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Research Article

Buried Memories, Imagined Wealth: Yamashita Treasure as Collective Memory in Everyday Life in Mindanao

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Abstract

This paper examines how Yamashita Treasure—an allegedly buried wartime hoard left by the Japanese military in the Philippines—continues to be remembered, narrated, and imagined in the everyday lives of residents in Mindanao. Based on an ethnographic methodology involving long participant observation in four field sites between 2015 and 2024, and coding of the obtained data, the study explores how ordinary people encounter and interpret traces believed to indicate the presence of the treasure—such as fragments of pottery, symbolic carvings on rocks, or cryptic maps—as well as unexpected events like sudden economic success or the rare arrival of Japanese visitors. These materials and incidents are rarely verified through historical inquiry but are instead animated by collective imagination, subaltern knowledge production, and deeply embedded wartime memories. Engaging with postcolonial theory, the paper argues that narratives surrounding the treasure do not merely reflect rumor or folklore. Rather, they serve as a grassroots form of war memory, indirectly recalling Japan's occupation of the Philippines. While the treasure's existence remains uncertain, its imagined presence generates a sense of possibility—a hope for future prosperity grounded in a painful past. As such, the narration of the Yamashita Treasure becomes a means of simultaneously resisting historical forgetting and producing future-oriented imaginaries. By analyzing these everyday practices and representations, this study contributes to broader discussions on postcolonial memory, hope, and the lingering effects of war.

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Have you ever heard of the Yamashita Treasure? This word denotes a persistent legend asserting that, during the Pacific War, Japanese forces looted vast quantities of gold and other valuables—estimated at 100 billion U.S. dollars—from across Asia and concealed them in the Philippines during the campaign there, under the direction of General Tomoyuki Yamashita and the Fourteenth Area Army. While it belongs to the genre of so-called "golden legends," Yamashita Treasure is more than mere folklore in the Philippine context.

Several commercially successful films centering on the Yamashita Treasure have been produced in the Philippines, including *Ang Lihim ng Golden Budda* (1989) and Y*amashita: The Tiger's Treasure* (2001). The legend's appeal extends beyond the archipelago, as manifested by numerous books published in both English and Japanese (Chrysaetos, 2013; McDougald, 1993; Namae, 1995; Sasakura, 1998; Seagrave & Seagrave, 2005). The History Channel produced two seasons of the reality show, *Lost Gold of World War II* (2019–2020), which followed American treasure hunters attempting to uncover the mystery of the treasure. Perhaps most strikingly, in 1998, a geotechnical engineering group at the University of California, Berkeley conducted a serious excavation using seismic engineering methods (Washbourne, Rector, & Alonso, 1998).

Even today, 80 years after the end of the war, many individuals in the Philippines continue to search for the Yamashita Treasure. Local and foreign treasure hunters persist digging into Philippine soil in pursuit of elusive riches. This study examines why the Yamashita Treasure—despite its ambiguous existence—continues to be imagined as a real and tangible object. Focusing on some field sites in Mindanao, this paper explores how collective memories associated with the treasure are recalled, reconfigured, and sustained through local narratives and practices.

The perceived plausibility of the Yamashita Treasure has intensified over time, particularly within Philippine society and among treasure hunters from Japan and the United States. Following the war, Japanese initiatives to repatriate the remains of fallen soldiers commenced in the late 1950s. However, local Filipinos began to suspect that these ostensibly humanitarian missions concealed ulterior motives: the retrieval of hidden wartime treasure. Such suspicions catalyzed the initial wave of widespread enthusiasm surrounding the legend. In January 1971, a locksmith named Roger Roxas is said to have unearthed a golden Buddha, approximately 70 centimeters in height and weighing around one ton, along with 24 gold bars behind the Baguio General Hospital. This statue, commonly referred to as the "Golden Buddha," was reportedly seized by then-President Ferdinand Marcos in April of the same year (Umari, 1993).

Imelda Marcos, the wife of Ferdinand Marcos, publicly stated that a portion of her husband's wealth came from a treasure. This assertion further entrenched public belief in the Philippines that the Golden Buddha incident constituted compelling evidence for the Yamashita Treasure's actual existence. The alleged looting led to legal proceedings, and in 1996, a U.S. federal court in Honolulu ruled in favor of recognizing the Marcos regime's act of plunder (Roxas v. Marcos, 1998). In contrast, current President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. has commented dismissively on the issue, stating, *"It's being reported, not just in the Philippines, but everywhere else, that the Yamashita gold exists. But all my life, I have yet to see any gold like that… If they know something, they could tell me. I need that gold,"* (Inquirer.net, 2022). Taken at face value, this statement casts the treasure in the light of a myth rather than material reality. However, the Supreme Court's engagement with the issue in a legal context suggests that the possibility of the treasure's existence has not been entirely discounted.

