

What if Magellan had not come upon the Philippines? This remains an intriguing speculation, but it is too late for that. This historical essay tells what happened.

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It is an orthodox—as it is deplorable—to begin any account of Philippine history with Fernando de Magallanes. Many brave attempts have been made, especially in recent years, to push back the beginnings of formal history. Most Filipinos now gag at both term and concept of “discovery by the Spaniards,” cite Chao Ju-kua, the Chinese official and geographer who described the Philippines in 1280 and try to quote even earlier fragments of Indonesian, Chinese and Japanese records. It is unnecessary here to argue and fret over the lack of pre-Magellanic records or to point with outraged adjectives at the deliberate culturecide of the colonizers. It is still simpler, if

less faithful to one's historical sense, to assume that as far as we are concerned, pre-Spanish is almost synonymous with pre-history.

The fact is that, like Churchill's British isles, our islands have been “the creature of men and events across the seas.” The great land upheaval which, geologists maintain, wrenched us from the mainland of Asia; the wave upon wave of Indonesians and Malays who crossed the seas to merge their blood into the Filipino nation; the early Chinese, Indians, Japanese and other Asians who came to trade and stayed to marry, teach and rule were perhaps no less important to our history than the unprepossessing Portuguese navigator Magellan. But while he

and the powerful forces behind him live on in history, they, his Asiatic precursors, have become almost impossible to discern.

"The documentary history of the Philippines," wrote the American scholar Bourne, "begins with the Demarcation Bulls and the Treaty of Tordesillas, for out of them grew Magellan's voyage and the discovery of the islands." Certainly, whether the Pope was to halve the world like an orange for Spain and Portugal and whether Fernando and Isabel of Castille and Joao of Portugal were to redraw the line 370 leagues west of the Cabo Verde Islands "for the sake of peace and concord" was something of a turning-point in our history. Other opinions ascribe the beginnings of Philippine history in western records to the Islamic blockade of Europe which, by running the trade routes to the East, sparked the age of exploration, the desire for the Christianization of unknown lands and to the growing conviction—one which seems unbelievably simple to modern minds—that the earth was round.

At any rate, on a Saturday morning, on March 16, 1521 we see (through the eyes of the Venetian Pigafetta) the small bearded unimposing figure (lame in one leg if we are to credit one historian) of Fernando de Magellan, standing on the deck of his ship *Trinidad* and peering at the horizon where the heights of Samar had just become discernible. We see him the next day landing on the tiny island of Homonhon, exclaiming with his sailors over traces of gold in the earth, setting up tents for his sick men, and a day later, meeting a party of nine men out for a day's sport.

These were the first islanders Magellan and his expedition saw. Pigafetta found them graceful, neat and courteous, "ornately adorned" with gold earrings and armlets and "very pleasant and conversable." On another island explorers met natives travelling in large boats, armed with swords, daggers, spears and bucklers, eating and drinking out of porcelain dishes and jars, living in houses built "like a hayloft," thatched, raised on "huge posts of wood" and divided

into "rooms like ours." They were governed by a king dressed in embroidered silk, perfumed and tattooed whose dishes and "portions of his house" were made of gold.

In Cebu, the Europeans met the self-assured but prudent Rajah Colombo who first demanded tribute of the white strangers and then, on the advice of a Siamese trader who had met the powerful Portuguese in India, acceded to their offer of friendship. Pigafetta's first impressions are significant: they first saw Colombo seated on a mat in his palace, wearing fabulous jewelry of gold and precious gems, delicately picking at a sophisticated meal of turtle eggs and palm wine sipped with reed pipes. For entertainment he had four girls "almost as large and as white as our own women," noted the Venetian with Renaissance roguery, dancing to musical instruments consisting of brass gongs and drums. The queen when they met her was "young and beautiful", with mouth and nails reddened, wearing a black and white cloak and a hat "like a pope's

tiara" and attended in great pomp.

The strangers also remarked—as did the explorers who were to come after them—that the natives had weights and measures, calendars, bamboo manuscripts, a religious body of beliefs with painted idols and the offering of the sacrifices, an orderly and stable social structure governed by oral and written laws and elaborate manners and customs, vast and active trade among themselves and with neighboring countries. There was also ample evidence of mines, looms, farms, naval constructions, the raising of poultry and stock, pearl fishers, civet, horn and hide industries and, as Magellan was to discover with his dying breath an efficient military.

