

## **Descend or Defend: Iligan as a Toponym and its Relevance to Local Historiography**

Marjorie S. Almario-Magdadaro  
Artchil C. Daug

Department of History  
College of Arts and Social Sciences  
MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology

### **Abstract**

The history of Iligan City in Northern Mindanao, the Philippine Islands, stretches back as far as the beginning of Spanish colonization in the second half of the 17th century. Although its contemporary history ranging from the later American Period during the Second World War to its rise as an industrial city in the following three decades after the war is well-examined, Iligan's history during the Spanish Period remains a difficult picture to imagine. It is not only because documentary evidence is very limited, its indigenous population relies on oral tradition to tell the story of its past. The difficulty of access to primary sources which are either tucked away in the national archives or that they are written in a language that in contrast to the rest of the then Spanish Empire never became the primary language of the country contributed to local historiography in the Philippines making use of oral accounts by indigenous peoples, and this is similar when it comes to Iligan. Specifically, this paper examines Iligan as a toponym to trace the possible origin and meaning of the term. By looking into both readily available archival sources and the cultural memory of the tribal authorities of one of the city's indigenous peoples, the Higaunon, this paper shows that they are the first settlers of Iligan and that one of the earliest sites of culture contact was the mouth-river of Iligan, which perhaps one of the reasons why Spaniards chose this area to establish a fort. Most importantly, this paper proves that Iligan as a toponym is not empty in meaning, but rather mirrors past relations and activities, which are relevant in the writing of local history.

**Keywords:** Iligan, toponym, Higaunon, local history, Spanish

### **Suggested Citation:**

Magdadaro, M. and A. Daug (2022). Descend or Defend: Iligan as a Toponym and its Relevance to Local Historiography. *Langkit: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 11, 13-26.

## Introduction

Place names are pointers. In normal circumstances, they point to a location—in the Philippines place names are sometimes replaced by pointing lips, referrals to the void, or terms that are similarly ambiguous when one is asking for directions. But place names are signifiers, which point to perhaps a galaxy of signifieds. In certain areas of the archipelago, these signifiers are intangible markers that can carry with them not just the culture of the place they signify but also its past. A pointer not just to a geographic location but to a pattern of human behavior or remote memory. And this is relevant, especially in the writing of local collective memories in the country. Local historiography pertaining to the Spanish Period (1565-1898) in some areas of the Philippines is anemic in terms of documentary evidence. Either many such documents fall victim to natural disasters, or they become subject to neglect and are left to suffer entropy by themselves. In some cases, many sources remain captives of archives found in former colonial centers making it difficult for local researchers to access them. It is also important to note that writing did not enter mainstream culture prior the colonization of the archipelago in 1565. There are communities that for centuries relied on oral tradition. And even if documents are indeed available, most of these documents are in Spanish—a language that because of some post-colonial nationalist prejudices of the 1950s was decidedly neglected and driven out of the education system.

Such then is the case for Iligan, which appears in Spanish sources as Yligan, a city in the northern portion of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2015) classifies it as a highly urbanized city with a population of 342,618 (as of 2015). It has a land area of 81,337 hectares and has 44 barangays; these are like small districts that are considered local government units. Misamis Oriental bound it in the east, Lanao del Norte in the west, Lanao del Sur and Bukidnon in the south, and the Bay of Iligan in the north. It is home to the so-called Tri-people namely the Higaunon of the Lumad group (non-Islamized tribal indigenous population), Mëranáw of the Moro group (Islamized indigenous peoples), and the Dumagat, as the indigenous people called the migrant settlers who mostly profess Christianity as their religion. There are also indigenous Christians among them who were baptized during the colonial period, and who are referred to today as "Iliganon" among the locals (Rodil, 2003). The groundwork for the contemporary history of Iligan was already established through the researches of Jamboy (1985) and Enderes (2012) regarding the Japanese Period and Salgado (1984) during the industrialization of the city. However, the limitations of coming up with a history of Iligan during the Spanish period are observable in the studies of Tangian (2010) on Iligan as a pueblo and of Acut (1989) on Iligan right around before the Second World War. Two things can be noted from the current literature on Iligan's past: (1) that the telling of the Spanish period cannot simply rely on local historiography, and (2) that none of the studies focused on the toponymy of Iligan. The first is a consequence of the poor access to possible historical documents, while the second is a consequence of the lack of enthusiasm towards the study of place names.

