



## Illicit Trade in Gold Cultural Materials in Butuan, Philippines

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**ABSTRACT.** Historical and archaeological records have always associated Butuan in northeast Mindanao with gold. This reputation has set off rampant looting activities in and out of the locality since the 1970s until today. Such illicit activities have never been given much attention, and thus, this form of destruction of cultural properties has never been accounted for. This study examines the conduct of *pag-aantik* in Butuan through the lens of an archaeologist working on the site. I intend to expose the processes and the people involved in the illicit trade in gold cultural materials in this archaeologically rich market. Through the ethnography of looting, the study draws its attention to the social nature of the illicit trade. I argue that a small-scale analysis of this activity in Butuan allows us to observe interactions and relationships between groups of people, and the transformations gold items go through in the process. This is all to inform the academe as well as the future policies that aim to combat the destruction of cultural resources in the country.

**KEYWORDS.** Butuan · illicit trade · gold artefacts · ethnography of looting

### AN ARCHAEOLOGICALLY RICH HUB

In the mid-1970s, a flotilla of ancient boats, locally referred to as *balangay*, was discovered in the northeastern Mindanao city of Butuan (figure 1). Subsequent archaeological excavations recovered an array of cultural materials. These material evidences have allowed researchers to argue Butuan's participation in interisland and even in Southeast Asian trade from about the seventh to the twelfth century CE (Capistrano-Baker 2011; Bolunia 2013, 2014, 2017; Hontiveros 2004; Lacsina 2016; Stead and Dizon 2011; Peralta 1980). Gold is among the notable products that have circulated Butuan during this time. Recent archaeological studies on recovered crucibles as well as preworked and worked gold pieces assert that goldworking, as a metalcraft, was once a conspicuous industry in Butuan (Cembrano

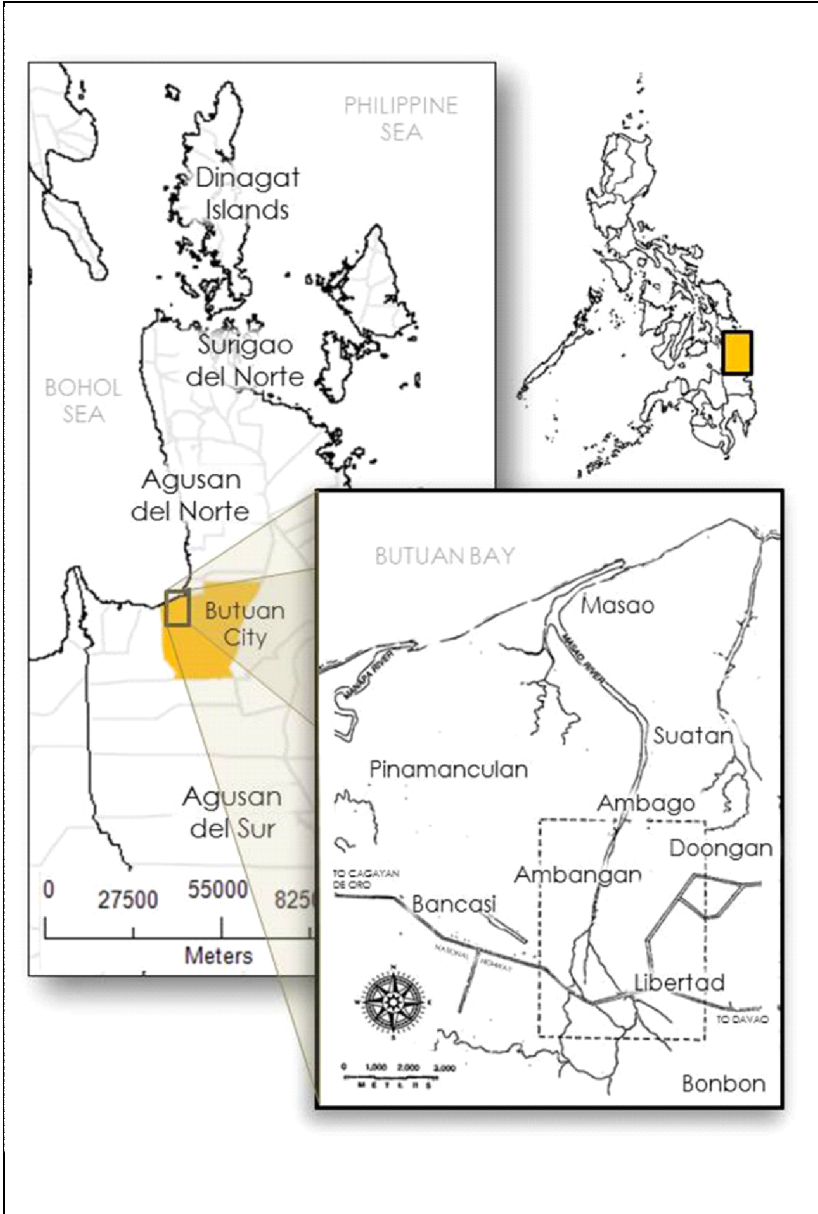


Figure 1. Present-day map of Butuan City in Northeast Mindanao, showing its sitios and barrios. Maps by the author, from Estrella 2017.

1998; Estrella 2016b, 2017; Ronquillo 1989). This is supported by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish ethnohistoric accounts describing the profusion of ornaments and implements made out of *bulawan*, or gold, to the population's disposal (Estrella 2016a; Gatbonton 2013; Hontiveros 2004; Scott 1994).

Up to this day, the balangay site complex has remained to be the single most important archaeological site in Butuan. A total of six wooden boats have been archaeologically excavated and more have been reported in barangays Doongan and Libertad (Lacsina 2014, 2015). Other cultural materials, recovered from previous pursuits, include earthenwares (Almendral 1983; ASEAN 1986; Barbosa 1978; Roales 1989), tradeware ceramics (Brown 1989), faunal remains (Bautista 1982, 1983, 1990; Bautista and Galpo 1983), and metal implements (Bautista and Orogo 1990; Cembrano 1998; Estrella 2016b, 2017; Ronquillo 1989). Two museum structures were built within the vicinity, the National Museum Region 13 Branch and the Balangay Shrine. Outside the complex, there were other archaeological excavations: in barangays Ambago, Ambangan, Bonbon, San Vicente, and Bit-os, yielding materials that are important but less sensational than the balangay (Alegre 1979a, 1979b; Bautista 1991; Bolunia 2005, 2017; Burton 1977; Jannaral 1977).

