

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# St. John the Baptist Church through the Years: Demystifying Albay's Icon of Faith and Heritage

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**Abstract**

This paper profiled the St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City, Philippines. It assessed the church's cultural significance as well as the threats, issues, and constraints. This qualitative research adopted the cultural mapping approach of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). It employed ethnography, historiography, and participant observation as methods in cultural mapping. Braun and Clarke's phases of thematic analysis were applied to reveal the inherent cultural significance. Further, the assessment of cultural significance was based on the Four Fields Value of Important Cultural Property. Findings revealed that St. John the Baptist Church both in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City possessed historical, aesthetic, and religious attributes that made the heritage structure profoundly valuable. However, natural calamities and funds for church restoration are the issues or constraints facing the church. This paper recommends that a conservation management plan that will focus on the restoration guidelines, conservation measures, and heritage protection must be adopted to fully protect the St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City. Moreover, the local government unit should conduct a risk assessment and update the hazard plans to mitigate the possible impacts of natural calamities on these heritage churches.

**KEYWORDS:**

Heritage conservation, heritage churches, heritage value, cultural significance, St. John the Baptist Church

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Heritage is the people's inheritance from their past that plays a vital role in shaping their identity and psyche as a people. It also helps them understand themselves because heritage provides a link that shows how society evolved and developed. Furthermore, heritage gives human existence a deeper meaning (Smith, 2006). It is a significant part of society and a major factor in the quality of life. (Tweed Sutherland, 2007).

Cultural heritage is tangible or intangible. Tangible cultural heritage such as monuments, built structures, and sites provide a tangible representation of the past (Smith, 2006). On the other hand, intangible cultural heritage is comprised of practices, expressions, knowledge, beliefs, and traditions, among others, that were created and transformed by society. Further, all cultural heritage items, whether tangible or intangible, movable or immovable, shall be documented and their inherent cultural significance, such as "historical, aesthetic, scientific, technical, social and/or spiritual values," shall be recognized, because the "cultural significance" of a heritage item makes it profoundly valuable (UNESCO, 2003).

Article XIV of 1987, Sections 14, 15, 16, and 17 of the Philippine Constitution, mandates the State to promote the preservation, enrichment, and dynamic evolution of a Filipino culture, considering the principle of unity in diversity in a climate of free artistic and intellectual expression. Likewise, the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, or R.A.10066, was created for the protection, preservation, conservation, and promotion of the Philippines' cultural heritage, including its property and history, and the ethnicity of local communities. R.A. 10066 elucidated that the government should prioritize the protection of national cultural treasures and national historical landmarks, especially during any occurrence and devastation of natural calamities.

The Province of Albay is one of the earliest seats of the Catholic faith. Churches were then built to spread the Catholic religion in the province. Our Lady of the Gate Parish in Daraga, Albay, Nuestra Señora de Salvacion in Joroan, Tiwi, Albay, St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City, and Camalig, Albay, were the old churches erected in 1773, 1776, 1800, and 1842, respectively (Ayo, 2017). These astonishing heritage churches have become a symbol of the acceptance of the Catholic faith by the people of Albay when the Catholic religion was introduced to them (Gerona, 2011).

The National Museum of the Philippines declared St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City as the "National Cultural Treasure" of the country. A national treasure is a unique cultural property found in the locality that possesses outstanding historical, cultural, artistic, and/or scientific value. It is the highest designation given to cultural property in the country. On the other hand, St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay was declared by the National Museum as an "Important Cultural Property" in 2017. An important cultural property exemplified its cultural, artistic, and historical significance to the Filipino nation.

Safeguarding outstanding cultural sites and monuments is imperative for the preservation of cultural identity (Estonanto, 2018). St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City and Camalig, Albay, having been declared as "National Cultural Treasure" and "Important Cultural Property" respectively, are of great significance and are worthy of conservation, preservation, and protection. The devastations to the heritage churches caused by the strong earthquake in 2013 in Cebu and Bohol, remind us that strong efforts through legislation are indeed necessary to foster the preservation, conservation, and protection of cultural heritage. Further, threats, constraints, and issues to cultural properties must also be addressed because the next generations would not understand a significant part of their past if a heritage site were to lose its existence (Baybayon et al., 2017).