This paper explores the usefulness of studying place names to substantiate local histories, especially in the absence of a considerable amount of documentary evidence, in forming local collective memories. Alfonso (2017) in an article on Philippine toponymy, highlighted the categories from which place names in the country are interpreted: folkloric,

linguistic, historical, and geographic. Toponymy, therefore, is not limited to historical documents but must also rely on how the indigenous population remembers a memory through the telling of their stories, the changes in the use of their language, and the influence of geographic formations or geography. This study of Iligan as a place name aims to examine at least three of these categories (folkloric, linguistic, and historical) to contribute to the body of work that comprises its local memory. This is done through an analysis of the different perspectives on the origin and meaning of the place name and what these perspectives show about Iligan's past.

### **Research Questions**

Thus, the three main research questions of this paper are: (1) What are the different perspectives on the origin and meaning of Iligan as a place name? (2) What are the points of convergence and divergence of these perspectives? And (3) What do these perspectives show regarding Iligan during the Spanish Period? As such, this paper is divided into three major sections. The first part tackles the folkloric, linguistic, and historical perspectives of Iligan as a place name and are both taken from written and oral sources. This is followed by an analysis of these perspectives, which examines the points of convergence and divergence in perspectives to show the relevance of these meanings in relation to Iligan's past. The last section evaluates the significance of studying place names in substantiating local historiography and the challenges of establishing local memories in the post-colonial period.

### **Methodology**

To establish such perspectives on Iligan, this paper made use of archival research and key informant interviews. Available archival sources are retrieved from the main libraries of the University of the Philippines-Diliman and Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology. The already acknowledged compilation of translated primary historical sources of the Spanish Period found in the Blair and Robertson collection of translated documents from the Spanish period is included in this study. Other sources were also taken from the digital libraries of Project Gutenberg and the University of Michigan. All the historical evidence was subjected to regular historical scrutiny of external and internal criticisms.

Moreover, key informant interviews were conducted in 2013 with a total of ten (10) Higaunon informants from Iligan, which were selected through a snowballing method that started with a Higaunon *Baylan* who is comparable to tribal spiritual leaders. The first interview was a *Baylan sa Kaligaun*, a function given the task of keeping tribal culture. Some *Datu* were also interviewed. They are Higaunon tribal political leaders. The Higaunon is considered one of the indigenous tribes of Iligan. The data gathered from the interviews were also validated. The interviews were strictly confined to the topic of the origin and meaning of the word Iligan and no other element of Higaunon culture was gathered to not endanger their intellectual rights over their culture.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Toponymic Perspectives on Iligan*

Toponymy as a study of place names belonging to onomastics, a domain of knowledge

that concerns names and naming (Barber & Berdan, 1998). The latter has two (2) principal types: toponym (place names) and anthronym (personal names). There are different typologies of toponyms based on their genesis: there are descriptive names, associative names, incident names, possessive names, commendatory names, manufactured names, mistake names, and shift names (Barber & Berdan, 1998) (Bright, 2004). Categorization of toponyms based on these types may come easy however, the interpretation of origins and meanings for toponyms from which the categorization is based is not. This is partly because, according to Helleland (2012), definitions and interpretations of toponyms may vary from one group of people to another, coming from different contexts. This is also true in the case of Iligan.

