

# The Fernão de Magalhães Expedition in the Philippines. A Globalizing Event

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Globalization is currently a fashionable concept associated with the elimination of trade barriers among nations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The word is usually understood in terms of economic linkages between dominant capitalist economies and the “underdeveloped” former colonies (e.g. the global system of Immanuel Wallerstein), but the concept of globalization may also be applied to the impact of the Ferdinand Magellan expedition in the world of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and Asia (Esler 2000). The Magellan voyage demonstrated with unassailable finality the physical connectivity of the continents, archipelagos and oceans of the earth. The expedition's arrival in the Philippines became the foundation of Spain's territorial claims in Asia. Finally, the expedition set into motion events that would engage Spain, Portugal and other European imperialist nations as they established their colonies in Asia.

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For most Filipino historians, this singular event of 1521 marks a new epoch in the history of the Philippines; not so much that the archipelago was “discovered” by European explorers but that these islands would henceforth be included in the cartographic records or European maps of the “new lands” of Asia and would therefore become the object of future exploration and colonization. With this frame of reference, there are some considerations of the Magellan voyage to be taken into account in terms of Philippine historiography: firstly, as an event significant in itself to both the Philippines and Spain; and secondly, the events recorded through the account of Antonio Pigafetta (the official chronicler of the expedition). In presenting these comments, it should be mentioned that one difficulty for Filipino researchers of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century is the meagerness of primary sources in local libraries. For this article I have consulted the Pigafetta account (the Ambrosian Library copy) published in two volumes of *The Philippine Islands* (Blair and Robertson 1909), rather than the Filipiniana Book Guild edition that was simplified for general readership by its editors. The trend in history writing after the Philippines regained its independence in 1946 was to emphasize a national political history, downplaying in the process events that involved mainly the Spanish or Europeans. Such writings, by Teodoro Agoncillo for example, were a necessary corrective to earlier textbooks and research that were more a history of the Spanish or the Americans in the Philippines than a history of the Filipinos in their own country.

However, since the nationwide celebrations of the series of centennials of the Philippine Revolution from 1996 onward, historical writing has made a significant shift toward other areas such as social and cultural history, with increasing interest in historical periods other than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A fresh assessment of events such as the Magellan expedition in the Philippines represents a contribution to this new direction.

## THE MAGELLAN VOYAGE IN THE PHILIPPINES

The voyages of exploration accomplished by Portuguese mariners are impressive by any standard, with the opening of new sea routes in Africa, Asia and the Americas from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> to the early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cameron 1966, Hale 1966). Succeeding generations of European expeditions (Goetzman 1986) spent the next two and a half centuries exploring further along these routes. The Magellan expedition set off from Spain in the latter part of this remarkable era of Iberian exploration (Thomas 2004), and Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe was in its time the longest maritime journey undertaken by humans. In this context, the Philippine episode of a few months in 1521 was actually quite a short segment of the three-year voyage, and the explorations around the islands of Visayas and Mindanao were a minor achievement among the much grander adventures of the expedition. But the Philippine episode was significant in that Magellan was killed in a battle in Mactan Island, a disastrous turn of events that was followed the next day by an attack on the surviving crew from which they barely escaped with their lives.

The death of the intrepid leader and the subsequent violent expulsion of the expedition from Cebu, where they had been guests of the chief, constituted a

series of catastrophes that the Europeans found difficult to understand given the cordial relations that they had established with the chief and the local people. In most English language textbooks on Western history that mention this event, the narrative comes off as another example of "native treachery" or of the hostility of "uncivilized tribes" who "typically" attack foreigners or outsiders as a matter of course. This view, not necessarily stated as such but nevertheless an underlying assumption by the textbook authors, is premised on the assertion that the European global expansion in search of knowledge and economic opportunity in the unexplored places of Asia was a grand, noble venture of the Europeans as explorers, empire builders, pioneers, and civilizers of non-white people.