The main purpose of this paper was to profile St. John the Baptist Church in Albay Province and to reveal the inherent cultural significance of this heritage church. Thurley's (2005) "Heritage Cycle" explains the importance of heritage in people's lives. The cycle depicted that people must understand the heritage so that they will value it; and by valuing it, they will want to care for it; by carrying it, it will help them enjoy it, and from enjoying it comes a thirst to understand. " It could be inferred from the cycle that people must find and understand the value of cultural property. Caring, through conservation and protection, is a result of understanding the value of heritage (Monteiro et al., 2014).

The need to understand the value of St. John the Baptist Church has provided opportunities for in-depth academic discussion. Perhaps, understanding the inherent cultural significance of the said church would provide a myriad of opportunities where "Albayanos" could sustain their efforts towards the sustainable conservation, protection, and preservation of St. John the Baptist Church as an icon of Albayano's faith and rich cultural heritage.

This paper documented and profiled the St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City as heritage churches. Specifically, it assessed the cultural significance of the St. John the Baptist Church, identified its constraints, threats, and issues, and determined the conservation measures towards the conservation, protection, and preservation of the St. John the Baptist Church.

## 2 | METHOD

This is a qualitative research that adopted the cultural mapping approach of the NCCA, or the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (Borrinaga et al., 2019) in profiling the St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay and Tabaco City. It also employed ethnography, historiography, and participant observation as methods in cultural mapping.

### 2.1 | Data Collection

Community immersion through Sikolohiyang Filipino or Filipino Psychology (Marcelino and Pua, 2000) that includes "Pag-tatanong tanong" (improvised informal, unstructured interview), "Pagdalaw-dalaw" (visiting), "Pakikisama" (getting along

with), "Pakikiramdam" (sensitivity) and "Pakikipagkwentuhan" (informal conversation) was the main method of data collection. Likewise, interviews, document analysis, and desktop research were also employed in the collection of data.

## 2.2 | Data Analysis

The data collected were qualitatively analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis to investigate the cultural significance of St. John the Baptist Church. The cultural significance assessment was based on "The Four Fields Value of Important Cultural Property," which stated that cultural significance must include the historical, scientific, aesthetic, and socio-cultural value discernible in the heritage item (Borrinaga et al., 2019).

## 2.3 | Key Informants

The key informants in this paper are church workers, parishioners, and local government officials. The informants were 30 years old and above who are knowledgeable about the St. John the Baptist Church. However, pertinent information that was contributed by the younger generation during the community immersion was also considered significant data.

## 2.4 | Data Gathering Instrumentation

The instrument used in gathering data was the NCCA form for mapping of significant tangible immovable heritage such as churches, temples, and places of worship.

## 2.5 | Areas of the Study

The areas of this study are Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City. These are the areas in the Province of Albay where St. John the Baptist Churches were built by the Franciscan Missionaries.

# 3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 3.1 | Cultural Significance of the St. John the Baptist Church

Heritage value is an essential reason for protecting and conserving cultural heritage (Monteiro et al., 2014) and (De la Torre, M, 2002). Society will not conserve what it does not value. On the other hand, significance is an appraisal of the historical, aesthetic, scientific, social, and socioeconomic values that are attributed to a cultural property. Consequently, the assessment of cultural significance is a process that clarifies why a heritage item is important. Moreover, the statement of cultural significance should articulate the context, history, social and spiritual prominence of a heritage item (Borrinaga, 2020). Table 1 presents the historical, aesthetic, and religious significance of St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City.

Soliman (2019) stressed that heritage churches are important because of their memories and histories. This has motivated them to preserve and maintain heritage churches. In the same manner, Harding (2018) also noted that the historical importance of churches should be recognized as being of great importance from the standpoint of cultural history. Consequently, the people of Camalig treasured the history of their church. The people cherished the fact that the town of Camalig was the first Franciscan mission outpost in Albay Province that was administered by the Franciscan Friars. These Spanish missionaries first built the St. John the Baptist Church in their town out of light materials in 1578 to spread the Catholic religion in the community, and they succeeded in their mission of evangelizing the natives of the town of Camalig.