There is therefore both a synchronic and a diachronic element when looking at the difficulty in interpreting the origins and meanings of toponyms. They can vary depending on whose perspective is being interrogated, making their meaning dependent upon the position of the term within the socio-symbolic network of a given group. Then one also must consider the time element and the possibility that the original meaning may enter a legendary status because it ended up becoming lost in the margins of memory. Legends after all according to Gottschalk (1963) are stories of origins in a dateless past.

The typical pattern in the Philippines is that place names are products of these legendary encounters between the natives and the colonizers, who in the limbo of linguistic confusion as each does not understand the other's language, produced something out of nothing. A Castilian, or *kastila*—a term usually used by the natives to refer to Spaniards, ended up in an interesting place and decided to ask a native for the name of the place. The native, having no idea what the question is all about or if it is even a question, practically uttered a word on whatever s/he thought was the appropriate reply. Out of the communication gap came the place name. This pattern is rampant in the archipelago and Iligan is not exempted. According to the Baylan Eladio Sangcoan:

*“Niabot ang kastila unya kita siya ug Higaunon nga nag-kalibanga sa suba sa sigeg kaun ug pinyahun. Nangutana karun ang kastila unsay pangalan sa lugar unya wa kasabot ang nitibo mao ng mitubag ug Iligan kay abig nangutana ga-unsu siya. Mao na karung gitawag nig Iligan...”*

[A Spaniard arrived and saw a Higaunon defecating near a river after eating a lot of snake mackerels. The Spaniard asked for the name of the place but the native, who clearly *misunderstood the Spaniard*, told him “Iligan” because he thought the Spaniard was asking what *the area was in relation to what* he was doing. That is why it is now called Iligan...]

The area was from then on referred to by the Spaniards as Yligan. This is the reason why interviewing the Higaunon about the meaning of Iligan typically produces a laugh in the group. In the early 2000s, the city made it a habit to start using the expression “*Maayong Iligan*” to greet each other. The expression usually takes the place of a typical “good morning”, “good day”, “good afternoon”, and so on and so on. But in the ears of the Higaunon, it can sound like “this is a good place to defecate”. Apparently, no one really

bothered asking the Higaunon what their opinions were regarding the use of the term. The city eventually appropriated other indigenous terms for themselves without consulting one of the original inhabitants of the area. The truth of the story relies on the authority of the Baylan to keep Higaunon's knowledge and culture, but as to precisely whom these characters were and when this story happened it is no longer possible to ascertain. Tribal oral traditions are dateless, and the native character in the story was with all probability not that relevant to be remembered with a name. The “where” however is telling because it was supposedly near the Iligan River. This is telling because of its seeming relation to other local stories on the origin of the place name.

Acut (1989) mentioned that old folks identify the word /Ilig/ as the root word of the term Iligan. It was a word referring to the act of descending from a higher to lower ground. The idea is that people from the hinterlands and remote areas on the hills surrounding the Iligan plain would descend by raft through the Iligan River to bring local produce for barter during market day, also called “*tabo*” by the natives. It was held every Thursday and Saturday at the Iligan river (p. 58). This was corroborated by an account of an American traveler sometime in 1900. Florence Russel (1907) during her visit to Iligan, put on record the significant details she observed during this said activity. She mentioned that this was held in a Saturday along the river and described the participants as including Moro traders (Muslim traders). She wrote:

“Market day which comes every Saturday at Iligan made a break in the dull uniformity of our several visits there. It was full of interest to everyone for it is then the Moros come to town... Scattered around the *marketplace* were various groups of Iligan natives and Moros from the hills, all squatting on the ground, and haggling over the price of fish and eggs. There were Moro chiefs, looking world-wearied and indifferent, followed by their attendant slaves; there were thrifty Moros willing to sell one anything from a kris or barong to the very clothes on their backs; there were handsome young Moro blades, who stared shyly at the strange white faces and chatted volubly the while in their soft Malay tongue; there were Philippine market women in *camisa* and *panuela*, some of them carrying large, flat baskets of vegetables or fruits on their heads, the green of ripe oranges and bananas making an effective splash of colour above their dusky hair...” (pp. 96-100).

