to the questions about Biringan were taken from their perfect remembrance of it.

This study used a purposive sampling method so that every participant contributed significantly to the data collected. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Three research experts reviewed the survey questions for content and face validity (regarding the format and content alignment with the research objectives).

The researcher also sought the approval of the University President and obtained all municipal and barangay permits necessary before conducting the study. Adherence to research protocols was also done to ensure compliance with the institution's ethical standards, the well-being of the respondents, and the protection of the researchers as well. It was indicated in the consent message that the benefits of the respondent's participation in the research, and that all data collected will be treated with integrity and with the utmost confidentiality.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the study on the exploration of folktales of Biringan City, following the qualitative methodology. The contents of this chapter are organized based on the arrived themes shown in Table 1 below. There are four themes that were derived after categorizing the codes, which follows; Perfect Dwelling place, Deception, Protection, and Healing.

The interconnections between these themes reveal the complex cultural tensions embedded within the Biringan narrative. The Perfect Dwelling Place serves as an idealized counterpoint to material hardships, while Deception fundamentally undermines this perfection, creating narrative tensions similar to global folktale motifs such as Faustian bargains (Zipes, 2006). The apparent contradiction between Protection and Deception themes raises questions about the moral complexity of the *engkantos*, reflecting the nuanced relationship between Filipino communities and supernatural forces where spiritual entities operate according to their own moral frameworks that prioritize loyalty and territorial boundaries.

Table 1: Themes and Significant Statements

Themes	Statements	Frequency of Utterance	Frequency of Participants
Perfect Dwelling Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Friendly and helpful inhabitants.• Everyday celebration• Shows overwhelming wealth.• Advanced structures and technologies.• A promise of seeing lost loved ones.• Clean City• Beautiful environment	59	10
Deception	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating black rice means being unable to go back home.• Accepting healing power in exchange for the life of loved ones.• Tree was seen as a huge and futuristic building structure.• Accepting the invitation from a Biringan people has the possibility of staying in Biringan city forever.• Appreciating something in Biringan causes death.• Offer of extravagant things to lure visitors to stay in Biringan forever.	55	10
Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Zero COVID casualties• Not attacked by NPA (New People's Army)• Telling their visitors not to eat black rice so they can return to the real world.	27	6
Healing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An offer to become a quack doctor that heals any kind of disease.• Be able to raise a dead person to life.	16	5

3.1. Theme 1. Perfect Dwelling Place

Among the 10 participants interviewed, all of them speak of the good things that can be seen in Biringan City, as described to them by their parents and grandparents. It all pointed

to descriptions of a place where everything is good, a perfect dwelling place than where we live, and that anyone would wish to live in. As some participants said in their remembrance of how their parents and grandparents told the story to them,

"Lupig pa kuno an Manila ha kaupay hito na lugar. Kadadagko han mga bablay , ngan kapapawa han mga aragian, damo an layt". **(That place is even better than the city of Manila. Houses are huge and streets are full of lights.)**

"Mas maupay pa daw ito na lugar kesa ha abroad nga nakikita ha mga TV ngan magasin. An ira katitirok, kadadamo pagkaon na ginahahanda". **(That place is even better than those outside the country that can be seen on television and magazines. Lots of foods are being served during gatherings.)**

The sophisticated description of Biringan city by the participants agrees with an article by Spike (2022), which states that "Biringan City is a mythical place filled with towering spires and cathedral-like buildings that rise from the waters up to the clouds. It is described as a very technologically advanced metropolis where everything is lustrous and futuristic.

Moreover, some of the participants also mentioned the nice scenery/landscapes of the place and the virtuous characteristics of people in Biringan city,

"Waray didto sarang, bisan mga dahon na laya ha kalsada. Mga disiplinado ngan buotan an mga tawo didto. Pirme nagririsyo , maglipayon hira"*. ***** (There are no clutters, not even dried leaves can be seen on roads. People there are disciplined and kind. They are always merry-making, they are happy.)**

"Dire ka daw makita hin malurong lurong didto, waray ito didto ha ira". **(You cannot see a chaotic person in that place; no person like that exists there.)**

"Kamag upay han mga gardin han mga balay, pati ligid han kalsada kadadamo hin mag upay na bukad ngan tanom na waray pa daw kita". **(The gardens of the houses are very nice, there are beautiful flowers and plants along the roads that no one has ever seen before.)**

"Masulod ka pala han lugar, mapapausa ka kuno ura-ura kay makita kana hin mga nagpaparawa na mga buildings nga iba-iba an desayn, damo mga awto liwat". **(As you enter the city you will be amazed and stunned because you will see structures super shining, with modern designs. There are lots of cars also.)**

The statements that illustrate Biringan as a city of perfection in terms of its building structures, advanced technologies, good environment, and beautiful inhabitants align with comparative studies of urban folklore globally (Bennett, 2005). Those who claim to have witnessed the city describe architectural marvels and technological sophistication that surpass contemporary urban development, reflecting universal human aspirations for perfect communities.