Butuan's archaeological potential was further brought to the attention of the whole country due to the rampant looting activities in the city since the discovery of the boats. Such activities, and the report thereof, have called for numerous archaeological missions to the locality. The National Museum of the Philippines refers to these missions as salvage archaeology projects, which intend to save what had not been affected by plundering incidents (Alegre 1977; Burton 1977; Salcedo 1976). Up until today, numerous artefacts are being recovered systematically. However, there remain copious undocumented materials, which find their way to markets, museums, and private collections in and out of the country. The foremost motivation in looting is the search for gold because of Butuan's history as a source of ancient gold as confirmed by the actual recovery of gold items from both documented and undocumented excavations. It is in Butuan and in neighboring provinces where many gold cultural materials are found and exchanged. People from the Caraga Region witness occasional appearances of gold objects (see Lastimoso 1981 as well as Ronquillo and Salcedo 1981 reports on Surigao treasure as an example). Items, such as ear ornaments, chains, and finger rings, to name a few, are brought to Butuan from

Agusan del Sur, Agusan del Norte, and Surigao del Norte. Butuan appears to be the exposed surface, since it is where most of the exchanges of cultural materials happen.

The exchange of cultural materials in Butuan has always been a part of a larger network of illicit trade in the country. Since the 1970s, or even earlier, many parts of the Philippines have witnessed heightened interest in selling, buying, and collecting archaeological and cultural items. During this time, the term “antique,” which was used to refer to heirloom objects, had its meaning expanded to accommodate those items recovered from archaeological excavations (Almeda 1992). Paz (1992, 29) calls them in Filipino as “*antik hukay*,” to differentiate excavated items from heirloom objects. In Southern Luzon, particularly in the provinces of Batangas, Laguna, and Palawan, archaeological excavations in the 1960s and 1970s made possible, not only the collection of archaeological materials, but also treasure hunting (Barretto-Tesoro 2013, 2017; Paz 1992; Peralta 1982; Valdes 2003). The local labor force who helped in the excavations, equipped with knowledge and skills acquired from archaeologists themselves, became the looters of cultural resources (Barretto-Tesoro 2013). Almeda (1992) identifies this *modus operandi* as far as the province of Sorsogon.

The history of illicit trade in the Philippines suggests that archaeology has something to do with its existence and frequency. It appears to be a continuous loop that has been made possible, if not created, by archaeological pursuits in the country. On one hand, the conduct of archaeology in localities could signal economic potential to illegal diggers and dealers. On the other hand, when an area is looted, archaeologists are summoned to investigate what is left of the activity. As much as archaeology generates knowledge of the past, it also heightens the interest in historically important objects or “antiques” in an area. Although it creates jobs by employing locals in the excavation, it tends to enable them to become pot hunters and looters themselves, posing a serious threat to cultural resources. It is, therefore, the archaeologist, in the forefront of these concerns to the archaeological and cultural properties, who has the responsibility to examine the situation and propose avenues for minimizing, if not ending, the loss of cultural properties. However, the task requires a clearer look at the situation, a gaze which does not consider the activity as an abstract whole, but rather, a concrete reality dictated by its socio-cultural context.

In this section, I introduced Butuan and its enduring romance with gold cultural materials. From this affair, I highlighted the conflicting interests between archaeology and the illicit trade and how one causes the other. Conflict arises when archaeologists succumb to the tendency of viewing illicit trade as an abstract whole. In the succeeding parts of the article, I will try to review this tendency and put forward a microlevel examination. I attempt to explain the different small-scale and oftentimes overlooked processes and people involved in *pagaantik*, or the illicit trade in Butuan, based on my interviews with the participants and observations of actual diggings. In doing so, I intend to expose the interactions between groups of people as well as the transformations that gold items go through in the course of the process. I argue that on the lowest level of this illicit trade, we can observe important exchanges already happening, and at this onset of the market or hub, we can find avenues in combatting the destruction of cultural resources of the country.

### ILLICIT TRADE IN ANTIQUITIES

Illicit trade is a broad, and oftentimes ambiguous, concept that refers to many forms of interactions defined by law as illegal. Radisch (2016,19) points out that it is “an exchange in the control or possession” of a prohibited commodity or service. Prohibited or illegal commodities and services, o both, vary from one country to another (Commolli 2018; Radisch 2016). Countries consider what to them are parts of an illicit trade differently, since their opinions differ on what constitutes as dangerous to the physical health and well-being of the people and their communities. Williams (2001, 107) enumerates four categories of commodities and services illegally exchanged: (1) prohibited goods or services; (2) regulated commodities irregularly sold; (3) excise goods outside their intended destination market without paying the local dues; and (4) stolen commodities. Each of these categories comprises long lists of commodities and services ranging from drugs, prostitution, and human trafficking to smuggled goods and even cultural materials.

Despite the apparent threat of illicit trade to the physical health and well-being of the population, and its sometimes covert social, economic, and political impacts, many people continue to engage in illicit trade in their pursuit of gaining high income (Radisch 2016; Felbab-Brown 2018). In one way or another, these people are involved

in organized crimes, and their convergence makes it even more problematic, since at this point, more categories of commodity or service can be involved (Radisch 2016). This therefore poses greater difficulty not only for the countries involved but also for the whole international community (Albanese 2015; Williams 2001). Interconnectedness brought about by globalization and conflicts even add complexity to these criminal activities (Kinget et al. 2018; OECD 2016).

### **Crime against Cultural Heritage**

The trade in antiquities is considered to be a crime if cultural materials which are treated as regulated commodities are sold irregularly (Alder and Polk 2002; Polk 2009; Williams 2001). Proulx (2011) describes this trade as a “gray market,” since it consists of both legal and illegal undertakings. The UNESCO (1970) Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property declares that all cultural properties must be protected against illegal sale and transfer from origin countries to destination countries.

The UNESCO Convention of 1970 takes its roots from a long attempt to safeguard cultural materials, initially from destruction brought about by armed conflict (1954 Hague Convention for Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict; 1969 European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage). It recognizes a new form of destruction and paved the way for more international treaties on protecting material and nonmaterial cultural properties (1985 Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe; UNIDROIT 1995 Convention on Stolen or Illicitly Exported Cultural Objects; 2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage). In these agreements, owning artefacts or any other important cultural material is acceptable, but, stealing, smuggling, laundering, or trading them without proper permits is punishable by law (Bowman 2008; Tjihuis 2006). The movement, exchange, and transfer of cultural properties are, therefore, the focus of legal attention.