The image of course is that people descended from the hills and that the place called Iligan was a meeting place for them. If this tradition of turning the river into a pathway for trading stretched back even before the Spaniards came then it can be understood why the place has to be named Iligan. The mention of the Moro is also interesting. The Spaniards used the term Moro to refer to the native Muslim population. By 1900, the native Mēranáw were already converted to Islam and do have a close cultural affinity with the Higaunon if one sets aside the Islamic influence on the former. The problem however is that the interviewed Higaunon appears to be not subscribing to this notion of Ilig and Iligan. Unfortunately, no Mēranáw who were approached for interview claimed to have sufficient knowledge over this

topic.

Historically, Iligan was mentioned in colonial sources as early as 1639. The context was the Spanish attempt to establish a Christian settlement and a garrison for the first time in the Lake region, referred by them as Lanao. Iligan has proximity to present-day Lake Lanao. The colonizers apparently were repelled by the Mēranáw and their Maguindanao allies and were forced to retreat further north where “they erected a fort upon the bar of the river of Iligan” (de Jesus, *The Recollect Missions, 1625-40*, 1906b, p. 113). The aim of establishing a Spanish fort in Iligan was to use it as a launching pad for the Spanish military expeditions to the Lake region, which was the case until 1895 (Majul, 1973). Iligan became a site of Spanish fortresses from the 17th to the 19th century. The first Spanish fort erected along the Iligan River was of stone, in the shape of a star, and was called St. Francis Xavier, after the patron saint of the Jesuits who administered the place in the 1640s. The fort was described as

“situated near the entrance of the river at eight (8) degrees, three (3) minutes latitudes septentrional and one hundred sixty-two (162) degrees, twenty-seven (27) minutes longitude east, distance from Manila, one hundred thirty-two (132) leagues and a half to the southeast, is made of lime and cut stone with raised embankment with a figure somewhat star shaped. It had a seven hundred forty-four (744) feet enclosure at whose center is an elevated structure (caballero) square in shape at thirty (30) feet front, at whose side can be seen the angles providing of the fort, ten (10) pieces of cannons of various minor calibers, eleven (11) pinsotes, forty-nine (49) muskets and arquebuses constitute its armament...” (Almario & Palattao, 2015).

However, according to Loyre (1987), the lack of men and supplies made the fortress ineffective. Nevertheless, the Spaniards continued to take advantage of its proximity to the Moro territory that despite Fort Francis Xavier being “eaten by the sea” sometime in 1780, a new stone fort was constructed as its replacement and was called Victoria. Just the same, as it stood on the riverbanks of Iligan, it too was washed out by a great flood coming from the river in 1916 (Almario & Palattao, 2015)—an event suggestive perhaps of what the Spaniards meant by “eaten by the sea”. In 2012, this rising of the Iligan River met with a high tide during a typhoon. The entire plain of Iligan was flooded by waters never seen before in contemporary times.

Interestingly, many city brochures, local websites, fiesta-souvenir programs or even the city planning development reports, suggest that the place name Iligan came from the presence of a fortress. However, and this one is a product of the nationalist attempt to indigenize everything since the 1950s onwards, the fortress from which Iligan was associated was not the Spanish one but an indigenous one. According to Fernandez (1983), Iligan came from the Tala-andig term /Ilihan/ or from the Banwahon term /Iliyan/, both meaning fortress. The culturally and linguistically related Higaunon also mentioned that the rolling hills of Iligan served as a natural ilihan for them. These tribes, together with the Higaunon were collectively referred to by the Spaniards as *monteses* or *buquidnon* (people of the mountains) (Unabia, 1985). These tribes developed native fortresses to defend against potential threats (Villaluz,

2014). An example of these fortresses in Mindanao was described by the missionary de Jesus (1905a) as located “on a steep and inaccessible rock” and that there were

“...no other approaches or mode of ascent than certain ladders made of rattans [*bexucos*], which resemble strong osiers. When those were removed it was fortified and protected from the invasions of enemies... That site, perched on its summit, was a very agreeable residence capacious enough for that people to live in a house resembling a cloister, so large that they lived in it with all their families. These had communication on the inside, while it was strongly enclosed on the outside” (p. 232).