The construction of the stone church and convent in the town of Camalig started in 1605. The people believed that the prisoners in the said town labored on the construction of the stone church. However, on February 14, 1814, Mayon Volcano had one of its most destructive eruptions, a Plinian eruption. It was Mayon Volcano's most violent and destructive eruption in historical times (Faustino, 1929). Figures 1 and 2 shows the map and the photo of St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, respectively.

Similarly, St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City is historically significant. The map where the church is located is shown in Figure 3. The church also served as the settlement of the Franciscan missionaries in evangelizing the natives of Tabaco, which

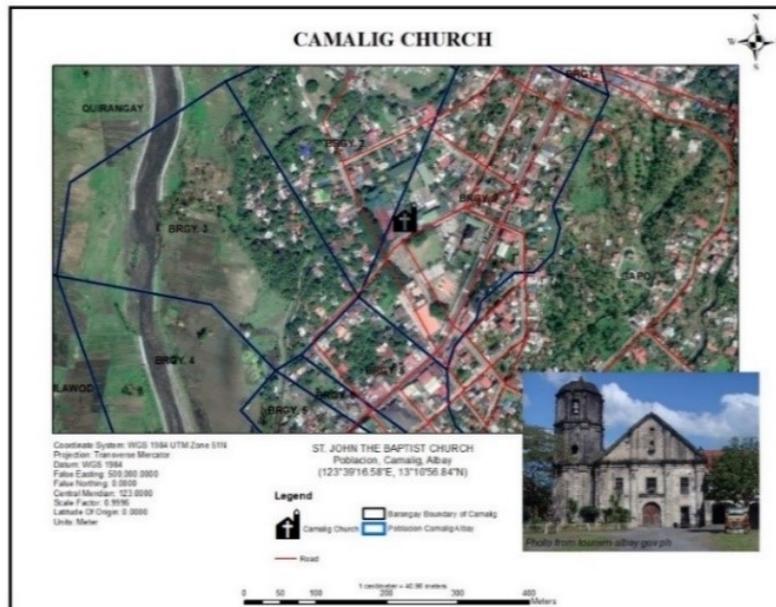
**TABLE 1** Cultural Significance of the St. John the Baptist Church

	<b>Historical significance</b>	<b>Aesthetic significance</b>	<b>Religious significance</b>
Camalig Church (St John the Baptist, Camalig Albay)	Served as 1st Franciscan mission outpost in Albay and administered by the Franciscan Friars for more than 400 years. In 1837, a new church of stone was built under the direction of Fr. Francisco Latoba and Manuel Brihuega. It was believed that the prisoners in Camalig labored the construction of the stone church. The church stood the test of time and survived natural calamities. The church a refuge during wars and volcanic eruptions.	It has an architectural style of Renaissance and Gothic design with a little touch of Romanesque. The beauty of the church could be compared to any cathedrals in Europe. The church is recognized as one of the strongest churches in the Bicol Region. Marks and signs of the masons who labored the construction of the church were encrypted on the stone which could be seen at the different parts of the church.	The Church has become a place of worship and place of religious activities. The church revealed the success of the Spanish Missionaries in evangelizing the natives of the towns of Camalig
Tabaco Church (St John the Baptist, Tabaco Albay)	Served as the outpost of the Franciscan missionaries in evangelizing the natives of Tabaco which led to the establishment of the town of Tabaco as a parish and as an organized community. In 1723, the resident of Cormidal, Tabaco started to build the first stone church under the leadership of Alkalde Capitan Martin Aguirre. The bell tower stands apart from the main church building, the only one of its kind in Albay during that period. The church stood the test of time and survived natural calamities	The church is an example of baroque style church in the Philippines. It has elegant stone façade embellished with decorative urns at the top of the church's structure. The church design reflects its builder's engineering and military background. It bears rare symbols and markings of the Masons who constructed the church.	The Church has become a place of worship and place of religious activities. The church revealed the success of the Spanish Missionaries in evangelizing the natives of the towns of Tabaco

led to the establishment of the town of Tabaco as a parish and as an organized community. Fr. Pedro Alcarzo started to build the first church in Tabaco made of light materials under the patronage of St. John the Baptist. However, Dutch invaders burned the church built by Fr. Pedro Alcarzo in 1636 (<http://tabacocity.com.ph/about-us/>).