The distinction between cultural and personal property has been a subject of contention in international law (Frigo 2004; O’Keefe 1999). Prott and O’Keefe (1992) suggest that the legal language recognizes cultural property more than the broad concept of cultural heritage. It is then the property of the person or the country, as well

as the present and future access to it that is needed to be protected from illegal transfer and other forms of destruction (Tantuico 2018). Determination of what constitutes cultural property, however, depends on each country's legislation. In the Philippines, it ranges from objects "of cultural, historical, anthropological, or scientific value and significance to the nation" (Republic Act 3874, or the Act Prohibiting Exportation of Antiques in the Philippine Islands of 1931; Republic Act 4846, or the Cultural Properties Preservation and Protection Act of 1966 as amended by Presidential Decree 374 of 1974), to "products of human creativity by which a people and a nation reveal their identity" (Republic Act 10066, National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009). Tantuico (2018) observes that the law is only concerned over the control of the movement of cultural properties in and out of the country, realized in the tedious process of declaration and registration, and the granting of permission for their transfer or sale. I attempt to demonstrate that the destruction of cultural property goes beyond being broken or lost during unpermitted transfer or sale.

### **Changing Focus**

Illicit trade in antiquities is inherently viewed from the framework of criminality. The questions of what kind of and to what extent is it a criminal activity, however, are still being asked. One thing is certain: there are some laws being violated in the trade. Mackenzie (2009, 41; 2011) proposes two perspectives in looking into the criminality of the illicit trade in antiquities: seeing the "market as criminal," and seeing the "criminals in the market." Nonetheless, I prefer to look at these views as macro- and microlevel perspectives.

Viewing the illicit trade in antiquities on a larger scale allows us to see an organized and complex networks of criminals operating in a transnational setting (Campbell 2013; Mackenzie 2009; Manacorda 2011). Campbell (2013, 113), in particular, approaches the illicit trade through a "network paradigm" to be able to make sense of the complexity of this phenomenon. From examining the global characteristics of illicit trade, one can identify the organization of the trade, ascertain its scale, measure its worth, and highlight the complexity of the phenomenon (Radisch 2016). An advantage of a macrolevel perspective is that it emphasizes the global threat of this phenomenon. Consequently, it affects all corners of the society and combatting it is everybody's business (Comolli 2018). And, by saying that it is everybody's business, it means that not only governments should be

convinced to recognize this fact, but more importantly, everyone should come up with similarly convergent and comprehensive policies and plans of action.

However, Proulx (2011, 1) contends that this macrolevel view appears to be a stereotype in which illicit trades in antiquities are all seen as criminal activities on a global scale. In return, discussions tend to generalize it as transnational and global, making it even more abstract, lacking in local contexts and detached from reality (Hobbs 1998). In response, archaeologists and cultural workers alike see the need to provide the bigger picture in order to forward their causes of protecting valuable cultural properties. They, willingly or unwillingly, overlook what is within their own midst, where illicit activities are discreetly operating. The diversity of legality and regulation among countries and its interplay with equally diverse social organizations are even obscured (Edwards and Gill 2002; Hagan 1983). In addition, in large-scale views, measurements and valuations reduce the lives of the people to money and statistics. Everyone who is involved is treated as an offender, and therefore, a criminal.

Instead of two opposing views, however, I wish to see them as complementary parts of a comprehensive approach. The illicit trade in cultural materials can be found simultaneously within local and global contexts (Proulx 2010; Robertson 1995). After all, a global phenomenon should be “local at all points,” and thus, should be reflecting local realities (Latour 1993, 117). It must be stressed that the global characteristics and organization of the illicit trade in antiquities have already been examined extensively, as we observed in the earlier sections of this article. On the contrary, small-scale analyses of its dynamics through an archaeological gaze have been given little attention. Thus, I wish to particularly draw the attention of my research on this level, not only to expose the nature of the illicit trade in antiquities, but also to draw realistic and grounded solutions to the problem. After all, the illicit trade market, as a whole, is not all the time criminal (Commolli 2018; Felbab-Brown 2018; Matsuda 1998).

### **Archaeologically Rich Market**

What I am proposing is to start “from below” and give more emphasis on individual lives. I subscribe to Mackenzie (2005a,1) when he suggests that “we must be sure of the existence and form of the looting problem we wish to address” prior to the regulation of the trade and the formulation of policies to combat it. Whereas the macrolevel



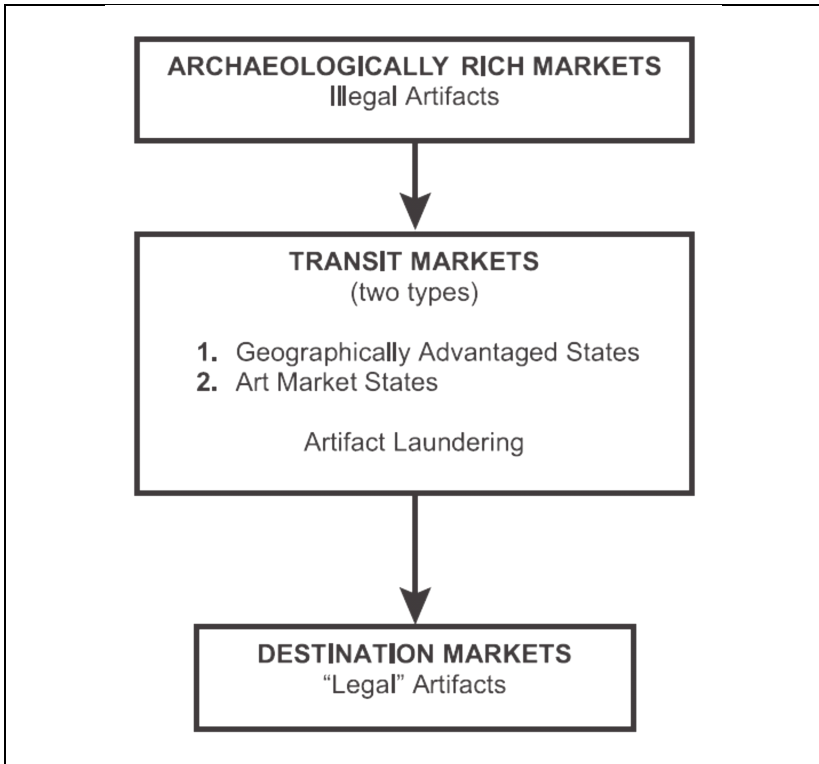


Figure 2. Market flow of the trade in illegal antiquities (Kersel 2006, 189).

provides us with the possible end results of the problems, looking into the microlevel situation of the problem is the logical first step in understanding them.