According to Baylan Sangcoan, the hill on which the present-day City Hall of Iligan is constructed was a strategic area, which was where a Higaunon fortress was once erected. The Higaunon was called the hill *Buwanginan*, which later became Buhanginan Hill. The area does have an advantage as it overlooks almost the entire plain of Iligan. The Higaunon had stories of their conflict with some members of the Subanen tribe, who were another indigenous tribe on the plains before they were pushed south eventually towards the Zamboanga area during the length of the Spanish period. The other advantage of Buhanginan Hill is related to the fact that the plains below it are easily flooded. In fact, the original site of the colonial government building in Iligan was located near the fort, and it was precise because of the flooding that made the people decades later decide to transfer the seat of government to higher grounds. Thus, Buhanginan Hill became the site of what became known as the City Hall.

#### *Place of Descent or Fortress of Defense: Convergence and Divergence*

There are therefore two images shaped by these accounts from mostly the people’s memory regarding the origin and meaning of the place name Iligan. On one hand, it is a place on which something or someone descends, while on the other hand, it is interpreted as a fortress or a place easily defensible.

#### *Place of Descent*

The Higaunon language is called *Binukid*, and it belongs to the Manobo group of the Austronesian family of languages (Baguio, Dizon, & Flores, 2010). The two accounts involving the Higaunon, the encounter between a Higaunon and a *kastila*, and the people descending to a trade center down the mouth of the Iligan River, share the root word */ilig/* in the sense of, according to Baylan Sangcoan and Datu Morano, something going down, or something gets excreted. Apparently, */ilig/* is an infinitive verb meaning “to excrete or to go down”. However, when */ilig/* is inflicted with affixes, the verb turns into a noun and a proper noun like a place name at that. According to the Higaunon grid of affixes, when a Higaunon base word is suffixed with */-an/*, it becomes a term referring to a location (Echor & Mata, 1999). In the *Daraga day Bukid*, a folksong sung during the traditional Diyandi ritual, */ilig/*

is used in the following manner:

*Ang daraga day bukid*  
***Ta-ilig man mag-ilig***  
*Alanday mga pubri*  
*Kaloy-i kay ignoranti*  
*Higaunon galig kaliwat*  
*Nagtugbong day sa ragat*  
*Tagbaya-baya tag simba*  
*Kang San Miguel a pista*

*Mao day kapalimanan*  
*So adlaw mo ayag man*  
*Madayo man day bukid*  
*Duha ka adlaw **mag-ilig***  
*Hada-i alang pagdomdom*  
*So pista mo simbahan*  
*Adi ninyo isikway,*  
*nagsayaw-sayaw sa ragat*  
*Ang daraga day bukid*

*Mag-ilig* is translated to Cebuano by the Bae Wilma Bado, *Bae Dimasangkay sa Bayug* and president of the Iligan Higaunon Council Association as “*mamaybay*” or heading towards or to go by the shoreline. The first instance then, *ta-ilig man mag-ilig*, can be translated as “going to the shoreline, by the coast” towards the sea (*ragat*). In the second instance, the maiden from the mountain (*daraga day bukid*) *duha ka adlaw mag-ilig* means spending “two days by the shore” away from the hills (*madayo man day bukid*). This also corresponds to the Mēranāw word /ilid/, which means “going along the shoreline” according to Howard McKaughan and Batua Al-Macaraya (1996, p. 119) in their *A Maranao Dictionary*. The same dictionary also translates *pag-ilidan* as “shore”.