The perception that the Philippine state itself entertains the possibility of the treasure's existence has arguably enhanced the credibility and persistence of the legend. Since 2007, a formal regulatory framework has been instituted, mandating a fee of 10,000 pesos and requiring official authorization from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) for any treasure hunting

activities. Although an ordinance prohibiting treasure hunting remains in effect in Baguio City, widely considered the symbolic epicenter of the legend, the city council officially allowed a group to conduct an excavation in 2017 to verify the treasure's existence (Inquirer.net, 2017). A city councilor remarked, "What if we say no, and the treasure exists? It would be better to find out. If the treasure is found, the national government gets a 35-percent share, the city government gets a 35-percent share, leaving the remaining 30 percent to the treasure hunters who discovered it" (ibid.).

One of the key reasons why treasure hunting has come under governmental regulation is the damage previously inflicted on valuable archaeological materials. In 1991, a Japanese group reportedly destroyed numerous ceramic vessels from around 300 BCE at Ayub Cave in southern Mindanao. Subsequently, local Filipinos, believing the site contained treasure, dug up metal-age Kalanay pottery and applied chemicals to it, mistaking it for gold (Bersales, 2016). These episodes led to the implementation of more stringent controls on unauthorized excavations to safeguard archaeological heritage. Nevertheless, when state or local authorities assume a managerial role in overseeing treasure hunting, they may inadvertently convey the impression that official institutions are endorsing the existence of the Yamashita Treasure.

Literature Review

Several scholarly interpretations have been proposed to explain why the Yamashita Treasure legend prevails vividly in contemporary Philippine society. One perspective attributes its endurance to persistent poverty and high unemployment rates, which drive individuals to seek the dream of sudden wealth through treasure hunting (Namae, 1995). Another interpretation posits that the treasure legend endures due to a perceived national tendency among Filipinos to rely on external sources of fortune rather than on self-determination (Sasakura, 1998). A third view suggests that the plausibility of Japan having concealed vast reserves of gold in the Philippines is sustained by the existing economic disparity between the two nations (Kajiwara, 1995). Drawing on Foster's (1964) concept of the "image of limited good," cultural anthropologist Kageaki Kajiwara links the structural dependence of Philippine society on external sources of wealth to the persistence of the Yamashita Treasure tale. Just as the Philippine economy is supported by remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), the wealth generated domestically is perceived as finite. In this context, achieving prosperity requires access to wealth from external sources, and the Yamashita Treasure is one such imagined reservoir. Kajiwara (1995) also highlights the potent role of rumor in Philippine society as a key factor in the survival of the treasure narrative. From a different perspective, historian Sinzo Hayase (2004) argues that the persistence of the legend may be rooted in Japan's failure to adequately address its postwar responsibilities, suggesting that some Filipinos remember the treasure as a form of delayed war reparations.

In line with broader scholarship on Philippine war memory, previous studies have noted that memories of the Pacific War are deeply embedded in Catholic spirituality; that recollections of the Japanese occupation are not static reproductions of historical fact but are continually reconstructed through contemporary political, cultural, and social contexts; and that the Philippine state, motivated by a desire to preserve economically beneficial relations, is often ill-suited to engage in sustained memory work (José, 2011; Linantud, 2008).

Therefore, the continued prominence of the Yamashita Treasure tale results from a complex interplay of these various aspects. However, this paper asks: How people in the Philippines actually recall and reimagine the treasure in their daily lives? What mechanisms sustain the social imagination surrounding something whose very existence remains uncertain? This paper explores how people in local cities and rural areas in Mindanao invoke the reality of the treasure through everyday discourse. By clarifying the local logics by which people situate its existence within their own lifeworlds, this analysis examines the contemporary meanings embedded in the continued narratives of the Yamashita

Treasure, particularly through the lens of "remembering and forgetting" war memories.

