



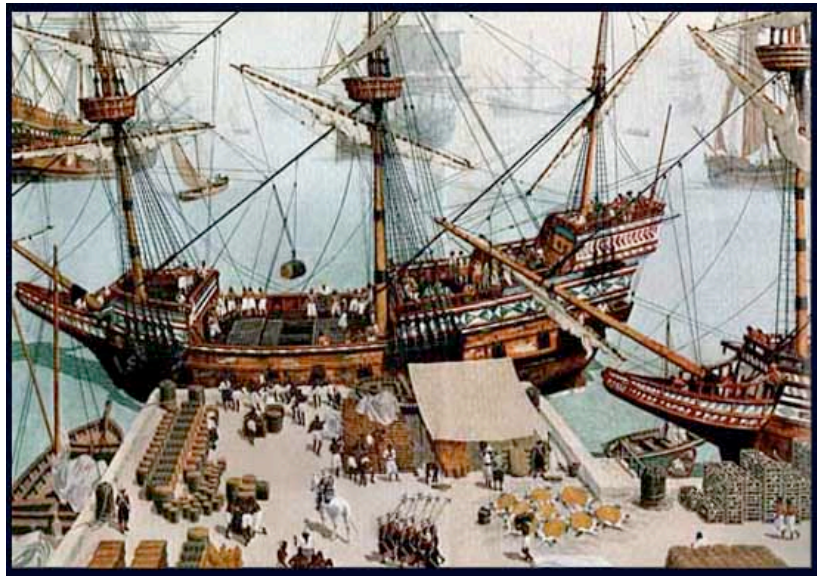
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When we think of the Spanish influences on Filipino culture and language, we naturally think that these things came directly from Spain. That's understandable considering that the Philippine Islands were named after a king of Spain and that we still tend to call all Spanish-speaking people and their language, *Kastila*, even if they are not from the Castile region of Spain. But the Philippines were not the only lands that Spain conquered in the 1500s. They were the empire's most distant possessions and although Spain kept them isolated from their closest neighbours, Filipinos had some contact with fellow subjects on the other side of the world. Many elements in Filipino culture that we think are Spanish really came from the native inhabitants of Central America. Common words like *palengke*, *tiyangge* (markets) and even *nanay* (mother) and *tatay* (father) may sound Spanish but they are actually from the Nahuatl language of the Aztec people.

The Mexican connection

So what was the Philippines' connection to Latin America? When Magellan "discovered" the Philippines he was really looking for the Spice Islands, which are known today as the Maluku Islands in Indonesia. Back then, spices were not just for improving the taste of bland food; they were highly valued as preservatives and medicines and they were extremely expensive. Portugal eventually won the Spice Islands and blocked Spain's access to Asia from the west. However, Spain still had the Philippines, which they hoped would become a literal gold mine. As it turned out, the Philippines never produced enough gold, silver, or even taxes to support an empire, but one of

Mexico is not just a town in Pampanga



A galleon in the port of Manila

the valuable things that the colony did have was its location on the eastern edge of Asia. Spain couldn't possess the Asian markets but it could buy and trade for all the goods it wanted with the silver it was looting from the Americas. This was the connection to Mexico.

The galleon trade

Manila became the central depot for all of Spain's commercial activities in Asia. From 1565 until 1811, large cargo ships called galleons travelled between Manila and Acapulco, Mexico. Most years one or two separate galleons from Acapulco would carry large amounts of Mexican and Bolivian silver to Manila to pay for all the exotic goods that would be brought to Manila from throughout Southeast Asia and especially China. The silver also helped to pay for the operation of the colony.

A galleon would also sail from Manila to Acapulco once or twice a year loaded with all the highly desirable Asian goods that would then be transferred across Mexico to the port of Vera Cruz where they were loaded onto ships of the Spanish treasure fleet and carried off to Spain.

The War of Independence in Latin America ended the galleon trade in 1811 but by that time Portugal was no longer blocking the more direct eastward route from Spain to the Philippines.