These were the spirited, self-sufficient, bold and lusty men who were to become transformed, by some alchemy of conquest and colonization, into the indolent, dull, improvident indios who would have to be prodded with the tip of Spanish boot or flogged at the church door because they were so timid, and so stupid and whom the

Americans, much later would find unfit to govern themselves.

The modern mind balks at the circumstances which made a Papal Bull and a letter from the Spanish incontestable legal title to these Asian islands. It is hard for us to accept the simplicity and presumption of this stranger from halfway around the earth to stand on a Visayan beach and, erecting a cross, claim to have discovered for his king lands which existed and prospered when Iberia was marshland. How preposterous! we say; but Magellan did not think so.

Creature of his age and race, he had all the lordly audacity of the race of the explorers and discoverers. Extremely able, patient, ingenious and resolute he was also fiercely imaginative and indomitable. His heritage was that of Prince Henry the Navigator, of Vasco da Gama who had gone to India and returned to Portugal with merchandise worth sixty times the original cost of the expedition; of Columbus who had set out with a letter to the king of Cathay and found America; of Ponce de Leon,

Cortes, Pizarro, and Balboa. It is not easy to understand the world of Magellan with its insatiable curiosity for the unknown, its inordinate desire for adventure and renown and the fabled wealth of the Indies, a world so full of unshakeable courage and faith that is set out on wooden ships to conquer the trackless seas and the pathless continents.

Magellan's personal history before his great voyage was typical of a lower class nobleman of the 16th century. Brought up as page in the royal court of Portugal, where he grew up in the exciting company of cosmographers, hydrographers and swordsmen, Magellan saw service in Africa and was soon determined to embark on a career of exploration. Because the Portuguese king ignored his plan to reach the Spice Island—there must have been dozens of such ambitious proposals from all manner of courtiers and adventurers in the Portuguese court—Magellan renounced his citizenship, went to Spain and offered his services to the Spanish monarch. The Spaniards proved no more receptive to his

plans of exploration than his compatriots: for many months Magellan was quite a guest at court, showing everyone his little painted globe. In his desperation, he decided to make exploration a private venture—a not uncommon method in that age. He had secured the backing of Christopher Haro, a wealthy Antwerp merchant, and was all but ready to sail on his own initiative when the Spanish king, set on his ear by such determination, finally signed a contract of "capitulation" with the Portuguese mariner. Leaving a wife and a six-month-old son behind, Magellan set sail on August 20, 1519 from Seville, with five ships, 256 men, and the promise of staggering wealth and fame on a voyage that was to include mutiny, starvation, astounding discoveries, terrible hardship and at last, the circumnavigation of the globe.

Yet, "the greatest navigator of all time" as Magellan has been called, was to meet his match in a Malayan chieftain, Rajah Lapu-Lapu, whom western historians have called with undisguised annoyance "a naked savage."

Lapu-Lapu was, from early youth, an excellent fighter and swordsman. He had incomparable bravery and a subtle intelligence. He had fought and maneuvered himself from the position of mere datu to that of the major ruler of the island of Mactan and when the Europeans came he had spies in the courts of his rival kings in Cebu with instructions to observe the fighting gears and tactics of the newcomers. With uncanny pre-science, he mistrusted this matter of making friends with the white men.

When Magellan, prodded by his new allies, Humabon of Cebu and Zula of Mactan, determined to make this surly native chieftain submit to him or he "would know how our lances wounded," Lapu-Lapu was prepared. He sent back an equally arrogant answer: if the stranger had iron lances, he had lances of bamboo and they were more terrible. He dug pitholes along the beach, retreated and waited for the Spaniards to approach. Leaving their boats in the shallow waters and boastfully charging their native allies to

leave the fighting to them, the Spaniards, once on land, were quickly outflanked, outnumbered and outshot. In an effort to turn the tide of battle, Magellan ordered his men to burn the houses of natives. Forever afterwards, western men in Asia would make the same mistake and would think that acts of savagery and inhumanity would increase their power. The sight of their burning villages, instead of terrifying the natives, infuriated them and they fell upon the white men with loud cries until those who were not slain ran back to their boats. Magellan was wounded by a poisoned arrow in his arm, and a bamboo spear in his face, and no longer able to draw his sword, he was cut down with a *kampilan*, the native cut-lass, and falling face down the water, was overwhelmed by Lapu-Lapu's warriors.