Methodology

This research followed standard anthropological procedures. The principal method employed was participant observation (Malinowski, 1922), where I resided with informants and participated in their daily routines to collect data through shared experiences. Informants represented a diverse range of social attributes—men and women of varying ages and occupations, including self-employed individuals, farmers, fishers, teachers, and pensioners. Notably, none were professional treasure hunters. In the following sections, I1 through I15 refer to informants (see Table 1).

Table 1

Attributes of Informants

Informant ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location
I1	Male	20s	Entrepreneur	Brgy. C
I2	Male	40s	Fisher	Brgy. D
I3	Female	30s	Homemaker	Brgy. B
I4	Male	50s	Not specified	Brgy. A
I5	Male	80s	Retiree	Brgy. A
I6	Male	50s	Self-employed	Brgy. A
I7	Male	20s	Farmer	Brgy. D
I8	Male	50s	Self-employer	Brgy. D
I9	Male	60s	Construction business owner	Brgy. D
I10	Male	30s	No occupation	Brgy. D
I11	Male	20s	Parish assistant	Brgy. B
I12	Female	50s	Homemaker	Brgy. D

In examining the diffuse imaginaries of the Yamashita Treasure within Philippine society, I deliberately chose not to concentrate on those who have devoted their lives to treasure hunting. Instead, my focus was on how the topic emerged intermittently in casual conversations among ordinary Mindanao residents or in spontaneous acts such as briefly digging into the ground during work breaks. To avoid disrupting people's "normal" interactions and behaviors, I refrained from using a voice recorder during conversations (Abu-Lughod, 2016). All data were documented in fieldnotes.

Ethnographic data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Bernard, 2018; Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Fieldnotes were examined and coded through an open coding process, after which similar codes were consolidated into conceptual categories to identify key themes and patterns.

In anthropological research, the ethnographer's positionality plays a crucial role in shaping the fieldwork process and the social realities being observed (Agar, 1980). My positionality as a Japanese researcher in this study likely influenced the data significantly. My presence may have prompted the treasure story to surface in people's conversations more often than otherwise— an

aspect I will return to later. It is therefore important to state from the outset that this paper reflects a Japanese ethnographer's account of the social imagination surrounding the Yamashita Treasure in the Philippines. The presence of ethnographers can sometimes heighten local speculation; in this case, it may have contributed to risky expeditions, including the fatal incident discussed later. Such circumstances underscore the moral complexities inherent in ethnographic research.

There are specific reasons why this study selected Mindanao as its research site. As mentioned earlier, the epicenter of the Yamashita Treasure legend is Baguio. This association is based on historical records indicating that, toward the end of the war, General Yamashita and the Japanese military command retreated northward from Baguio into the mountainous areas of Northern Luzon (Fukumitsu, 1982). The common narrative, which conforms to the classic pattern of treasure tales, suggests that the Japanese army buried valuables in the mountains as they fled, to avoid being burdened during their retreat (Namae, 1995).

By definition, the Yamashita Treasure is purported to have been concealed by the Fourteenth Area Army led by General Yamashita. However, Yamashita himself never passed through Mindanao. According to this logic, the likelihood of gold being buried in Mindanao is exceedingly low. Nevertheless, as in other parts of the Philippines, numerous narratives and practices surrounding the Yamashita Treasure are also found there. The island's particular historical and socio-political characteristics—such as the long-standing presence of Japanese residents since before the war, the concealment of Japanese soldiers after disarmament, its political and social marginality, its image as a frontier, and its reputation for fertile and resource-rich lands—may have further heightened local interest in the treasure compared to other regions. I chose to focus on such peripheral regions, where the historical credibility of the legend is weak, precisely because they offer a better vantage point from which to examine the enduring strength of the contemporary social imagination surrounding the Yamashita Treasure. It was for this reason that Mindanao was selected as the research site.

In analyzing the data obtained through participant observation, this study primarily draws on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1980). Halbwachs posits that memories of the past are constantly reconstructed from the present standpoint. His framework has been widely adopted across disciplines. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is not merely the sum of individual memories, but a structure with its own internal logic and value system. It sustains a sense of the past as something that persists into the present, rather than being confined to a distant or disconnected time. This temporal continuity is supported by spatial frameworks, accumulations of material traces, representations, and symbols that anchor memory to a specific place.

In collective memory theory, memory is understood to emerge between agents and mediating elements (Wertsch, 1998). Each act of recollection reinforces and reconfigures the memory remembered (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Conversely, the deterioration or disappearance of spatial frameworks contributes to the erosion of memory. As material traces of the past fade, sociopolitical imperatives to "not forget" often intervene to preserve and revitalize collective memory.