3.2.Theme 2. Deception

Among the 10 participants, all of them also state that the good things seen in Biringan city are actually just used as a lure to trick people. It was just an act to fool and take the lives of people they are interested in. As some of the participants iterated during the interview,

"Hit handaan nira damo ito it pagkaon, pwede ka kumaon, pero ayaw pagkaon han itom na kanon kay dire ka na mkauli. Didto kana maukoy ha ira ngada kahasta, dire ka na

makabalik ha imo pamilya". During their feast, there are lots of food being served. You can eat anything except the black rice. Eating it will make you stay and live in Biringan city forever, you cannot return to your family anymore.)

The show-off of wealth and a dream place to live in are all but fake and are used to deceive people who are interested in them. Spike (2022) states that several Samar locals can attest that they were abducted and taken to Biringan, where they were offered riches, and peculiar-looking foods were laid in front of them. Eating food that is colored black, gets you trapped in that city forever.

In addition, another participant also told a story,

"May kumadi ha Pagsanjan, mga trabahador han usa nga kontraktor ha Manila, namimiling kun hain an Biringan, kay mayda daw ha ira kumuha nga mayaman, tapos ginbaydan na hira. Maupay kay may nakag siring na ayaw pagdayon. Salit nanguli nala adto, kun waray adto may nakapugong bangin dire na makapanguli ha ira". (Once there are group of workers from a construction company in Manila who came to Pagsanjan, they are looking for Biringan city. According to them, they were hired by a rich person who even paid them in advance. Luckily, the locals whom they ask advised them not to go, so they were able to return to their homes. If not, maybe they are all gone.)

Supernatural folklore often features themes of entrapment through temptation, reflecting deep-seated cultural anxieties about the cost of desires fulfilled (Magliocco, 2004). The mystical inhabitants of the city are rumored to be the cause of strange disappearances as they will either spirit away a human they take interest in. The locals call it "*bugkot*"; the victim will fall ill, suddenly die, or disappear as a result of this. In addition, Paciente (2022) also states in an article that if you're a maiden or a beautiful young lady, and if someone from the said city likes you, they may lure you in by tempting treasures or forcibly abduct you." Thus, the show-off of modern and wealthy civilization with a seemingly perfect environment appeared to be but a tool to lure people. And it leaves a question of why there is a need to deceive people if it is truly a place where people can live happily and contentedly.

Furthermore, some participants also said that inhabitants of Biringan are even using words that they actually mean the other way to deceive people, like

"hihimuon ko ikaw na tambalan basta maghalad ka usa na ugang kada mabubulong mo. Aysus! kay an kabalyo kinabuhi ngayon hit akon mga kapamilya liwat". (I will make you a quack doctor/ faith healer if you will offer me a hen for every person that you can cure. What it actually means is offering life of my loved ones for every person that I can cure.)

If you will not be wise enough, you will fall into this trap knowing that what they ask is only a chicken but in reality, it means offering the lives of loved ones to get the healing power. The kindness and the good physical features of the people of Biringan are not true, they are part of the trick to deceive people. In agreement with this statement is an article by Paciente (2022), which states that the inhabitants of Biringan name's etymology do take into account that they can be tricksters or magicians, or corporeal supernatural beings capable of casting spells that are either beautiful or harrowing. A portrayal of deception where the reason is not known.

3.3.Theme 3. Protection

Among the participants interviewed, there were 6 of them said that living near the alleged one of the Biringan portals has an advantage for them. Biringan people seem to be protecting the whole municipality of Pagsanjan, Samar. As one of the participants said,

"Ini yana na pag taga COVID, bumulig liwat hira ha amon, kaagahon nag spray hira na pag abat namon para dire kami ma apektuhan han virus, salit pagmata namon an kalsada mahulos bisan waray umuran... usa la an narecord na nagkacovid dinhi, dire ngani liwat kami natuod na ungod adto". (This COVID pandemic, the Biringan people helped us, we believe they spray something that protects us from the virus... in the morning the roads are so wet even it did not rain at night ... we only have one COVID case, but even so we doubt if it is really true.)