Mexican culture in the Philippines

Spain governed the Philippine colony through Mexico. Many Spaniards in the government, the military, the Church and merchants were either born in Mexico or had lived there for a few years before coming to the Philippines. These colonial Spaniards, along with Mexican *mestizos*, brought with them Mexican influences that can still be seen in the Philippines.

One notable link to Mexico is the basic monetary unit of the Philippines. Spain's currency was the *peseta* before the euro replaced it in 2002, but the Philippines share the *peso* with Mexico and several other Latin American countries.

Some may think that the town of Mexico in Pampanga is the most obvious evidence of Mexicans in the Philippines but that may just be a historical coincidence. The town was originally called Masicu, possibly from the word for elbow,

which referred to a bend in the nearby Pampanga River. During the colonial era, Spaniards changed the name, either intentionally or by accident, to the similar sounding and more familiar, Mexico, which is a Nahuatl word.

Along with loads of silver, the galleons also brought supplies from America, such as horses, books and new kinds of plants and foods. Fruits and vegetables are probably the largest contributors of Latin American words to the Filipino vocabulary. It is estimated that there are about 250 Nahuatl words in the Filipino language. (See the chart for some examples.)

Some Latin American foods became so popular that their Nahuatl names have entered languages around the world – *xocolatl* (chocolate), *xitomatl* (tomato), *potatl* (potato), *ahuacamolli* (guacamole) and *mizquitl* (mesquite). Even the name of the popular American chewing gum, Chiclets, is rooted in the Nahuatl word *tziictli*, which means “sticky”. And of course, corn or *mais* and tobacco were originally grown in the Americas. Their names can be traced back to the Arawak people of the Caribbean. Other fruits and vegetables such as the pineapple, the peanut, papaya, lima beans, cassava, chico/zapote and *balimbing* came from Central and South America, too.

Many traditional Filipino melodies and dances such as *La Paloma* and *Sandunga Mia* also originated in Mexico.

Filipino culture in Mexico

The cultural exchange was not a one-way street. Filipino sailors served on the galleons and labourers were transported to work in Mexico. To this day, unconfirmed stories persist about families in Mexico, known as *Chinos*, who descended from Filipinos.

Apart from the passengers and crew, most of the galleons

themselves were built in the Philippines using local hardwoods.

Filipino *mestizo* merchants travelled on the ships, bringing with them bits of Filipino culture that are now a part of Mexican culture. Mango seedlings were brought to Mexico in 1779 and were later crossed with other varieties of mango to produce the so-called Manila mango, which is now the favourite variety in Mexico. In 2005 the Philippine government protested Mexico’s plans to patent the name as their own.

Filipino workers who were brought to Mexico to cultivate sugar cane and rice brought with them the popular palm wine called *tuba*, which is still sold along the streets and in markets of Mexico.

Even the traditional Filipino shirt, the *Barong Tagalog* has its counterpart in the *Guayabera* or Yucatan shirt of Mexico and Cuba, though where it originated is a matter of some debate. All three countries claim to have invented the design, which just further demonstrates the intertwined history of the Philippines and Latin America.

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Some Nahuatl words in Filipino

Filipino - Nahuatl - English

abokado - *ahuacatl* - avocado
atswete - *achioltl* - annatto
cocoa - *cacahuatl* - cocoa
guwaba - *guayava* - guava
kamote - *camotli* - sweet potato
nanay - *nantli* - mother
palengke - *palenque* - market
patatas - *potatl* - potato
pitaka - *petlacalli* - wallet
sapote - *tzapotl* - chico
sayote - *hitzayotli* - type of gourd
sili - *chilli* - chili pepper
singkamas - *xicamatl* - turnip
tamale - *tamalli* - tamale
tatay - *tahtli* - father
tsonggo - *chongo* - monkey
tiyangge - *tianquiztli* - market
tokayo - *tetocayotilli* - namesake
tsokolate - *xocolatl* - chocolate



*Many Filipino fruits and vegetables have Aztec names and even the word **palengke** (market) is from their Nahuatl language*