In the case of the Yamashita Treasure, the spatial frameworks have undergone significant decay. Because it is not a medium that directly bears the violent memories of war, the political imperative to remember it remains weak. Yet the treasure legend has not been forgotten; it continues to be recalled in Philippine society. Paul Connerton's (2008) work on forgetting offers a valuable counterpoint to Halbwachs. Connerton reminds us that forgetting is not simply a passive loss of memory but can take multiple socially structured forms, from repressive erasure to structural amnesia and prescriptive forgetting. The Yamashita Treasure legend appears to elude these dominant forms of forgetting. Despite the erosion of physical sites and the absence of institutionalized memorial practices, the legend persists through informal storytelling, everyday interpretations of ambiguous "traces," and

their embedding in local lifeworlds. In this sense, the persistence of the treasure narrative embodies a dual dynamic—its survival as a residue of wartime memory, and its resistance to the socially and materially driven processes that would otherwise consign it to oblivion. This paper thus approaches the contemporary discourse and practices surrounding the Yamashita Treasure as a collective memory continually reconstructed in the present, examining how it endures despite the physical dissolution of its spatial frameworks and the relative absence of political imperatives to maintain it.

Results and Discussion

During the fieldwork period in Mindanao, the treasure tale frequently emerged as a topic of conversation, whether during socializing with neighbors or drinking sessions. The name of General Yamashita was mentioned by people across a broad demographic range, from elderly individuals who had experienced the war to young agribusiness entrepreneurs. Across generations, people expressed interest in the potential location of the treasure.

For instance, I1 once invited companions to climb a mountain he owned. Upon reaching a scenic viewpoint overlooking his property, he asked the others, "Do you have any ideas about the gold?" In another instance, while sharing drinks and discussing political affairs, I2 commented, "Marcos was rich because he found the Yamashita Treasure." These examples illustrate how various moments in everyday life served as occasions for invoking and recounting the legend. The discourse surrounding the Yamashita Treasure was not confined to individuals who actively sought it but rather arose spontaneously within the fabric of ordinary social interaction.

The Materiality of the Treasure: Imagined and Evoked

The locksmith Roger Roxas claimed to have discovered a Golden Buddha, which Ferdinand Marcos allegedly seized. Yet, if the treasure exists, what evidence underpins such a claim? More fundamentally, what is the imagined composition of this treasure?

In Japan, a prevailing theory posits that the treasure consists of *Marufuku* gold coins (Fukumitsu, 1972; Namae, 1995). Toward the end of the Japanese occupation, trust in the Japanese military had declined across Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, and military scrip and Japanese currency had depreciated. In response, the Japanese military reportedly minted three types of gold coins— (1) *fuku* (福, fortune), (2) *roku* (禄, prosperity), and (3) *ju* (寿, longevity)—to secure provisions at the front lines. It is said that 25,000 of these coins, with an estimated value of 3.1 billion yen, were brought into the Philippines (Namae, 1995).

Drawing on historical documentation, nonfiction writer Yuji Namae conducted research into what the treasure might actually be and collected testimonies from former Japanese soldiers. These included accounts such as: "We were given gold coins from the command before surrendering," "We flushed the coins down the toilet," and "After capture, we exchanged them for canned food and cigarettes in the internment camp." He further speculates that the persistence of treasure legends in areas where *Marufuku* coins were never brought can be explained by local memories of Japanese troops burying classified documents or ammunition prior to surrender—events that were reportedly witnessed by Filipinos (Namae, 1995; Ikue, 1995).

However, during fieldwork in Mindanao, no informant referred to the treasure as consisting of gold coins. The most common imagined form of the treasure was gold ingots. Other material forms in local narratives included Buddha statues, dragon sculptures, diamonds, and earthenware. It is plausible that such imagery is informed by existing representations, such as Roger Roxas' Golden Buddha or the depiction of gold bars in films and television programs.

The notion that the treasure comprises ingots or sacred artifacts is also supported by the Golden Lily theory (Seagrave & Seagrave, 2005). According to this fictitious story, the treasure allegedly buried throughout the Philippines comprises valuables looted from various parts of Asia by agents of the Japanese imperial family during the war. The theory further claims that the U.S. military unearthed these treasures from 172 sites after the war and used them as a secret funding source during the Cold War. Based on this urban myth, several books have systematized methods for deciphering treasure maps and symbols, which continue to enjoy strong support among treasure hunters within and outside the Philippines (Chrysaetos, 2013).

