I read with great interest the recent book by Prof. Manuel Maximo Lopez del Castillo-Noche of the University of Santo Tomas entitled *Puente de Espana en las Filipinas (The Spanish Colonial Bridges of the Philippines)* [1]. For those fascinated with Spanish colonial bridges, I highly recommend the book.

It seemed appropriate to have part of the title of this article in Spanish as I am about to tell you about our two Spanish bridges. One is well known to me and one recently re-discovered.

**A bridge of old memories: Puente de Isabel II**

As a young boy growing up in the town of Imus, Province of Cavite, I was fascinated by bridges, both stone and hanging ones. Back then, I always made it a point, on my way home from elementary school, to gaze at ‘my’ old bridge called Puente de Isabel II, which spans the Imus River. The bridge, named in honor of Queen Isabel II of Spain, was built in 1856.

Always a sigh followed my seeing Puente de Isabel II because to get home to the ‘barrio’, I must cross the other bridge—the hanging bridge. Bridge was a bit too elegant a word to call two bamboo poles tied together, thrown over the creek and required a balancing act worthy of a circus performer to cross successfully to the other side. On frequent occasions, the old lady who effortlessly balanced on her head a giant wicker basket filled with charcoal would wait for the young boys coming home from school before she crossed. When most of the kids are on the bamboo bridge, she would start crossing and the two bamboo poles would bounce and shake with her heavy load. Most of time, we all fall off our precarious toehold into the mud below. Going across meant making sure the old lady was nowhere to be seen before we all hurriedly crossed over the bamboo poles. *Puente de Isabel II* was famous during the Spanish era because the engineers
that built the bridge in 1856 received a Silver Medal for excellence in design from the Spanish Governor General Don Ramon Montero [1]. It is more important historically. During the Battle of Imus in 1896 General Emilio Aguinaldo of the Philippine Revolutionaries or Katipuneros won the first major victory of the Revolution by blasting one span of the bridge to trap the Spanish army.

The elders of Imus considered the Puente as haunted. The elders would say that at night the ghosts would appear –of a Filipino priest beheaded on the bridge by the Spaniards during the Philippine Revolution, the Spanish soldiers and Katipuneros who died fighting on the bridge and the men and women who died there during the Japanese Occupation in World War II. So scary was the thought that when my classmates and I had to stay late in school, we didn’t just walk on the bridge, we ran for our lives screaming ‘tabi-tabi po!’ [2]. We never did see any ghosts. Now that I am as old as the ‘old folks’ of my youth, I think they might have just made up the ghost story to make sure we went home by sunset.

**Bridge building in Panay**

For the first 100+ years during the early conquest of the Philippines, Iloilo City in Panay Island was the center of the Spanish colonial power until the transfer of the seat of government to Manila. Thus, bridge construction during the next 200 years was centered in Luzon, mainly around Manila, to connect the city to domestic commerce. By 1855 the Spanish government relaxed a little and allowed the port of Iloilo to open for commerce. Ten years later, Nicholas Loney, a British merchant, imported sugar mills from England and opened sugar financing. Banks started to open in Iloilo with Hong Kong Shanghai Bank (HSBC) and Banco de las Islas Filipinas (now called BPI). Increased agricultural focus on sugar allowed sugar plantations to boom in Iloilo and later in Negros Island.

Commerce required roads and bridges. By 1866, Spain established the Inspection General de Obras Publicas which appointed civil engineers to build roads and bridges in Panay. Unlike in Luzon where most of the bridge constructions were organized by the friars, construction in Panay was mainly accomplished through civil and military engineers.

