



Ancient Pinoy entrepreneurs

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History books tell us that Ferdinand Magellan discovered the Philippines in 1521. The familiar story says that he landed in the Visayas and soon met his end when he tangled with Lapulapu in the Battle of Mactan.

Because the books all tell us that Magellan discovered the Philippines, many people assume that the Philippine Islands were somehow isolated from their neighbours. We have an image of pre-colonial Filipinos just minding their own business, perhaps doing a little trading with visiting Chinese merchants, when suddenly, the Spaniards show up, claim the islands for their empire and drag the natives into the modern world. This idea is probably a remnant of the colonial eras of Spain and the United States when the people really were cut off from their neighbours in South East Asia due to the protectionist trade practices of the two successive occupiers. However, it wasn't like that before the Spaniards arrived.

Filipinos in Southeast Asia

Europeans had already met some Filipinos at least ten years before Magellan met Lapulapu – long before they were called “Filipinos.” The Portuguese knew these “pre-Filipino” Tagalogs as Luzones (spelled Luções) because they were from Luzon, which was the name that Chinese and Malay traders used for Manila at that time. It is a Tagalog word that means “to come down to water from higher land” and, of course, Luzon eventually became the name for the whole island on which Manila is located.

When the Portuguese conquered the Sultanate of Malacca (Melaka) on the Malay Peninsula in 1511, they found a community of Tagalogs with their own shops and several prominent businessmen. The Portuguese governor even appointed one Tagalog, named Regimo, as the temengung or police commissioner.

Regimo was the head of the Tagalog community in Malacca. He had married into a local upper class family and acquired the title of *diraja*, meaning royal, and he had persuaded many



Some of the places where pre-colonial Filipinos did business

other Tagalogs to also settle in Malacca. Regimo was not just a simple trader, though; he was really a business tycoon. He financed large-scale export ventures to China and he owned several sailing ships, which he sent on regular trading missions to Brunei, China, Sumatra, Siam (Thailand) and Sunda (Java).

Apart from Malacca, there was also another colony of about 500 Tagalogs in Minjam on the Malay Peninsula, which may have been selling cotton from Mindoro to the Chinese as early as the 1300s.

Another pre-Filipino business mogul, named Surya Diraja, owned a plantation and an estate. He exported 175 tons of pepper to China every year and one of his ships was in the first Portuguese fleet to make an official visit to the Chinese empire.

Pre-colonial Filipinos were known throughout Southeast Asia. Magellan's navigator, Antonio Pigafetta spotted a Luzon ship in Timor in 1521 and a 1515 Portuguese account about the port of Canton (Guangzhou) in

China mentioned that Luzon traders had done business there before. Another Portuguese report from 1540 mentioned that there were many good ship's pilots in Borneo, “mainly some called Luções, who are discoverers.”

The “Luções” were also highly regarded mercenaries in Southeast Asia. They served the exiled Sultan of Malacca in 1525 when he attempted to take back the city from the Portuguese. Jaõa de Barros, an early Portuguese historian, called the Filipinos “the most warlike and valiant of these parts.” Filipino mercenaries also fought at Aceh in northern Sumatra in 1529 and they served the king of Burma (Myanmar) in a battle at Martaban.

Cosmopolitan Manila

While Filipinos were active throughout Southeast Asia, the port of Manila, or Maynila, as the inhabitants called it, also enjoyed lively trade relations with the region. A Bornean trading colony was established there in about 1500 and when the Spaniards arrived in Manila in 1570, the three

main rulers of the area were descendants of Muslim royalty who had married into the population. Ache, known as Rajah Matanda, was the grandson of the Sultan of Brunei.

At that time Manila had already become quite cosmopolitan. The Malay influence meant that many people of the ruling class called themselves Muslims, though apparently, for most, this meant little more than refusing to eat pork.

Malay was a second language for wealthy people in Manila and it was changing the Tagalog language through many fashionable borrowings. Upper class ladies were addressed as *binibini*, the Malay word for female. A blacksmith's shed in Malay became the new Tagalog word for a great hall, *gusali*, and a disbursement in Malay became a gracious gift in Tagalog – *biyaya*. The Malay word *karabaw* replaced the Old Tagalog *anuwang* for water buffalo. New cooking items such as the *kalan* (stove), *sandok* (ladle) and *balanga*

(jar) were also introduced and trendy new foods came into style such as *atsara* pickles and *puto* cakes. The term *alak*, for alcoholic drinks, began to be used as well.

It was at this time that many common religious and intellectual terms entered Tagalog such as *pag-samba* (worship), *aral* (learning) and *kawani* (clerk). Many of the words borrowed from Malay had already been borrowed by the Malays from other cultures. Words like *basa*, (read), *guro* (teacher) and *diwa* (spirit) came from the Indian Sanskrit language and from Arabic came terms such as *asal* (behaviour), *hukom* (judge) and *agimat* (amulet).

Since Manila was the main trading port in the archipelago, many words related to commerce were borrowed from Malay such as *lako* (peddle), *utang* (debt), and *bayad* (payment), which the Tagalogs initially modified from *bayar* to make their name for a slave trader, *mamamayar*. Many Malay terms for weights and measures

like *kaban* and *tsupa* were also used at this time but have now been replaced with the metric system.

The Tagalog language had changed so much in Manila due to its Malay connections that even two centuries later new Spanish missionaries had to be sent away from Manila, into the rural areas, if they wanted to learn “proper” Tagalog.

So, it seems that the pre-colonial Philippine Islands were not exactly obscure backwaters in Asian affairs. Magellan may have “discovered” the islands, but considering that he was among the Portuguese who conquered Malacca in 1511, he may have discovered the Philippines there in Malaysia, ten years before he got to Homonhon in the Visayas.

E-mail the author at: feedback@pilipino-express.com or visit www.mts.net/~pmorrow for more about Filipino history and language. Also find Paul Morrow on FaceBook.

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