So, when does this uncertain treasure begin to take on a sense of reality among local people? The moments when it appeared most plausible were typically when people had found physical traces of the treasure. For example, the ceramic vessel shown in Figure 1 was discovered by I3 within her own living space and was recognized by her as a fragment of the Yamashita Treasure. She approached me in a hushed tone and said, "I have something from Yamashita Treasure… can you come check?" When I visited her home, she carefully brought out several ceramic items, including a jar and a smoking pipe, and placed them in front of me. She explained:

> *"These came from the river beneath my house. They must have been left by Japanese soldiers, right? You're Japanese, you must know, don't you?"*

When I responded that I wasn't sure and reached out to touch the items, she gently pushed my hand away, saying, "Please find out once you go back to Japan." The ceramics were treated with extraordinary care. This was not an isolated case. When fragments of pottery were found at the bottom of rivers, or when black, shiny stones resembling "black diamonds" were discovered in the mountains, people would preserve them carefully. These fragments were stored, discussed, analyzed, and reinterpreted within the community. In the process, they were transformed into tangible "evidence" for the treasure's presence in the region.

Figure 1

Pottery Fragment Identified as a Trace of Yamashita Treasure (Fieldwork, 2015)

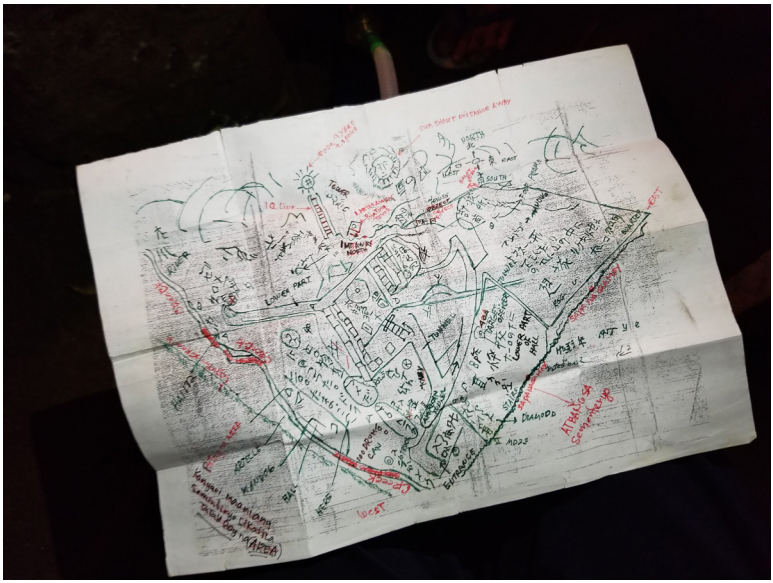
A key process through which the treasure became real in people's minds involved the discovery and interpretation of coded signs. People often identified boulders, coconut trees, or other markers in the surrounding space when treasure fragments were found. The markings engraved on these stones and the triangular arrangements of rocks and trees were interpreted as clues, seen as intentional signs left behind to guide future seekers to the treasure's location.

Above all, what most strongly sustained belief in the treasure's existence in the research sites was the presence of treasure maps. As seen in Figure 2, such maps circulated locally and were also passed down or shared among family members and close friends. Most of these maps shared certain features: they appeared to be handwritten in an old-fashioned style, contained characters resembling Japanese writing, and were marked with various symbolic signs such as circles and triangles. In other words, these maps were not readily interpretable to the ordinary Filipino. Because they appeared indecipherable, they were seen as documents that only a select few, specifically Japanese individuals capable of reading the script, could understand. This mysteriousness heightened the perceived authenticity of the maps and the probability that they pointed to a real treasure. At one drinking session, I4, who owned the map shown in Figure 2, presented it to me and said:

> *"I got this from someone I trust. You're Japanese, right? You can read this, can't you? Help me decode it."*

Figure 2

A Map Indicating the Location of Yamashita Treasure (Fieldwork, 2018)



People encountered unexpected material objects in their everyday surroundings, such as glowing stones, pieces of pottery, or other unanticipated remnants. Likewise, treasure maps would come to them through unexpected channels and were often carefully preserved once acquired. These moments of surprise—be they a shiny rock or a mysterious map—served as triggers for recalling the Yamashita Treasure. Once discovered, these objects were reinterpreted as material traces of the treasure and became the basis for narratives that sustained the plausibility of the treasure's existence

within the fabric of everyday life.