In 1723, the residents of Cormidal, Tabaco started to build the first stone church under the leadership of Alkalde Capitan Martin Aguirre. The stone church was finished in 1731. However, the said church, which was built in Cormidal, Tabaco, also suffered from the devastation of natural calamities. In 1811, a strong earthquake destroyed most structures in the town, including the stone church in Brgy. Cormidal, Tabaco. In 1814, three years after the earthquake, Mayon Volcano had its very destructive eruption that worsened the situation and heavily destroyed most of the building structures, including the stone church in Cormidal, Tabaco.

In 1850, a new bigger church (Figure 4) was built when Fr. Fermin Llorente, a former soldier and an engineer before becoming a priest, was assigned as Pastor of Tabaco Parish. The new church was built using volcanic stones and was built next to the



**FIGURE 1** GIS MAP of St John the Baptist in Camalig, Albay



**FIGURE 2** The St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay. (Photo taken from: <https://www.camalig.gov.ph/wp>)

town watchtower, which became the belfry in the center of the town. The bell tower stands apart from the main church building, the only one of its kind in Albay during that period. It was originally built with a tower clock and also served as a "Baluarte" (watchtower) for defense against raiders from the sea. (<http://albay.gov.ph/Albay-Heritage-Month-4/>). Figure 3 shows the exact location of the St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City.

In addition, the St. John the Baptist Church did not only reveal the Spaniards' great power during their colonization, but it has also become a tangible symbol and icon of the Catholic faith in the Province of Albay. Heritage churches have become a living testament of the rich Hispanic past and religiosity (Ayo, 2017).

More importantly, the St. John the Baptist Church provided a deep sense of the Albay's rich history and culture. The triumphs of the Spanish missionaries in spreading the Catholic Faith in the Province, the façade of the church, the materials used to build the structure, the people who painstakingly labored on its construction, and the church's resilience in the face of natural calamity all contributed to the St. John the Baptist Church's significance.

Concerning aesthetic significance, St. John the Baptist Church is aesthetically significant. The grand and exquisite design of the church both in the town of Camalig and Tabaco contributed to its aesthetics. The St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay has an architectural style of Renaissance and Gothic design with a little touch of Romanesque. Thus, the church could be compared to any cathedral in Europe. In the same manner, the St. John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City possessed aesthetic