/Ilig/-an, therefore, becomes either the place where people go down to, or something is going down and in this case literally from someone. These interpretations of the meaning of Iligan come from folkloric perspectives—legends and stories orally transmitted within the collective memory. The Native-Spaniard Encounter pattern is common in the Philippines and accepting it outright can for some people perpetuate the colonial swindle that there were no settlements in the country and it was the Spaniards in this sense who created “Iligan” just like the rest of the towns that were established in the Spanish period (Azurin, 1995). The story presented here though came from the Higaunon themselves and it does demonstrate the consequences of a meeting of cultures, which is far more relevant than the typical post-colonial insistence on the old colonial antagonist-protagonist or exploiter-exploited frame of thinking.

Did the Spaniards call their settlement Yligan because it was a term used by the natives to signify the place? The answer is more inclined to the affirmative. The word /iligan/ is part of Binukid vocabulary, and the Spaniards would never have called their settlement a similar-sounding Yligan if they were not influenced by Binukid. However, was Iligan a permanent settlement before becoming Hispanized as Yligan? The clue comes from the fact that the Higaunon are people of the mountains, and the place they usually go down to trade is on lower grounds. The Baylan Sangcoan did say that the root word for Higaunon is /gaun/, meaning mountain or hill. This is also the reason why the Spaniards branded them as Montesés, meaning people of the mountains, together with the Bukidnon—the root word /bukid/ literally means mountain or hill. It does appear that /ilig/-an/ was a meeting place of sorts for trading in pre-Spanish times, but it became a permanent settlement when the Spaniards constructed a fort in the area thereby turning it into Yligan. And perhaps, the



people of the mountains were wise enough not to construct anything permanent in the area because it is usually flooded. As mentioned earlier, the forts the Spaniards established fell victim to floods. Interestingly, the Yligan located at the mouth of the river is at present the area called Poblacion and it is where the central market is located. Flooding remains a problem too.

### *Fortress of Defense*

The accepted notion which is seemingly promoted by the local government of Iligan itself appears to be the perspective on forts either the Spanish ones or the indigenous ones. The idea is that Iligan was named for its being a fortress. The old Iligan City website from the 2000s had a section called “History of Iligan” and it explained that “the name Iligan is from the Higaunon word ‘iligan’ or ‘ilijan’ meaning fortress of defense against frequent attacks by pirates and other hostile Mindanao tribes”. The website is now overhauled and almost completely new but there is a printed copy at the Iligan City Public Library. This claim appeared as early as 1993 from a section found on page 8 of that year’s Iligan City Tourism and Fiesta Celebration Souvenir Program. The section is called “Iligan Yesterday and Today” and was written by Jaime An Lim and Annabella A. Gandionco. It explained in a similar fashion that “the name Iligan comes from the Higaunon word ‘ilihan’ or ‘ilijan’, meaning a fortress of defense, against the periodic attacks of pirates and unfriendly tribes”.

This fortress that these government documents are talking about was erected during the Spanish period. It can be observed from Spanish missionary and military reports during that period that when the Spaniards arrived, the area was already referred to as Iligan (de Jesus, 1906b). As mentioned above, the objective of the Spaniards was to erect a fortress near the present-day Lake Lanao to infiltrate the lands of the Moro in that area, but they were driven out by a combined Mëranáw and Maguindanao forces. The retreating Spaniards led by *El Padre Capitan*, Fr. Agustin San Pedro, were coming from the uplands from the Lake region of the Mëranáw and “descended to the seashore with all the men” who then “erected a fort upon the bar of the river of Iligan.” It is curious that in this sense, the Spanish forces themselves were descending to a place referred to by the indigenous peoples as Iligan.