Microlevel analysis of illicit trade in cultural materials happens in an examination of flows, chains, and portals (Kersel 2006, 2007; Radisch 2016). Cultural materials in an illicit trade move in traffic from one level to another, passing through a series of portals. Kersel (2006,189) refers to a level between portals as a market, whereas Radisch (2016:31) calls it a hub, and they are differentiated as a source, transit point, or destination (figure 2). These markets or hubs can be both illegal and legal, and the participants can be both criminals and legitimate business people (Borodkin 1995; Polk 2000). In the source, commodities are collected through looting of archaeological and

cultural sites and stealing from museums. They are then bought by dealers, who, in return, will sell them to the collectors. This could happen on a larger scale, where the source market or hub is different from where the transit points and destination markets are. However, as I shall demonstrate in this article, this movement can also be found in one place, in an archaeologically rich market.

It is on the level of the archaeologically rich market where the very first interactions with and exchanges of archaeological materials and other cultural resources take place. It is, therefore, the most important of all the markets. Local individuals, groups, and/or families compose the foundations of an archaeologically rich market (Kersel 2006). They are the diggers, dealers, and few collectors of cultural materials from their locality. The market or hub is often represented by a location, which can be both the geographical setting and the interactions of the people involved in the illicit trade. It is an important key, therefore, that the right mix of “developed infrastructure,” “weak governance, unfavorable economic conditions, and weak law enforcement capacity” should be available (Radisch 2016, 31).

It should be emphasized that, more than a place, an archaeologically rich market is constituted by the complex relations between members of a society (Felbab-Brown 2018). Felbab-Brown (2018, 3) suggests that members of a society participate in illicit trade because it could be a means “to satisfy their human security and to provide any chance of their social advancement, even as they continue to exist in a trap of insecurity, criminality, and marginalization.” On the other hand, Campbell (2013) views this participation of locals in different capacities in the illicit trade of cultural materials as role specialization and, therefore, a means of collaborating with one another. Collaboration can, however, be seen as an established hierarchy of dependence. Panella (2010) argues that a certain hierarchy among these participants is imposed to ensure the perpetuation of the status quo of key participants, especially of the collectors and dealers, by making the diggers dependent on them. Panella (2010) further identifies two important relationships among the participants of the illicit trade in cultural materials in an archaeologically rich market. The “first link” is the relationship between the diggers and the dealers, whereas the “local link” is the relationship between the “dominant actors,” the dealers and the collectors (Panella 2010, 228). It is not only the interactions that could be examined in this way, but also the transformation of the cultural material being exchanged.

## ETHNOGRAPHY OF LOOTING

This study employs alternative ethnographic approaches toward understanding illicit trade in cultural materials through looting, as exemplified by several studies in light of similar objectives (Antoniadou 2009; Hollowell 2006; Matsuda 1998; Staley 1993). In a traditional way, Renfrew (2000,15) defines looting as “the illicit, unrecorded, and unpublished excavation of ancient sites to provide antiquities for commercial profit.” It usually involves theft from and destruction of sites that are known and unknown to archaeologists (Conklin 1994). However, it appears that the macrolevel view on illicit trade in antiquities has also stereotyped the concept of looting, focusing on its legalistic and economic dimensions. In reality, looting can take many shapes and sizes. It can “range from the accidental, amateurish, episodic, and unorganized, to the organized, professional, systematic, and well-financed dealings with cultural materials” (Kersel 2007, 85).

Looting, in archaeology, is not inherently wrong (Felbab-Brown 2018). Its concept tends to be influenced by the large-scale, black-and-white view of criminality. There is more to looting, since it happens within specific historical and socio-political contexts (Antoniadou 2009; Felbab-Brown 2018; Hollowell 2006; Kersel 2007). In other words, looting is constructed socially and culturally (Mackenzie 2005b), which is why Staley (1993) prefers to move away from the terms “looter” and “pot hunter” when referring to diggers, since they have outright negative connotations and cannot be used in diverse situations.

Examining the illicit trade on the microlevel therefore demands an ethnography of looting. However, due to some limitations, this study falls short in conducting a full-scale ethnography. Instead, I wish to refer to my method as a strategic engagement with the participants of the trade. Normally, archaeologists would refrain from interacting with diggers, dealers, and collectors, and would observe the activities from a distance in fear of involving themselves with the illicit trade, which is considered unethical (see the Katipunan Arkeologist ng Pilipinas Inc. (KAPI) Code of Ethics). My engagement, though as limited, attempted to go nearer. In order to gather empirical evidence and answer my research questions, I communicated with the diggers, dealers, and collectors as well as observed their activities while they were working on the ground. I built upon Antoniadou’s (2009) view that such methodology has a two-fold objective. While it aims to expose the power relations in the production of our knowledge of the

past, it also “gives voice to unofficial, indigenous meanings of and engagements with material remains” (Antoniadou 2009, 246).

I was working on my master’s thesis in Butuan when I first chanced upon the reports of diggings and discovery of gold cultural materials in the city. My first visits were in July and September 2015 to analyze gold artefacts from the National Museum Region 13 Branch (see Estrella 2016b and 2017). Not only did I read about the illegal diggings from the field reports of the 1970s but I also learned about these activities from stories told to me by members of the museum staff and some locals of the community. However, reports and stories were all I had. I did not have the chance to interview actual participants in the trade. I had the chance to come back in December 2015 and 2016, but for an excavation in Agusan del Sur, where I heard even more reports from the locals themselves about the recovery of bulawan or gold. With another project in October 2017, I embarked on understanding not only the diggings but also the succeeding stages of these illicit activities. During my fieldwork in October–November 2017 and July 2018, I interviewed local diggers, dealers, and collectors as well as observed and documented actual diggings and trade activities in Libertad (District 6) and Manila de Bugabus (District 4) in Butuan City, and Bayugan II in Agusan del Sur.

A total of only ten (10) diggers, three (3) dealers, and two (2) collectors were interviewed in this study. A friend from my previous research activities in Butuan introduced to me a dealer who happened to have once been a digger. When I asked him to introduce me to other participants in this trade, he agreed. I wasted no time and began my engagement and initially interviewed the diggers. I explained to them my study and they all signified their willingness to share what they know about the trade. However, they insisted on maintaining the confidentiality of their names and other information. Thus, no consent and other forms were accomplished. All of the respondents requested not to release their personal information, especially their names, in any means. Taking photographs and videos were also negotiated and they agreed that photographs of their activities could be taken but in the angles that their faces and/or defining characteristics are not seen. An interview guide was prepared beforehand but they refused a structured, one-on-one interview. Instead, all interviews were done during the trips and the actual conduct of digging activities, and responses were recorded in field notes.