**FIGURE 3** The location of the St. John the Baptist in Tabaco City

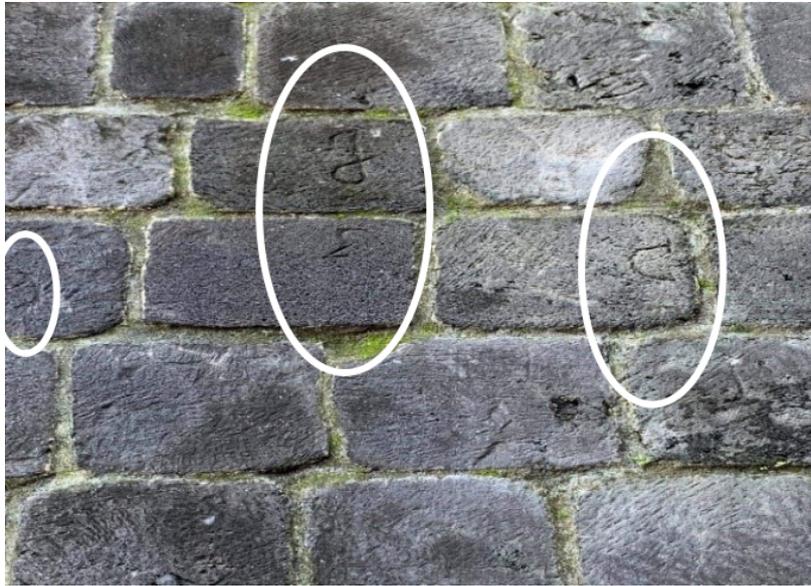


**FIGURE 4** The St John the Baptist Church in Tabaco City.

significance. The church was a kind of Baroque church in the Philippines. It had an elegant stone façade embellished by a column pinnacle and decorative urns at the top of the structure. Most importantly, this church was distinct from every other in the entire country because it had rare symbols and markings of the Masons who constructed it. Mason's marks (Figure 5 ) were used during the Medieval Period to identify a particular work by a mason or aid in the correct installation of the blocks. The church's design reflects its builder's engineering and military background. A fine example of the so-called "earthquake baroque," its fortress-like structure emphasizes horizontal rather than vertical dimensions. (<http://albay.gov.ph/Albay-Heritage-Month-4>)

The lavish style and grand architectural design of the St. John the Baptist Church both in Calamig, Albay, and Manila reveal the great power of the Spaniards in the country and their victory in spreading the Catholic faith in the Province of Albay. Filart (2013) asserted that heritage churches are both public structures and heritage assets. Therefore, the beauty and integrity of the church are being preserved for the benefit of tourism, history, and culture.

The church has possessed spiritual significance because the St. John the Baptist churches have become places of worship and places of religious activity for the Albayanos. These churches strongly revealed the success of the Spanish missionaries



**FIGURE 5** The mason's marks which were encrypted in the walls of the St. John the Baptist Church.

in evangelizing the natives of the towns of Camalig and Tabaco. Most importantly, the church symbolized the spirituality and religiosity of the Bicolanos—a distinct quality that Albayanos possessed.

Based on the foregoing discussions, it could be inferred that St. John the Baptist Churches in Camalig, Albay and Tabaco City are culturally significant. These churches have wonderful memories of which the community is cherished. They played a significant role in the rich history of the Albay Province and the identity of the Albayanos. The prominence of these grand and lavish churches in Albay Province has provided a glimpse into the enormous power that the Catholic Church had at the time of the Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. The churches were distinct in the entire country because they had rare symbols and markings of the Masons who constructed them. Mason's marks (Figure 5) were used during the Medieval Period to identify a particular work by a mason or aid in the correct installation of the blocks. Most importantly, the church has become an icon of the faith of the Bicolanos. They have become a symbol of the spirituality and religiosity of the Bicolanos—a distinct quality that Albayanos possessed.

### 3.2 | Constraints, Threats, and Issues of St John the Baptist Church

Old churches were resilient structures. These religious edifices have proven their strength throughout the centuries. However, some of these structures were damaged by natural calamities (Soliman, 2019). St. John the Baptist Church, both in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City, were prone to natural hazards due to the vulnerability of the province of Albay to geologic and hydrometeorologic hazards due to its geographic location along the Western Pacific Basin. (Espinass, 2013).

Mt. Mayon Volcano Natural Park (MMNP) posed hazards in terms of lava flows, pyroclastic flows, and lahars. MVNP is a very active volcano that erupts every eight (8) or ten (10) years (Buot, 2009). Thus, MMNP. In a single eruption, one, two, three, or all of these hazards could occur (Van Westen, 1994). And lahar is regarded as the most dangerous hazard not only during eruptive periods but also during the volcano's repose (Fano et al., 2017). Historically, MVNP had its major eruption in 1814 that destroyed most of the building structures in Albay, including the St. John the Baptist Church in the town of Camalig and Tabaco. A torrent of fire, lava, and large hot rocks from the eruption of the volcano devastated all the nearby barrios and towns, including Camalig, Cagsaua, Budiao, and large parts of Albay (Legazpi City) and Guinobatan (Faustino, 1929).