It is interesting that it does begin to appear that the “Fortress of Defense” emerged in a place that for a long time signified a “Place of Descent”. In the aforementioned Mëranáw dictionary, *iliyan* is translated as fortress (p. 119) but this fortress is found according to Fernandez (2014) as along the waterway, the Iligan river. He added that from the Mëranáw perspective, /ilig/ means “water going downstream” (pp. 180-197). This was actually mentioned in a 1987 Fiesta Souvenir Program: “the site chosen was very suitable for defense purposes - at the mouth of Iligan River. Its tall mountains, fronting its u-shaped shorelines, gave an ample view of invaders coming from the plains. it provided the place with natural sentinels. Its location further prompted the natives to call the place, Iligan, from the Maranao word, ilig, meaning ‘water going downhill’”. The Spaniards, failing in the campaign by the lake followed the water going downstream and established a fort near the waterway. They eventually Hispanized their erection of a fort by calling the place where it was built Yligan. The change in spelling can be attributed to what is referred to in toponymy as mistake names. These happen frequently among speakers from across languages "in an attempt to mold an

existing name into their own language". This happens in places occupied by a dominant culture or a colonizer (Barber & Berdan, 1998). In this case, the Spaniards.

The same mistake naming however is problematic when it comes to the above-mentioned Tala-andig and Banwahon term for fortress /ilihan/. In fairness to the Spaniards, Iligan and Yligan sound the same. And if one must subscribe to Barber and Berdan regarding a dominant culture appropriating for itself a word from a subjected culture, then one must argue which of the three Bukidnon cultures was dominant at that period. An abhorrent idea if one finds oneself living with these tribes. That the original /ilihan/ was misunderstood, misinterpreted, or mis-transcribed into /iligian/ by the Higaunon (or the Spaniards) is even out of the question because both words are used in their vocabulary. The Spaniards appear to have used the term because the Higaunon used it. Could the Higaunon made the mistake? Impossible because the Higaunon knows how to use these terms and it can be condescending to presume otherwise. The mistake perhaps is attributable to an attempt to misappropriate terms in the name of a nationalist sense to indigenize a presumed Hispanized term on one hand and a misguided rationalism that discarded people's memories on the other.

### *Toponymy and Memories*

There are three perspectives that can be identified regarding the meaning and origin of the place name Iligan. First is the one coming from a story by Baylan Sangcoan about the Higaunon suffering from an upset stomach who was asked by a Spaniard. The second one is the idea of descending from a higher ground to a lower one because of trade. The third is a misappropriation of a supposedly Tala-andig and Banwahon term. The first and second can be a case of a Higaunon using a term that coincidentally points to two signifieds: a place where he was defecating (something does descend when one does it), and a place where most people descend to for trading—both uses of the term /iligian/ is correct. This renders the historical record of the Spaniards descending from the lake region to the coastal area, asking the natives what the place is called, and deciding to make a fortress there more viable. The Spanish Yligan is just the Higaunon /ilig-/an/. This is straight up from historical records and the people's memory.

It is unfortunate that the local government of Iligan ended up holding on to the third and most improbable of the three perspectives. There is just no probability that /ilihan/ was mistaken by the Higaunon as /iligian/. They were not as ignorant as the Spaniards in this matter. The Spaniards asked for the name of the place, and the Higaunon answered with /iligian/, and the place became Yligan. This does render credence to the notion of Barber and Berdan (1998) that toponyms serve as hints "in interpreting past geographical conditions, cultural values, ethnicity, geographical origins of the namer's sociopolitical conditions and historical relations in the past" (p. 117). In the case of Iligan, it reveals that the Iligan plains have always had a high potential for flooding. This is something that many in the city cannot deny and sadly this has always been a problem since time immemorial. This also appears to be the reason why permanent Higaunon settlements were and remain located on the mountains surrounding the plains of Iligan, a place formerly called Yligan and was considered by the Higaunon as their /ilig-/an/. This study also shows that the /ilig-/an/ was

a common meeting place for trading especially for the area's indigenous population.