Representations of Reality

Within everyday life, various narratives emerged that represented the treasure as a real, tangible presence. These discourses took four primary forms: (1) testimonies based on the lived experiences of wartime survivors; (2) narratives associated with sudden economic growth; (3) stories linked to the arrival of Japanese visitors; and (4) firsthand accounts of attempted excavations.

These narratives did not seek to question the treasure's existence. Instead, they were predicated on the assumption that it did, and that it was located somewhere in the land people inhabited. The key questions were where it might be hidden, who might have found it, and how they had done so.

Among these, the testimonies of wartime survivors held particular weight. Detailed recollections shared by elderly individuals, who claimed to have personally seen or interacted with Japanese soldiers, were often regarded as the most trustworthy form of evidence. For example, I5, pointing to his garden, recounted the following:

> *"See those three coconut trees over there, planted in a triangle? The Japanese planted them long ago. Right in the center of that triangle is where the treasure is buried. If you have time, try digging. There are signs carved into the trees. Back when I was a child, I lived in Pikit (in Cotabato province). There were lots of Japanese soldiers there. They were kind… they would wave us over and give us candy. There used to be many Japanese in Mindanao, so that's why there are so many treasure signs here."*

This kind of narrative was grounded in vivid, place-based memories—stories of observing Japanese soldiers burying items or seeing them mark trees and rocks with strange symbols. Elderly individuals who shared such recollections became living repositories of collective memory. Their stories were not merely taken as personal reminiscences but as crucial testimony, bridging historical events and the contemporary belief in hidden treasure. Their presence lent a sense of immediacy and legitimacy to the treasure trail. They operated as social memory devices, embodying and transmitting fragments of the past that continued to animate the imagination of the present.

The Yamashita Treasure was frequently invoked in relation to individuals within the community who had experienced a sudden rise in economic status. In instances where someone became visibly wealthier, local speculation often attributed their newfound prosperity to the clandestine discovery of buried treasure. The following narratives exemplify this pattern of association:

> *"You know that construction company called Joka, the one along the highway? It's got a large lot and lots of trucks parked there now. They weren't making much money before, but suddenly they got big. Suddenly, all these trucks appeared. Have you noticed the large rock on their property? There's a sign on it, a treasure mark. People say they dug beneath that rock and struck gold. That's why they've kept the rock there… It's a lucky stone, almost like a monument." (I6)*

> *"The son from that house recently bought a few trucks. And now he's doing great with his general store. I'm telling you, he found the treasure. The other day in Davao, I told someone I'm from Davao Occidental, and they said, 'Oh, people from there must be rich—there's treasure in that area, right?' Look, here's a photo. I actually found a black diamond myself." (I7)*

In communities where local resources are limited, sudden business expansion or rapid financial improvement tends to be perceived as anomalous, something that cannot be easily explained by daily labor alone. In such cases, people often infer the involvement of external sources of wealth. Within this interpretive framework, the idea of the Yamashita Treasure gains traction. The treasure emerges not through archaeological evidence, but through social imagination, triggered by perceived

economic incongruities.

Unusual events perceived within the community were also often linked to the idea of the Yamashita Treasure. Among such events was the unexpected arrival of Japanese people. None of the research sites were conventional tourist destinations likely to attract Japanese or foreign visitors; the presence of Japanese individuals in these areas were relatively rare. In Brgy. A, however, a Japanese-run NGO facility had been established in the early 2000s, making sightings of Japanese people more common than in other areas. Nevertheless, locals did not entirely understand the motivations behind the NGO's establishment. The following conversation emerged regarding the organization:

> *"That Japanese foundation nearby? Its real purpose was treasure. When they first set it up, a Japanese man came and asked if he could install a water pipe behind my house. Said he wanted to borrow the land. I refused right away. He knew there was treasure buried there." (I6)*

> *"No, no. He found the treasure first… that's how he was able to start the foundation." (I5)*

Why, after all, would a Japanese person go out of their way to establish an NGO in such a remote village? For residents, the explanation remained elusive. But one answer fit: the Yamashita Treasure. Similar interpretations were found in other sites:

> *"A few years back, Americans came to Brgy. D for the first time. Said they were Christian missionaries and came in a big group. But why would they come here of all places? They were looking for treasure, I'm sure of it. And I heard that a Japanese group would come to visit here in 2016, for the grave of their wartime ancestors. They will be coming to take back the treasure." (I8)*

Whether in the guise of missionary outreach or NGO activity, the presence of Japanese or other foreigners in rural communities often raised suspicions about hidden motives. The dominant assumption was that behind these seemingly benevolent initiatives lay a covert intent: to recover the long-rumored treasure. Similar dynamics were reported when Japanese memorial or repatriation missions visited particular locations in the Philippines, only for those sites to be subsequently excavated by local residents (Ikue, 1995).

Both rapid economic development and the unexpected arrival of the Japanese were seen as anomalies that disrupted the normal rhythms of everyday life. The Yamashita Treasure was a narrative device that rendered these anomalies intelligible, offering a coherent story through which people could make sense of unsettling or inexplicable events. Through the imagined presence of treasure hidden beneath the land, people found a way to comprehend and integrate events that otherwise stood outside the bounds of everyday understanding.

The presence of Japanese visitors often served as a catalyst, particularly for older individuals, not only to recall the Yamashita Treasure and the friendly behavior of Japanese soldiers during the war, but also to revisit memories of Japanese brutality. I encountered only one case where someone shared a firsthand account of a treasure excavation.

> *"A long time ago, my father's brother discovered a golden dragon, a Japanese-style dragon. I saw it with my own eyes. He was planning to sell it, to turn it into money. But just before that happened, he died. After his death, the statue was passed on to another relative. That person also died shortly after. This land is cursed by the Japanese soldiers. I know people around here with surnames like 'Kimura' and 'Miyake'; there used to be many Japanese here. When the war broke out, the Japanese ate the indigenous people who were living here. The Japanese did many terrible things here." (I9)*

This man was the wealthiest person in the barangay. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that those who have accumulated wealth are more likely to deny involvement in treasure hunting or speak of the treasure in fearful, ominous terms. While this cannot be said with certainty, it is notable that this man, perhaps provoked by my presence as a Japanese, began to recount how his family had been cursed by the treasure left behind by the Japanese, and how the Japanese had committed atrocities in the area during the war. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Mindanao had a significant population of Japanese migrants, many of whom were engaged in abaca cultivation. Several of these settlers had married Filipinos, acquired land, and built relatively harmonious relationships with local communities (Hayase, 2014). However, the memory of how these once-friendly Japanese neighbors suddenly transformed into enemies with the onset of war was still vivid and powerful. These memories were often recalled in direct continuity with the story of the Yamashita Treasure and were passed down to younger generations listening nearby.

Drawn Toward Excavation

As outlined in the previous section, the four narrative types circulated daily did not question the Yamashita Treasure's existence. Instead, they collectively worked to accumulate and reinforce speculation about where the treasure might be and who might possess it. As these narratives intensified, they occasionally led individuals to take action, namely, to dig for the treasure.

In the research sites, such efforts were typically modest in scale. A more accurate description is that people engaged in treasure hunting as an extension of their daily routines, for instance, by digging with a shovel in the yard just outside their homes. Small-scale excavations, like the one shown in Figure 3, were often concealed using coconut fronds or blue tarpaulins. Referring to the excavation in Figure 3, I10 remarked with a tone that mixed exasperation and hope:

> *"That landowner has already dug in nine different spots and still hasn't found anything."*

Elsewhere, stories circulated about attempted or planned excavations:

> *"There was a rumor about black diamonds buried in the mountain. We formed a team to dig, but didn't manage to invest in the equipment in time." (I11)*

Figure 3

A Hidden Hole Excavated in the Search for Yamashita Treasure (Fieldwork, 2015)

Finally, I would like to share an episode that strongly suggests my own presence as a Japanese researcher may have directly influenced the decision to undertake treasure hunting. Shortly after returning to Japan from Brgy. D in 2015, I received a message from I12 in the barangay with whom I had developed a close relationship:

> *"That boy died while searching for Yamashita Treasure with his father. A rockfall came down from the cliff."*

The boy, just 18 years old, had been deeply convinced that the treasure lay hidden somewhere in his place. He was one of the kindest and most helpful men during my fieldwork, always generous with his time and eager to assist with my research.