The diggers are all locals of Butuan but not necessarily born in the city. Half of them trace their origins to different parts of the Visayas. They are all male, their ages ranging from twenty-five to seventy-six years. Diggers could speak both Visayan and Filipino, whereas dealers and collectors could conveniently switch from Filipino to Visayan and English. Therefore, language was never a major concern.

## THE *PAG-AANTIK* IN BUTUAN

### The World of Work

Diggers, or *mangkalot* (from the root word *kalot*, or to dig), are also locally referred to as workers. This is probably to evade the true nature of their labor to nonlocals like me. Interviewed *mangkalot* are all residents of Butuan. They are all male. The youngest *mangkalot* is about twenty-five years old and the oldest is around fifty-six years of age at the time of the interview. Most of them are *lubi*, or coconut, farmers, but a few work for a company in the town. They only have basic education on various levels. They are extremely acquainted with the city, the primary area they search in. They are also knowledgeable about nearby towns, since their job often requires them to get out of the city.

In the conduct of *pag-aantik*, workers usually form or are asked to form a band of five to six people. They usually come from one or two families. Their involvement in the activity is never regular. Only when financing is available do they commit a week or two to *palakad* or digging trips. Most of their work is done during night time. *Pag-aantik* is conducted during the rainy season (September to December) because it is the time of the year when the soil in Butuan is soft, brought about by constant rain and the occasional flood. Workers seldom dig during dry season, but when they do, they are faced with great difficulty, since the soil tends to become too compact, making it hard to dig through. The workers resort to using water, which they carry by pails, to penetrate the cracks in the land.

*Pag-aantik* usually starts with the *palakad* (from the root word *lakad*, or to walk), the search for good areas to dig by walking from one *sitio* to another. The workers locate areas primary from the reports of fellow *lubi* farmers. Their searches are based on their personal experiences. They have even come up with criteria for identifying areas to be dug, such as the steepness of the slopes, the nearby bodies of water, and the



Figure 3. Photographs of a *sonda* used to test lands for buried cultural materials (top); a *sonda*'s rounded head in a close-up (middle), and a *guna*, a small knife used for slow and careful digging, next to a *sonda* still stuck on the ground (bottom). Photos by the author, 2017.

colors of the soil, to name a few. Areas with reports of supernatural phenomena are also indicators of “good” lands. Workers believe in the concept of *palhi*, or areas to be avoided because of unexplained forces watching over these. Also, they are able to identify *lata*, or lands that have already been satiated—areas that have already been tested or dug, or both, previously. Most of the areas where they search are privately owned and the owners have no idea that their lands are being surveyed.

When an area has been decided upon, it is “tested” for buried cultural materials. Workers use an instrument they have made called *sonda* (figure 3), a long rod, usually two-and-a-half to three meters in length, and around seven millimeters in diameter. It is used to repeatedly poke the area being tested. It has a round metal end that makes a sound when hitting tradeware ceramics, metal implements, and other objects buried in the ground. The burning of *kamanyan* or incense in a *pagalay* ritual follows as sign of respect and/or at the event of difficulty in finding materials. When cultural materials are ascertained to be beneath the land they are testing, they proceed with the actual digging. They just dig the soil without any depth or size of pit in mind. They use *pala*, big shovels, in removing large chunks of soil, and *guna*, a hand knife (see figure 3), for *igot-igot*, the process of slowly taking out sediments. Workers believe that the appearance of ceramics and *sundang*, or daggers, where they are digging are an indication of burials. Subsequently, the position of the materials in the area guides their digging to a certain direction to locate gold artefacts.

### Financing the Trade

Diggings stop when workers find bulawan or gold (figure 4). This means their work is almost done. According to the workers, gold items are always the primary intention of every *pag-aantik* in Butuan. Finding gold is the single most important motivation that gets the workers going in this trade. In fact, they would describe this motivation as *maka-wakwak*, or the inevitable tendency to become crazy for gold. Tradeware ceramics are collected and sold as well (figure 4). They collect them even though they believe that these are *plato ng patay* or possessions of the dead. The workers consider the dead as *walang binyag*, or unbaptized, and the first owner of these objects. Some of them regard the previous owners as their ancestors, which is why they ask for forgiveness whenever they dig burial sites and collect objects from there. They, however, believe in the local notion of *condenar*, that is, collecting these materials would mean the harmless transfer of ownership of the objects



Figure 4. Photographs of the gold beads and strip, and other materials recovered by the diggers (top); dig showing a large earthenware jar (middle); and tradeware ceramics accompanying the jar (bottom). Photos by the author, 2017.



from the deceased ancestor to the living digger. The objects are now deemed to be in “good hands” and no one can ever desecrate the grave of the ancestor for their properties again. Therefore, the deceased can now truly rest in peace (*plastar*). The human bones and sundang are reburied as a mark of respect and because these have little to no value in trade. Taboos include playing with the bones and telling offensive jokes about the dead. The workers also give thanks, since they, the ones living, now benefit from this bounty.

All of the digging activities where the interviewed workers were involved were commissioned by a dealer. Commissioned digging by groups happens more often than individuals or groups bringing and selling their finds. Thus, the dealers prefer to be called financiers, since they provide the means, food, and other necessities for the workers during the course of the palakad. Depending on the size of their workforce, a financier spends around PHP 1,200 to PHP 2,500 per day, which could continue for a week, at most.

Financiers are fewer than workers. They are also men. One financier (Financier A) is fifty-six years old and a seafarer. He does the commissioning when he has no ship to board. He maintains six or more loyal workers. Many of them are his old-time friends. He admitted that he and his workers were part of an older generation who were exposed to the rampant treasure hunting and looting activities in Butuan in the 1970s. This financier claims that he is related to a former National Museum Butuan Branch staff from whom he learned a thing or two about archaeology and the artefacts. He also claims to possess a dealer’s permit, which he never let me see. Aside from the workers in Butuan who do the actual digging, he commissions a restorer from Cebu who fixes broken pieces of objects made out of various materials. Another financier (Financier B), forty-one years of age, was a former worker who served older generations of financiers. As early as nine years old, he was already joining palakad. His curiosity was sustained because his father was one of the early diggers in Butuan and among the few restorers. He would always ask his father about his job, especially about the items being brought to their house. He has three more brothers and they are also engaged in this kind of activity. Financier B claims that this has something to do with genes coupled with own strategies. His father would sometimes teach them what to do, but it was their own experiences that taught them to be successful in this trade. The last financier (Financier C) did not want to share his personal background. What he was able to share was that he is in the buy-and-sell business if

he is not financing diggings. This is where he probably got his skills in financing, and marketing and selling cultural materials.