These interpretations of Iligan mean that it has always been a space frequented by indigenous peoples like the Higaunon, the Mēranáw, and later the establishment of Yligan, the migrant Dumagat. It is important to note that in the account of the American traveler in the early 20th century, the gathering of traders and the coming of the Moro on “market day” during Saturdays was of “full interest to everyone” and that the visitors themselves saw it as “a break in the dull uniformity of our several visits there” (Russel, 1907). There clearly was an already established socio-economic importance regarding the place, although it is only left to the imagination how it was affected by the presence of a Spanish fort. The more acceptable idea is that the Higaunon /ilig/-/an/ was never a permanent settlement, similar to how many place names in the city today that took their Higaunon origins were simply Higaunon markers as to the kind of resources they can take from such areas. It was a trading area, somewhere they descend into to trade. The presence of the Spaniards, the erection of a fortress, and the naming of the town Yligan made it into a permanent settlement.

The term does signify Higaunon tradition, social realities even in the pre-Spanish times, geographic conditions of the place, and the meeting and changing of cultures. In relation to local memories, this study suggests that toponymy can be a good take-off point. Toponyms embody profound meanings that when discovered, places are better appreciated, in addition to their links with historical events (Medina, 1992). Toponymy also establishes the socio-cultural significance of local spaces, especially in circumstances when settler descriptions are very limited (Yulo, 2002). This limitation may not consider the collective memories of other(ed) indigenous communities. Toponyms originating from tribal indigenous cultures do not simply point to locations because these place names taken from their language are doorways to their “representations concerning a universe and these involve spatial connotations” (Vansina, 1985, p. 125). The relevance of space from the perspective of the people traditionally inhabiting it is embedded in its language. Toponymy helps in understanding significant places and the place names whose meanings and origins are already lost in the normative effect of a culture that transforms them into mundane objects readily discarded. In some cases, place names were eventually changed. Old settlements may already have new place names as they were either changed by colonizers or renamed recently. Toponymy can investigate these name changes and suggests places that were already inhabited even before the advent of the colonizers (Sonza, 1984).

In the earlier part of this paper, it was suggested that place names act as signifiers that point to a galaxy of signifieds. This is relevant when considering memory studies, especially on memories that already placed the historical method to the point of exhaustion. It is the task of memory studies to search for what toponyms represent and mean to the culture and memory of a people. As Alfonso (2017) adequately put it, a place name is an “intangible evidence that stores context of the past in it” making “its deconstruction in all possible means” very important to “a community or society that does not have any written record of its past. Archival and historical sources may provide lists or identity place names, but not

their meanings” (p. 36).

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The interpretations of the meaning of Iligan as a toponym based on folkloric, linguistic, and historical perspectives reveal that it originated from the term /ilig/, which means “to descend”. Other sources claimed Iligan to have originated from its being a fortress of defense, but the presence of the Higaunon /ilig/-/an/ prior to the establishment of the Spanish fort means that the word the Spaniards used was not related to a fort. The idea that it must have been a natural fortress similar to other ones by indigenous tribes in Mindanao cannot also stand because the Higaunon refers to these natural fortresses as /ilihan/ similar to the Talaandig and Banwahon use of the term. They could not have gotten confused about the meaning of /iligan/ and /ilihan/.

It is more likely that the /ilig/-/an/ the Higaunon was referring to was eventually visited by the Spaniards after failing to establish themselves near Lake Lanao. Descending towards the shorelines, they eventually reached the /ilig/-/an/ of the Higaunon, asked for the name of the place, and decided to construct a fort and named the area Yligan based on the Higaunon term albeit not knowing what the term really means. Iligan thus is a place of descent and not simply a fortress of defense.

While legends are truly present in most data of place name research, just like this one, the value of toponymy cannot be denied in memory studies. Based on the findings of this paper, the toponym identifies the ethnicity of the first settlers of Iligan, being Higaunon, and the toponym points out an earliest site of culture contact, which is at the mouth-river of Iligan. This is with greater probability one of the reasons why the Spaniards chose this area to establish a fort. Most importantly, this research proves that Iligan as a toponym is not empty in meaning, but rather mirrors past relations and activities.

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