These statements were affirmed by the DOH records that the Municipality of Pagsanjan has only recorded one positive case (asymptomatic) of COVID, despite locals not wearing masks inside their town. The participants also said that they were also protected by the inhabitants of Biringan from people of our kind who have bad motives. A participant said,

"Ha tanan dinhi na maghigrani na munisipyo an Pagsanjan la an waray kasulod han NPA kay usa ha mga NPA na gusto sulungon an Pagsanjan in nagsiring na waray hira pakasulod kay an pagkita nira ha amon lugar may nagbabantay na sundalo na "shoulder to shoulder" an pagkatukdaw palibot han Pagsanjan, ngan damo an mga tangke pangiyera". (Among all the municipalities that are near here, it is only the municipality of Pagsanjan that was not attacked by NPA/National People's Army. One of the NPA members said that they were not able to attack the municipality of Pagsanjan because it was surrounded by soldiers, standing shoulder-to-shoulder around the perimeter of Pagsanjan and they saw also lots of war tanks.)

Enchanted people or supernatural entities in folklore traditions are often believed to offer protection to human communities, especially those they consider friends (Briggs, 1976). This protective function creates an interesting paradox with the deceptive aspects of Biringan, suggesting that supernatural relationships in Filipino folklore operate according to complex moral frameworks that distinguish between insiders and outsiders.

3.4.Theme 4. Healing

Among the participants interviewed, there were 5 of them who have said that they are being offered a healing power.

"Gusto nira ako maging tambalan, asya karuyag nira ak ig inupod". (They want me to become a faith healer that is why they want me to be with them)

In addition, another participant also said,

"Tatagan ako nira hin gahom pamulong ugaring la kay may kabalyo, pwede ngani liwat magbuhi ako hin patay, asya la kay kinabuhi hit ak pamilya it kabalyo". (They will give me power to heal and bring to life dead person, only that it needs to have something in return, the life of my family members in exchange for the said healing power.)

This declaration conforms with folklore studies indicating that supernatural entities can bestow healing powers upon chosen individuals (Young & Goulet, 1994). The healing theme bridges the material and spiritual realms, offering supernatural solutions to physical ailments while demanding profound sacrifices, reflecting a worldview where wellness cannot be separated from spiritual relationships and moral choices.

4. CONCLUSION

The folktale of Biringan City as shown by the themes derived, mostly depicts an optimistic perspective that every person hopes for. From the *Perfect Dwelling Place*, *Protection*, and *Healing* all illustrate a place where people can live happily and contentedly. The statements that support the theme of *Perfect Dwelling Place* describe a place where the possibilities of experiencing discomfort and sadness are unlikely to occur. From the place to the people and to see lost loved ones are all but a complete package of happiness. An aspiration that we all dreamed of becoming true. Protection, as the third theme that ascends, is a supplement to maintain the stability of happiness. However, the statements in the study are protection given to the whole community. But we know that a safe and protected community has happy people living in it. Another aspiration of a typical human being. The last theme is all about healing; this also shows that a perfect world is useless without healthy people living in it. To fully enjoy the perfect world is to be in its perfect health, where sickness can be healed, and death brought to life is possible.

The interconnections between these themes reveal deeper cultural complexities. The *Deception* theme fundamentally challenges the narrative's optimistic elements, creating tensions reminiscent of global folktale motifs where perfect solutions come with hidden costs. The apparent contradiction between *Protection* and *Deception* reflects the nuanced moral landscape of Filipino supernatural beliefs, where spiritual entities operate according to frameworks that prioritize loyalty and territorial distinctions between community members and outsiders.

Hence this study shows that the folktale of Biringan City is a story of human aspirations realized through tales only. This conforms to folklore scholarship indicating that folktales serve as repositories for hopes, dreams, and cultural anxieties (Tatar, 1987). In the case of this study, the dreams of Samarnon to defeat poverty and live an abundant life with loved ones are expressed through this otherworldly narrative.

The persistence of such narratives despite modernization suggests that folktales adapt to address contemporary anxieties while preserving essential cultural values. The Biringan folktale demonstrates how oral traditions evolve to process the impact of modernity on traditional communities, serving not merely as entertainment but as cultural mechanisms for understanding and coping with social change.

The only undesirable theme that emerges from this study is *deception*. The result shows that all the perfect scenery that Biringan City displays is there to lure people only. A common characteristic of folktales to always have a villain to make it more interesting. And seemingly inclining the folktale to the reality that a perfect life does not exist. According to the saying "Too good to be true", if something is too good, then it cannot be true. Even

though the locals of Pagsanjan, Samar claim it to be existent but without concrete evidence, the story of Biringan City will still be a folktale. A folktale of Samarnon's aspirations for a complete and happy life, tempered by the wisdom that all desires fulfilled may come with unexpected costs.

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Biringan: A Folktale of the Invisible City of Samar

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