**The stone bridges of Miagao**

The oldest Spanish bridge in Miagao is the well-known Puente de Boni (locally known as Tay-tay Boni). Built in 1854, Tay-tay Boni was constructed during the administration of Governadorcillo Miguel Navales and named after the bridge construction foreman, Boni Neular of Barangay Guibongan in Miagao [3]. It is a small narrow bridge (36.4 meters long by 8.4 meters wide) meant to be used by horse drawn carriages. This is an elegant looking bridge built using tablea or yellow coral stones from the mountains of Igbaras and Miagao. The same coral stones used to build the Miagao Fortress Church. Tay-tay Boni’s salient features are the ‘massive newel posts topped by pyramidion finials’ [1]. It was built during the period when the port of Iloilo finally became a center of commerce again, but a decade before the sugar boom began by Nicholas Loney.
In his *Puentes de las Islas Filipinas*, Prof. del Castillo-Noche discussed the discovery of a number of Spanish stone bridges in Panay. But, his team missed one, even grander (at least for me) and more massive in construction than that of *Tay-Tay Boni* just 2 kilometers further south on the same road. How that was missed was easy to explain. It’s hidden!

I always like to think that I “re-discovered” it.

**Puente de Britanico**

Back in 1997, I was scouting for a property to buy as I considered one day retiring in Miagao, a coastal town in the province of Iloilo that extends from the shores of Sulu Sea up to the mountains bordering the province of Antique. Referred by an agent, I climbed down the embankment of the National Highway to a swampy land beside Sapa creek. The property had a virtually abandoned old bakery building, a few small wooden dilapidated buildings surrounded by a ‘forest’ of huge banana trees. Even the caretaker was hesitant to show us around and mostly trying to talk me out of the idea of buying the place.

I remembered he said that the place was enchanted, with a ‘white lady’ that prowls the old building at night, a balete tree that was home to dwarves, the big talisay trees that hosts kapre, tikbalang and other enchanted beings [2]. The bridge was not totally unknown to townsfolk. They just did not care much about it because of stories of the bridge being haunted by the many who died by accidents and other mishaps on the bridge, similar to the bridge in Imus. And, of the passage along the Sapa creek on misty nights of an enchanted golden ship carrying the mythical Princess Ulayra.

Looking through the banana trees towards the creek I spotted the Roman Arch of a bridge, almost totally covered by moss, shrubs and trees. I thought it was an odd structure, considering that the modern National Highway was on top of the bridge. I asked the caretaker about the name of the bridge and was told that it used to be called Sapa Bridge, but renamed later as Britanico Bridge in honor of Judge Ramon Britanico. I looked at the bridge closely and instinctively decided to buy the property I later named Sulu Garden, despite the ‘white lady’ and the other mythical creatures of the night!

I left Miagao in 1999 neither seeing a ‘white lady’ nor a golden boat. I lived in New York City for more than a decade and finally returned to Miagao in 2012. After a 13-year sojourn, I was still obsessed with that bridge and finally began clearing the bushes, trees, moss and garbage strewn at the bottom creek. Cleaned up, it turned out to be much grander than I thought back in 1997. And stronger than I thought, being able to hold tons of traffic on the highway built over it in 1979.
There are no visible cracks on the all-stone construction. All other stone bridges still in use in Panay had either been partially repaired using modern materials (such as Puente de Alimodian) or totally replaced with modern utilitarian ones. There were two visits by engineers from the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) between 2013 and 2014 to assess the condition of Puente de Britanico. Each time, they certified the stone bridge to be strong and not subject for replacement or re-strengthening. That was a relief! I did not want the bridge touched.

On both occasions, the government bridge engineers showed me the ledger indicating the bridge was built during the American Occupation Period, an era representing the decades after the Philippine-American War that started in 1899. But, after months of reading literature on American built bridges around the world post-1899, there was nothing to show that this bridge architecture is similar to American built bridges. The type of bridges Americans built by the turn of the century was made of steel and cement; sturdy, utilitarian and simpler in design. Perhaps, the base of the bridge, which seemed eroded and of different materials than the upper part of the bridge, was repaired due to flood damage during the American Occupation Period and thus entered as American in the DPWH ledger. Just one more of the many unanswered questions about this bridge to be solved later on.