A typhoon is also a threat to St. John the Baptist Church. A very strong typhoon, which was called "Bagyong Ogis," hit the town of Tabaco sometime in the 18th century, destroying the town and some of its building structures. Typhoons in the 1950s and 1970s destroyed the stunning church structure, unroofed the church in stages, and destroyed the paintings of the church. In November 2020, the church suffered another devastation from a natural calamity when a super typhoon called "Rolly" (international name, Goni) heavily damaged the Tabaco Church.

The Philippines has different agencies that provide rules and regulations that focus on heritage conservation and protection. However, it was noted that when it comes to natural calamities, heritage laws have nothing to say. Every calamity that hits the country adversely affects heritage structures and leaves tremendous damage. (Soliman, 2019). Thus, the vulnerability of the Albay Province to natural hazards is a major threat to the existence of these old churches because it can cause impact or destroy heritage churches.

In Camalig, Abay, it was noted that the church was already vandalized due to the wrong restoration done by the church administration. The bell tower, façade, main entrance, baptistry, dome, capula, and buttresses are not in good condition due to improper cement plastering, which causes unpleasant ventilation in the church's interior parts. The old convent structure, walls, and wood flooring are also unsafe due to antiquated conditions and the volcanic rock structures that used to collapse. It was also noted that no funding was available for the church restoration projects.

### **3.3 | Conservation Measures towards the Preservation and Protection of the St. John the Baptist Church**

Old churches are cultural treasures. They are a source of pride. However, old structures will not last forever due to the threats posed by natural calamities, especially since the province of Albay is vulnerable to natural hazards. Therefore, inadequate emergency interventions will further cause irreversible damage to cultural heritage or destroy entire areas of cultural heritage (M. Drdác, 2007). Thus, cultural heritage, including religious edifices, must be given proper care and maintenance to prolong their lifespan and existence for future generations.

Considering the threats, constraints, and issues facing St. John the Baptist Church, the Local Government Units of Camalig and Tabaco City are at the forefront of the preservation and protection of St. John the Baptist Church. The Local Government of Camalig, Albay Church, in partnership with the administration of St. John the Baptist Church and the Diocese of Legazpi, are working closely towards the restoration of Camalig Church and Convent.

In Tabaco City, numerous infrastructure projects and maintenance work were completed in the church. Church doors, roofs, garages, Christ the King Patio, and gates were repainted. Church kneels were upholstered. The rehabilitation of the driveway and the parking area in front of the church was also completed. The NCCA conducted a retouch on the belfry where it was restored to its original structure.

At present, several programs are spelled out in the Diocesan Pastoral Plan. One important feature of the Pastoral Plan was the identification of commission heads and members who would share their time and resources towards the attainment of goals and targets. One of the commissions that were created was the Commission on Temporalities, which covers the management of the financial resources of the parish, buildings, and sites, including the cemetery. This commission undertakes and implements tangible and intangible projects for the parish church.

## **4 | CONCLUSION**

Both St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay and Tabaco City are culturally significant. They possessed historical, aesthetic, and religious attributes that made the heritage structure profoundly valuable. Natural calamities and limited funds for church restoration are some of the threats to the church. As part of the St. John the Baptist Church's conservation measures, some infrastructure projects and maintenance work were undertaken.

## **5 | RECOMMENDATIONS**

Capacity-building should be conducted for local communities on the bottom-up conservation measures of the built heritage that will mobilize the local communities in the appreciation, conservation, and protection of the heritage churches. More specifically, activities or projects that will raise public awareness and understanding of the cultural significance of these heritage churches must be spearheaded so that the community may further value these old churches. To fully protect the St. John the Baptist Church in Camalig, Albay, and Tabaco City, a conservation management plan focusing on restoration guidelines, conservation measures, and heritage protection must be implemented. Moreover, the local government unit should conduct a risk assessment and update the hazard plans to mitigate the possible impacts of natural calamities on these heritage churches.

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**How to cite this article:** E. L. Besmonte, I. A. S. Barce, C. A. Militante, and J. Villanueva, (2022), St. John the Baptist Church through the Years: Demystifying Albay's Icon of Faith and Heritage, *Journal of Education, Management and Development Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 1

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