Most modern-day Filipino historians interpret these events in Mactan and Cebu in terms of arrogant white intruders who presumed to defeat a local chief in battle, but were instead overwhelmed by superior force. Another way of looking at this event however is in terms of power relations among local chiefs, and trade relations between local chiefs and the larger political entities of Southeast Asia, notably the Chinese empire and lesser principalities through the centuries that dominated regional trade. Local warfare apparently had been endemic in archipelagic Southeast Asia, fueled by contests for personal prestige and access to foreign trade (Scott 1986, 1994; Warren 2002, Wolters 1999). These were subtle dynamics that the Europeans evidently did not fully comprehend at that time. When Magellan volunteered to fight the enemy of his host, the chief of Cebu, this was probably intended to be a display of European/Spanish military prowess and strength. But it is



Magellan shrine in Mactan Island.

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possible that to the Cebuano chiefs, what Europeans would regard as a chivalrous gesture was actually a subtle diminution of Magellan's stature as the expedition leader: by volunteering himself and his men as warrior surrogates for the Cebu king against a lesser chief (Lapu-Lapu) of the tiny island of Mactan, Magellan had unwittingly demoted himself to the status of a vassal, in a social setting that granted paramount value to personal prestige. When Magellan failed to prove his boast and was instead killed in battle, the status of the Spaniards was further downgraded; the massacre that occurred a few days after could probably have been fueled by some social or religious offense that would have been overlooked or forgiven when the white men had seemed invincible, but would be punished by killing the offenders now that they were revealed as weak. This "clash of cultures" (Fagan 1999) is a theme that runs through the history of European colonization in Asia and elsewhere, and often had fatal consequences for all parties involved.

While the European expeditions had no desire to understand Asian cultures, the Magellan expedition was nonetheless a systematic search for information on new places and opportunities for trade and conquest. Accounts of the exploratory voyages of Portugal in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century illustrate the means by which information on distances and latitudes was gathered so that every voyage could be replicated and extended further, particularly in waters off the continents of Africa and North America (Cameron 1966, Hale 1966). It appears that the data obtained by secret illegal incursions by Portuguese ships in the Caribbean and South America provided invaluable geographic information for the Magellan expedition, which expedited the search for the southern passage to the Pacific Ocean and thence to Asia, now named the Straits of Magellan. In regions where a strong maritime tradition had developed (India and Southeast Asia), Portuguese explorers obtained information by capturing expert local navigators or pilots who knew the regional waters, as Vasco de Gama did. Magellan likewise relied on information from the people of Islas de Ladrones that there were other islands further west (i.e., Samar and Leyte) with more food supplies. When the Spanish ships had to traverse the treacherous reefs and currents of the Visayas islands, the chiefs of Masao and Butuan in northern Mindanao, whom the Portuguese captain had befriended, accompanied

Magellan and his men to Cebu Island. After the Spanish ships left the kingdom of Borneo (Brunei in Borneo) in search of a passage to the Moluccas, they took as captives the passengers of a Luzon vessel to find out the best route to the Spice Islands south of Mindanao.

The navigational skills of Southeast Asian sailors had contributed to the development of a vigorous commercial network in the region. Although there does not seem to have been any systematic codification or recording of this information in the Southeast Asian principalities or kingdoms, it is clear, however, that mariners and navigators of Southeast Asian waters transmitted their skills and knowledge to apprentices orally and taught them through actual sailing. The Portuguese who had established a base in the Moluccas, and had begun explorations north along the western coasts of the Philippine archipelago by 1517 (Garcia 2002), had appropriated and recorded this information for themselves, integrating it into their formal system of knowledge. The Spanish expeditions (particularly those of the Loaysa, Saavedra and Villalobos to the Philippines after the Magellan voyage) did the same, and by combining their own cartographic and navigational records of magnetic compass direction, measurable distances and latitudes (that is, according to European data classification), they had expanded their knowledge faster and farther than local or regional entities such as the Chinese or the Arabs (Braudel 1981). The appropriation and inclusion of Asian local knowledge into a matrix of European scientific knowledge that was global in scope, and heretofore unprecedented, became part of the process of domination by the Portuguese and the Spanish of European-Asian trade by the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### THE PIGAFETTA CHRONICLES AND PHILIPPINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

The narrative of the Magellan expedition by Antonio Pigafetta, entitled *The First Voyage Around the World*, (Blair and Robertson 1909) is regarded as one of the major documents in Philippine historiography. In its English translation, this is an eyewitness narrative that is accessible to most researchers, and is therefore the primary source for the events of the Magellan voyage in the Philippines. The acute observation, open-minded attitude and detailed account of events by

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Pigafetta make his narrative an invaluable ethnographic source for Mindanao and central Visayas. The information therein validates data from other sources on early 16<sup>th</sup> century Philippines. The Pigafetta chronicles moreover live on in current Philippine historical debates, particularly for those scholars of local history and Church history in the Philippines. Finally, the Pigafetta account poses questions, presents puzzles and provides leads for further research.