In June 2014, I happened to be re-reading “History of Miagao,” a historical account about Miagao published in 1979 by Elias N. Failagao, a local Miagaowanon [3]. And there it was! A page with a chronology of major events in Miagao, including a line—“1873, construction of stone bridges at Sapa Idot, Mambatad, Malihothot, Damilisan and Narat-an.” Two other bridges were built the following year in Tabunacan and Lanutan. Besides the stone bridge of Sapa, all the other Spanish built bridges were long gone. Then, the boyhood memories came back of the time my friends and I were navigating Imus River on a bamboo raft. Passing under the Puente de Isabel II, I remembered the arches under the bridge. It was the same design; almost similar patterns! I thought that maybe this is a Spanish bridge after all.

I started reading all I can find about Spanish bridges since finding that entry in Failagao’s book. And, reading the pages of Prof. del Castillo-Noche’s book on colonial bridges finally convinced me that Puente de Britanico is indeed a Spanish and not an American bridge. I wrote the National Historical Commission for assistance to confirm the nature of the bridge architecture and still waiting for an answer.

**Puente de Britanico today**

The bridge was cleaned of debris. The white stones, quarried most likely from the mountains of San Joaquin, are resplendent after many weeks of careful manual cleaning with fine wire brush. Flowering plants are beginning to bloom from seeds planted months ago. Sapa creek is much cleaner than it used to be in the 1990’s and cleaned everyday of debris and plastic garbage. People since stopped throwing garbage over the bridge (some needed a bit more forceful convincing). The banks of the creek are planted with more flowering plants, papyrus and miagos bushes. Birds, butterflies and monitor lizards can be found roaming along the edge of the creek. Wildlife is coming back.
Sulu Garden, a nature center built besides the bridge, provides a convenient access to see Puente de Britanico in all its glory. Here, tourist visiting Miagao Fortress Church, a UNESCO Heritage Church, gets a chance to see the other attraction in Miagao—perhaps the only remaining fully intact Spanish bridge architecture in the island of Panay.

One day Puente de Britanico will get its municipal landmark recognition and perhaps the National Historical Commission will finally make it a national heritage site.

For me there is still one more challenge – find the keystone marker. Every builder leaves a mark carved in stone. Finding it will once and for all confirm the date of the bridge and the unnamed engineers who built it.

I will find that keystone. Just a matter of time and patience. For now, I am happy with the thought of the two bridges; one that spanned the memories of my youth and the one that continues into my olden days.

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Notes & References:


[2] Mythical creatures in Philippine folklore may vary from island to island. This link provides some descriptions of the more well known mythical creatures in local folklore. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippine_mythical_creatures The expression ‘tabi tabi po’ is part of the superstition as a way of saying “excuse me’ or “pardon me” when entering an area where creatures (such as dwende or dwarfs/elves or ghosts) may reside. The phrase is used to prevent any personal consequences should be creatures are not given respect while passing their territory. The White Lady is a ghost-like image of a woman in white. Balete trees are particularly enchanted and where dwendes or dwarves live.
Every time I type the term Spanish Bridge, I feel certain disquiet about the term. I think it is just semantics, but even the term Spanish era bridges don’t work for me. As if the term implies that the Spanish colonials built it all by themselves. The designers most likely are Spanish, but those who truly sweated for these bridges were Filipinos driven by colonial decree to be forced laborers or virtual slaves. Like the construction of churches in the Philippines, the common people were required to serve, without pay for a period of months each year, to build forts, roads and bridges for the empire. That was the reality of the Spanish era for our forefathers. When I look at Puente de Britanico, I think about the hundreds of Miagawanons who carried these stones from the mountain quarries of San Joaquin and how much suffering it must have taken before this bridge was finally built.

And, that I should not simply think of this bridge as Spanish, but truly a Filipino made bridge.