I now summarize the key features of the narratives surrounding the Yamashita Treasure as observed in the research sites in Mindanao. People frequently encountered material mediators in their everyday lives that evoked the possible presence of the treasure beneath their immediate surroundings—fragments recognized as pieces of the treasure, hand-drawn maps, or lines carved into stones, and the arrangement of trees forming symbolic patterns. These "traces" can be productively examined through Ann Laura Stoler's (2013) concept of imperial debris, highlighting the material and symbolic remnants of empire that persist long after colonial rule. In Mindanao, such objects are not inert relics; they are active sites of social imagination, animating memories of Japanese occupation and projecting aspirations for future prosperity. Importantly, they are not validated through empirical links to the past but gain significance through the vivid images they trigger in people's imaginations, functioning simultaneously as residues of imperial violence and as resources for reimagining life after empire.

Unusual or unexplainable events that disrupt the everyday—sudden economic success or the unexpected arrival of Japanese or other foreigners—further amplify the plausibility of the treasure's existence. These interpretations often unfold within what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms subaltern knowledge systems: local readings of carvings, maps, or events outside formal historical and archaeological discourse and are often dismissed by official expertise (Spivak, 1988). Yet they form an alternative epistemology grounded in lived experience, inherited memory, and local cosmologies. In such moments, the treasure is assumed to be real, prompting speculation about its location or recovery rather than questioning its existence. By attending to these stories as both imperial debris and expressions of subaltern knowledge, we can see how they offer grassroots modes of remembering war and colonialism while challenging the epistemic hierarchies determining whose histories are recognized as credible.

Once recalled, the treasure becomes the center of conversation, reinforced and reconfigured each time a new mediator or anomalous event appears. Familiar storylines—rumors, wartime survivors' testimonies, links to Japanese individuals past and present, and intergenerational accounts of excavations—circulate widely, continually generating and multiplying traces within everyday landscapes. Encounters with Japanese visitors frequently activate these narratives, often casting humanitarian or memorial activities as covert treasure retrieval attempts and recalling wartime atrocities. Japan is thus not solely portrayed as a benevolent postwar partner; instead, memories of violence, betrayal, and perceived cunning are reactivated, shaping an image of unresolved historical tensions (cf. Campoamor II, 2009).

This dynamic contrasts with the political disappearance of the past in diplomatic relations. As historian Satoshi Nakano (2011) notes, Japan's "politics of mourning"—akin to Freud's (1957) notion of mourning work—has enabled forgetting, and the Philippine state has fostered friendly relations with Japan by choosing to "forgive." Yet grassroots treasure narratives function as a continuous,

indirect means of recalling Japan's wartime occupation, underpinned by intertwined images of Japan as both wealthy and historically violent. This interplay of collective memory and contemporary imagination sustains the plausibility of the treasure myth. To recall the Yamashita Treasure is thus not merely to pursue buried wealth; it is to resist political forgetting and to reaffirm the memory of war. Such practices can be read as subaltern narratives (Spivak, 1988) that resist the dominant knowledge production of intellectual elites and challenge epistemic hierarchies.

At the same time, the practices of those who identify signs of the treasure without verifying their empirical validity suggest an orientation toward imagining—or even generating—the wealth believed to lie beneath their land. The treasure is there, yet not here, an ambiguity that, as Miyazaki (2004) argues, provides the ground upon which hope is sustained. Anchored in war memories that are continually recalled even as details are selectively forgotten, people refine and elaborate images of future wealth that might one day be uncovered. Through the ongoing narration of the Yamashita Treasure, they resist the erasure of the past and engage in the imaginative creation of future possibility—an act of remembering that is simultaneously an act of hoping forward.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how the Yamashita Treasure is imagined as a tangible presence in contemporary Philippine society, particularly through the everyday narratives and practices of people in Mindanao. Encounters with material traces and unusual events continually recall and reconstruct wartime memory, with the treasure functioning both as a site of remembrance and a repository of hope. Even when framed through the seemingly apolitical idiom of treasure hunting, these narratives sustain war memory at the grassroots level, resisting historical erasure and linking the past to future aspirations.

While this study highlights the significance of such narratives, it also leaves questions for future research. Limited ethnographic data on actual treasure hunting prevented a closer examination of how storytelling connects to action, and regional and comparative perspectives remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps would deepen the understanding of how the Yamashita Treasure myth circulates, varies, and sustains collective memory through everyday storytelling and practice.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Disclosure

I declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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