The workers will only sell their finds to the one who financed their digging trip. The financier buys gold items from the workers based on their weight, which is measured in grams. A gram, during the time this study was being conducted, costs PHP 1,800. Upon payment, the workers will then divide the total amount earned from their finds among the members of their group. The financier, in return, immediately sells the items for PHP 4,000 to PHP 6,000 per gram. Time is very important to the financiers. Prices are high when the sale is done right after the objects are recovered from the ground. Financiers would not even dare to clean the dirt from the objects to prove that they were just taken out of the pit. Delaying the sale, more so repairing the items, could diminish the price. *Sinubong* is what financiers call a gold item with a grade of 10 carats or lower. However, they have no means of identifying the exact quality of the gold items and even look down on the idea of having these items looked at by pawnshop assayers. They even follow the principle that the lower the grade of a gold item, the softer it becomes, which is why the characterization is mostly dubious.

The financiers shared during the interviews that they follow several criteria for adding value to gold artefacts. The more outstanding one criterion is observed in an object, the higher the value added. They consider “age” (antiquity), “story” (history), workmanship, economic value, and “perfection” (completeness) as the most important characteristics of best-selling gold items. On the other hand, they believe that gold artefacts lose their value when they are further damaged, transformed, or melted. They call fake items as “modern antiques.” I say it is a clever word play financiers use to describe the items traded by competitors. However, no financier would admit to selling fake items.

### **Collecting and the Butuan Narrative**

The two Butuan collectors interviewed in this paper both possess magnificent gold items in their big collections. However, they cannot identify a single collector who specializes in gold artefacts alone. Collectors tend to be even fewer in number than financiers and workers. They are professional men who are in their seventies. One of them (Collector A) is a lawyer and another is a medical doctor (Collector B). Another collector, whom I failed to interview, owns a timber company. They have their own regular work. Collecting is done



Figure 5. Photographs of a 35-gram gold chain offered by Financier A to Collector B for PHP 500,000 and haggled down to PHP 350,000 (top); a 21-gram gold head piece owned by Collector A and offered to Collector B for an undisclosed amount (middle); and gold ear ornaments, weighing a total of 6 grams, offered for an undisclosed amount to Collector B (bottom). Photos by the author, 2017.

in the side-lines. They claim to have been collecting for two decades now. It is not clear, however, if their parents or other members of the family collected before. The primary repositories of their collections are their houses; one of them manages a small, private museum, which is open to the public.

Collectors seldom join palakad trips. Instead, the materials are delivered to their houses or offices. Transactions happen very discreetly and quickly, over a cup of coffee or dinner. It is here that the *pag-aantik* ends: when an artefact is finally in the possession of a collector. A financier offers his gold items for a price to his patron first. The collector haggles for a lower price (see figure 5, for examples). If they do not agree on the price, the financier will offer the items to other collectors. But when they do agree, it is not the collector who releases the money but their secretaries. When the collector happens to be out of the town, photographs of the items are sent to him and the negotiation happens over the phone or the internet. The frequency of financiers selling gold cultural materials depends on the season. If it is the digging season, the arrival of items could happen almost every day.

Gold items in the collectors' possession receive special treatments. Collector A keeps his gold items in a vault inside a room in his house. Collector B also keeps them in his house, but wears all of his favorite gold rings. A collector knows what other collectors have, which is why they do not fight often over collection pieces. To them, these gold artefacts from Butuan are not just another part of their collections. They are, instead, valuable pieces of history.

What compels both collectors interviewed in this study in collecting cultural objects from their locality is to contribute to the narrative of Butuan's significant place in the history of the Philippines. It seems it is a lifelong mission for them to forward this Butuan narrative. Collector B would always say, "Long before the existence of the Philippines, there was already Butuan." The collectors are very conversant with the history of the locality and even participate in discussions and conferences about topics ranging from Butuan's tribute missions to China in 1000s CE to Magellan's landing and eventual celebration of the first mass in 1521 in Masao. Collector B possesses manuscripts, objects, and other curios that, purportedly, can support their claims. Gold artefacts stand out, since these are proof of Butuan's participation in the Majapahit-period (twelfth century) gold manufacture and exchanges in Southeast Asia. They serve as striking evidences of the economic wealth of the area even before the coming of the European

colonizers. Collectors could provide their own interpretations on the forms and functions of the gold items, directly linking them with what they have read and seen about the ancient gold trade. One of them is even very active in events and acquainted with people from the historical and cultural agencies in country. On several occasions, I had been part of a team he had invited to see the museum and his personal collections. The collectors take most pride not only on being able to participate in academic conversations, but, more importantly, on having a tangible piece of the distant past in their collections.

## INTERACTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Exposing the structure and the participants of pag-aantik in Butuan City allows for the examination of the character of an archaeologically rich market. This section attempts to make sense of the different interactions between actors in this activity as well as the transformations that happen with the material being exchanged.

### Social Nature of *Pag-aantik*

At the bottommost level of the illicit trade in gold artefacts in Butuan are the workers. They are neither looters nor pot hunters, since they are neither outsiders to the city nor engaged in full-time plundering activities. As we have observed, these workers are local residents who are raising their own families in the city. They are also employed as full-time coconut farmers and company workers. They speak the local language and share the local beliefs. They even see the connection between them and the burials they dig. Workers in the illicit trade in gold cultural materials in Butuan can be characterized as subsistence diggers (Hollowell-Zimmer 2003; Matsuda 1998; Staley 1993). According to Staley (1993, 348), subsistence diggers are prevalent in Third World countries, since the underdeveloped nature of their country's economy allows them to earn from the sale of artefacts and other cultural materials they have found in "support to their traditional subsistence lifestyle." Traditional subsistence includes farming, fishing, or involvement in local industries, a regular source of their everyday living. Subsistence diggers are engaged in what Hollowell-Zimmer (2003, 46) refers to as "low-end" diggings, doing "undocumented excavations in which the products are not headed straight for the international art or antiquities market but for less lucrative and often less visible markets or sometimes for no market at all." The labor is

nonintensive, requiring less effort and time from them (Felbab-Brown 2018). Therefore, it is a cash economy where the diggers do not earn much, a reason why they tend to involve themselves in these activities more often (Matsuda 1998).