Their leader dead, still another tragedy overtook the expedition. Their two newly-elected captains, Barbosa and Serrano, went ashore at Cebu to attend a banquet or to ask for pilots to direct them to Borneo (historians differ) and they and a score of others

were massacred by the Cebuan, only recently baptized and embraced in friendship. Pigafetta says the massacre was an act of vengeance for the Malay slave Enrique whom the new captain had abused. Another authority says that the rape of Cebuan women by the Spaniards was the cause of the massacre. It is more logical to suppose that it was the result of the Spaniards' loss of prestige at Mactan. Humabon and his allies had, after all, been merely temporizing; they had been warned that the Europeans were too powerful to resist. But after Lapu-Lapu had proved that the white men were not invincible, there was no point to continuing a dangerous friendship. Nor did their new Christianity, built on so fragile a foundation as wholesale baptisms and the promise of a suit armor from the Spanish king, deter them from slaughtering the evangelists.

The Spaniards lost from 20 to 30 men, Serrano and a few others being still alive when the ships set sail "in great fear of further treachery." The expedition stopp-

ed at Bohol to burn the now undermanned ship *Concepcion*, and at Mindanao and Palawan, before finally leaving the archipelago, not without hearing of the large and prosperous island of Luzon in the north, where it was said, the Chinese traded. Thus ended the first contact between Spain and what was to be known as the Philippines.

Although its ultimate effects on the native population were probably negligible. We can assume that, for a long time, no one questioned the supremacy of Lapu-Lapu in that area, although progress of his career is lost in time, and that inlanders returned to their old life, the only trace of the Spaniards being a curious new idol in the Queen's palace, which fifty years later Legaspi's men would recognize as the image of the Child Jesus.

The effect of the Magellanic expedition on Castille and Europe was much more lasting and dramatic. Magellan discoveries not only proved that the earth is round and accomplished the circumnavigation of the globe but tantalized the Spanish crown,

the trade houses and the whole area of explorers. Two more expeditions—under Loaisa and Saavedra—both unsuccessful, were sent. In 1529, King Charles, in financial straits, sold all claims to the Spice Island and all other lands west for 350,000 ducats. This treaty was "a plain renunciation" of any rights over the Philippines, yet both Charles and Philip later chose to ignore it and sent, first, Villalobos who it was who named the islands Filipinas and twenty years later Legaspi, whose great expedition, fitted out from new Spain in America "established the power of Spain in the Philippines and laid the foundations of their permanent organization."

What if Magellan had not come upon the Philippines? Most historians are agreed that we would have become a Portuguese colony, also Christian and Europeanized. With the Portuguese, as with Spain, "Christianization was a state enterprise." In India and elsewhere, the Portuguese have shown great spiritual enthusiasm coupled with the familiar theories of possession and exploitation.

Failing that, either the Dutch or the English would have conquered us, as indeed they did mount invasions against the Philippines, and we would have known a colonization more punishing because it was built on the commercial rather than the religious ideal with all the "merciless exploitation and frank racialism" of their colonial policy, yet more merciful because it would have left us something of our history and our culture. Or perhaps the power of Islam which was strongest in the 17th century would have engulfed us, or perhaps the tribute which some of the islands were paying China would have been enlarged into more definite subjection. We could have been another Korea under Japan which for many centuries before Pearl Harbor had definite political ambitions with regards to the Philippines, or

another Indo-China under the French whose attitude of racial superiority and "utter distrust of democracy" cause the extreme nationalism of the Vietnam. Or perhaps the Germans? Or, who knows, we could have known the relative independence of Siam?

At any rate it is too late to speculate on whether we would have been spared the long paradoxical Spanish colonization with its strange combination of hideous cruelty, humane and beneficent policies and incredible corruption and conservatism. It was too late that morning in March more than four centuries ago when a small bearded Portuguese mariner stood on the deck of his wooden ship and glimpsed through the mist of the Pacific the gray mountains of Samar.—*The Saturday Mirror Magazine*.

The cruder minds are taken in by variety and exaggeration, the more educated by a sort of gentility.  
— Goethe.