For Filipino historians, interest in the Pigafetta account is primarily in the sections dealing with the Philippines. Antonio Pigafetta was such an excellent narrator that a Filipino reader is often unaware that the events of the Magellan expedition are filtered through the viewpoint and sensibilities of the Italian chronicler. In a sense, historians comprehend the events of 1521 through the interpretation of Pigafetta who emerges as the spokesman for the expedition members, a privileged passenger of the expedition who was observing his fellow Europeans and describing their experiences even as he likewise observed the peoples and cultures they encountered. His observations of the Filipinos are the first of a long series of narratives and accounts by Europeans (and later, Americans) of the people of the Philippines: we Filipinos have long been the object and subject of observation through the centuries, and we as historians have become accustomed to reading about ourselves in these accounts. Pigafetta's narrative is a significant validation of what is known so far of 16<sup>th</sup> century Philippines and Southeast Asia. The region at that time could be categorized into zones and sub-zones of trade and political relations, interlocking areas of commercial activity that were also layers and hierarchies of political and economic power and cultural influence, with the Chinese empire as the most dominant (Warren 2002, Scott 1984, Sar Desai 1994). Within the Philippine archipelago, two important centers of trade were Butuan in the northern coast of Mindanao island and Cebu in the central Visayas island group. Pigafetta's observations indicate that trading activities were a major concern of the local chiefs, that political alliances were based on a complex kinship system, and kinships were formed from political alliances. These complex alliances point to a large inter-island trade network still not fully understood that, in turn, was linked with other Southeast Asian principalities and to the immense China trade.

Also significant were the observations made by Pigafetta of the social mores of the Cebuano and Butuanon people, about which few historians (Scott 1994) have written. The duties of the local rulers to their subjects, the social hierarchies designated by ceremonial roles and manner of dress (or the lack of it), the status of women as defined by social rank, and rituals of welcome and friendship that signified mutual obligations, were all duly recorded in an account more detailed than that of many later observers. Pigafetta even compiled a glossary of common words that is one of the earliest examples of linguistic investigations in the Philippines, and which clearly shows the common Austronesian origins of many Philippine languages. In the narrative of Pigafetta, some incidents provide leads for further research. In the voyages of the expedition after Magellan's death, Pigafetta made mention of some ethnic groups living along the coasts of Mindanao (among these were supposed cannibals) which the expedition had heard of or encountered, puzzling bits of information from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that still need to be verified and researched by local historians. The connection of the Borneo rulers to the chiefs of "Luzon," noted by Pigafetta in the episode involving the captured Luzon vessel off Sulu Sea, needs more amplification (Wionzek 2002) in order to add to the current knowledge of the rulers of early 16<sup>th</sup> century Manila.

The Magellan expedition in the Philippines and the pertinent Pigafetta chronicle are still the subject of heated debate at present, specifically the controversy surrounding the location of the site of the "first [Catholic] Mass in the Philippines." Although seemingly insignificant and may even appear trivial, establishing the fact is very important to the people of the localities involved (de Jesus 1998, Butuan City Symposium 2002), as well as to scholars who write on the history of the Catholic Church in the Philippines (Schreurs 1998, Bernad 2004). Those who support the Butuan City site (in northern Mindanao) contend that the official recognition by the National Historical Institute (NHI) of the wrong site in Leyte province (in the Visayas) was a political decision imposed by the Leyte-born Imelda Romualdez Marcos, the wife of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. That politically expedient action was reaffirmed in the late 1990s as historically correct by another committee convened by the NHI to review



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the issue. The subtext of this drawn-out controversy is that the discipline of history must not be manipulated for political gain, particularly one that conferred legitimacy on a dictatorship, and that past errors should be rectified by genuine and rigorous scholarship. This local controversy over a little-known

event may be far from the topic of globalization, but it can nevertheless be regarded as an extension through time of the global impact of the Magellan expedition and how its assessment or interpretation by modern historians of Philippine history still has to be brought to its full conclusion. **RC**

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