The workers, subsequently, sell their finds to the financier who provided the means to conduct a palakad. Between the workers and the financier, the price is solely based on the standard of gold weight per gram. The financiers do not see the need to add more, since they commissioned the activity and provided the necessary resources, such as food and transportation fares, needed during the course of the digging. Financiers do not share what they know and abuse the worker's limited knowledge on the trade. Because of this, the workers receive only a small amount of money that they will have to divide among the members of the group. The workers are also afraid of losing the confidence of the financiers, which is why they do not complain that much. The diggers tend to become dependent on them, too. This tendency to "monopolize the information and control of the network" are just one of the many cunning strategies dealers employ to close a deal and to maximize their earnings from it (Panella 2010, 228). Borodkin (1995) further explains that dealers study the trade and the artefacts, manipulate prices as well as conceal the identity of their sources and patrons. Moreover, these dealers are the middlemen—the link between the diggers who found the artefacts and the buyers who collect them. They are the intermediaries who sell not only the cultural materials they got from the diggers, but also their "ability to take risks, to guard information, and to conduct transactions discreetly" (Borodkin 1995, 377–78; Mackenzie 2005a). Between the financiers and collectors in Butuan, the price is far higher. The price of an item becomes fluid, as it is now dictated not only by the gold standard but also of added value based on criteria of antiquity, completeness, and workmanship, to name a few. The price is also negotiated, and a deal is closed when both the financier and the collector agree on a price. In return, the dealers, almost all the time, earn way more than the diggers (Brodie 1998).

If the diggers are the source of the materials being traded, the collectors are at the other end of the market. The archaeologically rich market in Butuan grew itself local collectors to whom archaeological materials and other cultural resources find their way. Collectors' views on and motivations for collecting cultural materials can range from as simple as decorations to as complex as art pieces and investment

opportunities (Brodie 2002; Brodie and Luke 2006). In the case of Butuan, collectors are wealthy professionals who were brought up in the historical and cultural narratives of Butuan. Therefore, their enthusiasm comes from the need to contribute to the historical narrative of the locality. This motivation has resulted in the collectors establishing connections with the academe by donating and/or allowing access to objects (Brodie 2011; Brodie and Luke 2006). It is on this level that they get to interact with archaeologists and cultural workers. However, it is obvious that they still want to maintain a safe distance from the National Museum of the Philippines. Brodie and Luke (2006) see this as a compelling need to legitimize connections with the cultural elite. Ultimately, the possession and display of artefacts and other materials important to the history and culture of the locality validates the high and cultured status of the collectors (Brodie and Luke 2006; Paz 1992).

Campbell (2013) posits this participation of locals in different capacities in the illicit trade of cultural materials as role specialization, and, therefore, a means of collaborating with one another. Collaboration can, however, be seen as established hierarchy of dependence. Panella (2010) argues that a certain hierarchy between these participants is imposed to ensure the perpetuation of the status quo of the key participants—the dealers and collectors—by making the diggers dependent on them. Panella (2010) further identifies two important relationships among the participants of the illicit trade in cultural materials in an archaeologically rich market. Whereas the “first link” is the relationship between the diggers and the dealers, the “local link,” on the other hand, is the relationship between the “dominant actors,” the dealers and the collectors (Panella 2010, 228). The first link in the conduct of *pagantik* in Butuan is between the workers and the financiers. This initial interaction allows us to see not just the plundering of cultural materials, but also the abuse of the workers and the perpetuation of dependency. The workers are forced to become accomplices of the financiers to recover buried gold objects and participate in the illicit trade, concealing the nature of their work in the rhetoric of role specialization and collaboration. Aside from this, the financiers’ deceitful ways also include the manipulation of prices, the creation of a narrative, and fraud, to name a few. Felbab-Brown (2018, 15) calls this the “technology of illegality,” in which dealers continuously manipulate networks and knowledge to maximize their own profits from the sale of the artefacts and to somewhat evade punishment from

the law. Digging and financing now becomes an inescapable source of income for both workers and financiers in Butuan. In fact, according to the interviews, it is unthinkable for them not to dig and sell cultural materials on top of their regular jobs. The real collaborators in the *pag-aantik* in Butuan are the financiers and the collectors, as we have observed in its local link. Their collaboration allows for the continuation of this scheme in the locality. Paz (1992) reports that in an illicit trade in antiquities, the collectors are the ones who dictate the demand of cultural materials. The workers and the financiers, on the other hand, supply these materials to them, and the cycle goes on (Davis 2011). It is true in the case of Butuan, but the prices are easily negotiated between the collectors and the financiers. The conduct of commissioned *palakad* is also the product of the collectors' willingness and capacity to buy gold artefacts and the financiers' capability to provide the means for the workers during the digging.

The last relationship formed in the course of the *pag-aantik* in Butuan is between the collectors and the cultural elite. This relationship can be observed in how collectors fit their collection to the Butuan historic narrative, and in how they extend themselves to the members of cultural agencies and the academe. Brodie and Luke (2006) suggest that collectors who involve themselves with the accumulation of objects with great historical and cultural importance need to establish connections with the cultural elite, primarily with the museum curators, museum enthusiasts, and the academicians, themselves. As much as the collectors, by donating or allowing access to their collection, provide something for the museum curators and the academics, the academics, in return, validate the act of collecting (Brodie and Luke 2006).

### **The Changing Meaning of Gold Artefact**

The interactions between the participants of *pag-aantik* in Butuan bring about transformations on the gold objects being traded. While the participants are very cautious in altering the physical appearance of the items, they are not that fully aware of the changes in meaning they have made on them. According to Polk (2000), the first layer of transformation happens when objects are transformed from illegal to legal or legitimate commodities. Kersel (2006) refers to this process as laundering and this is what separates illicit trade in antiquities from other organized crimes, since other commodities remain illegal when they are taken from one portal to another while cultural objects tend



to become legal. In the Philippines, under Republic Act 10066, archaeological materials, both found on land and underwater, are considered important cultural properties and should be protected. It also states that exploration and/or excavation without a permit is against the law. Palakad, therefore, is against the law, since both the workers and financiers have no permits and other legal documents to allow them to search and dig up the areas in Butuan. However, *pag-aantik* can be allowed by the law, provided that a person secures a treasure hunting permit. It is also quite perplexing that only the exportation of materials from the Philippines to other countries is regulated while the transfer from one locality or possession to another is not. Gold cultural materials in Butuan are even disguised as personal jewelry; thus, boarding them on airplanes has never been a problem to the collectors.

Another layer of transformation among gold cultural materials in Butuan is misrepresentation. From their recovery by the workers to their eventual sale to the financiers and to the collectors, interpretations about the form, composition, and function of the artefacts change. From possessions of the dead ancestors transferred to “good hands,” the *bulawan* or gold items become antiques, and when they reach a collection, they become “evidences” of Butuan’s golden past. Despite of the changes, gold artefacts remain a commodity, but their prices are affected by the changes in meaning. From a weight-based assessment of the object, gold items are given value according to their conceived temporal and spatial contexts, workmanship, and many more. Glover (2015, 239) sees it as the “chain of transfer from the original finder to the dealer, and to the collector,” where, during the process, provenance is lost. When the archaeological materials or other cultural resources are given provenance other than their true source, misrepresentation occurs (Paz 1992). Gill and Chippindale (1993, 269) lament that the materials undergo “intellectual corruption of reliable knowledge,” since the materials have been given a different story and interpretation. The items are now decontextualized (Brodie 2002). Misrepresentation of gold cultural items during the course of *pag-aantik* in Butuan entails meaning making by the workers, the deliberate attempts of the financiers to obscure the context of the materials to increase the price, and the legitimization of the collectors who try to fit these materials in the Butuan narrative. The financiers always have the construed intention to misrepresent the gold artefacts in Butuan. Mackenzie (2005a, 255) points out this ability to create provenance and to communicate it in

the market as a “verbal assurance” given to buyers of cultural materials. However, it can be viewed that the financiers and collectors also collaborate in making meanings for the objects they engage with. Since the stories are also negotiated, these make them cocreators of this new provenance. This layer of transformation, as supported by a long history of illicit trade in the locality, leads us to suggest that most, if not all, Butuan gold items circulating and being kept in many public and private collections in the Philippines have undergone misrepresentations brought about by their movement from one portal to another. We, therefore, should be critical when looking into the materials and collections they represent.

The last layer of transformation involves fraud. According to Brodie, Doole, and Watson (2000), forgery is common in and a risk of illicit trade. Collectors in Butuan face the risk of purchasing fake gold artefacts from financiers and other collectors. Fake gold items can appear either as both not genuine gold and not recovered from the locality or as genuine gold but the craftsmanship is recent. Both the financiers and the collectors have the capacity to have these items assayed but they seldom do. The collectors, with this limited means of ascertaining authenticity, are being totally swayed by the narratives created by the financiers. However, as much as there are risks, the market also thrives because of trust (MacKenzie 2005a). Participants, especially in the local link, collaborate and maintain good relations with each other. Because of this transformation, modern-day, if not fake, objects make their way to collections, making it more difficult to be certain of the narratives they are making.

## CONCLUSION

This article is a product of my reflections on the impacts of archaeology and archaeologists to the sites and communities they work with. Archaeologists, in their study of the distant past, do not only excavate sites but also participate in the social dynamics of a locality. And, since archaeology is a discipline that puts artefacts in their socio-cultural context in the past, it should also be able to put its “enterprise on its proper socio-political and economic dimensions” today (Castañeda 2008). It is not the intention of my research to undermine the large-scale view of the illicit trade in antiquities but to provide an alternative entry point to the inquiry of such a phenomenon. This study allows us to look at the situation involving individual lives, lived in their own

concrete reality, and dictated by their society and culture. My strategic engagements with the participants of the illicit trade in Butuan have been a learning opportunity for me to listen to their stories and observe their actual activities. In gathering empirical evidence, I was able to expose the nature of the trade in an attempt to better explain to the academic community what is really happening and to inform appropriate policies that will address the concern.

Pag-aantik is the localized version of the illicit trade in cultural materials and it exists in the archaeologically rich hub of Butuan City. It is participated in by local workers, financiers, and collectors. The study was able to describe its character, in which identity and relationships are constructed and negotiated by society and culture. Its social nature exposes the hefty benefits gained by financiers and collectors at the expense of the workers. Butuan's notoriety as both the historical and archaeological locus of gold items in the Philippines also allows for gold to be a distinct category of cultural material exchanged in the illicit trade in the locality. Consequently, in the process, gold artefacts are constantly transformed by deliberately changing the perspectives on the meanings of objects for profit and for narrative making.

Toward the end, let me point out what this study wishes to communicate further. The destruction of our cultural properties lies not only on the actual plundering of archaeological materials from beneath the ground or their eventual loss in the illicit market but also on the exploitation and abuse of the local population for profit and the total loss of information about the past. This research informs us that the microlevel analysis is as valuable a source of information as the macrolevel view. Therefore, legislations on the protection of cultural heritage, both on the international and national levels, should be interpreted against local contexts. We do not need more laws, instead, what we need are specific and realistic provisions geared toward safeguarding both cultural properties and the local community. The study also suggests to move beyond regulations and to start building the groundwork in providing proactive social development for the local diggers who are the most exploited participant in this trade. As much as they are the front liners of cultural destruction, they are also potential protectors of their own cultural properties, through education and local community engagement. However, educating them might not be enough. We need to empower them. I subscribe to Matsuda's (1998) call to end stereotypes about diggers as the first logical step

toward their empowerment. Minimizing their exposure to such kinds of activity by providing alternative occupations or sources of livelihood can also be part of the solution. Empowering these local diggers also means giving them the responsibility of protecting their own cultural heritage. There is no guarantee that dealers will have no workers at their disposal after some of these diggers stop working for them. However, by involving the former diggers in the active protection of their own cultural properties, we are actually reducing participation in the loss and opportunity to further destroy cultural heritage, and, at the same time, increasing awareness for its protection. I believe this is an important first step.

I am exposing the illicit trade of gold cultural materials in Butuan not for the government to partake in the process but to inform agencies and other concerned groups about who and what we take into consideration. This is to challenge them to think of ways other than simply assuming, and thus permitting, the role of the financier and the collector, since it would only perpetuate abuse of both the local workers and of the cultural materials. Solving the problem of illicit trade means putting an end to the oppressive flow of the market. The primary involvement of the academe, particularly the archaeologist and other cultural workers, should always be in the exposition of even more covert systems and variations to these systems as well as in informing people in authority. ❀

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Victor Paz, Dr. Eufracio Abaya, and Dr. Mai-Lin Tjoa-Bonatz for the valuable questions and insights that inspired the study. An earlier version of this article was presented to the 21st Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Congress held at Hue, Vietnam, on September 23–28, 2018. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and to the people behind the Third World Studies Center, University of the Philippines Diliman whose comments and support contributed to the improvement of this article.

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