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**Life and Times of Filipino Seamen  
During the Period of Spanish Colonialism**

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# Life and Times of Filipino Seamen During the Period of Spanish Colonialism

Rolando G. Talampas

*(Note: There being no reported female participants in the sea-going profession for the period under study, the term seaman—not seafarer (as in present-day international convention)—is used in the following effort to describe the living and working conditions of the native seaman.)*

An experienced seaman, asserted the noted American scholar William Henry Scott, was the real freeman (*timagua* or *timawa*) in classical Philippine society because he “shared such trade-raiding sophistication as his master’s command of Malay, the lingua-franca of southeast Asian trade.”<sup>1</sup> If freedom were a thing that was really important to pre-colonial Filipinos, seamen included, then surely they had lost it with Spanish conquest. But if such freedom<sup>2</sup> were based primarily on language, then surely he lost practically nothing with Spanish conquest for the colonized Filipinos not being taught Spanish until late in the colonial period preserved the language/s with which they carried on with their trades.

The caracoa<sup>3</sup>, given its size, material and technical requirements for construction and actual sailing, with which the *timagua* transformed himself into an experienced seafarer, per Scott, was a product of a distinct social organization of the time and the only way to get it again was by “blood, marriage, or vassalage to those who practised it.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup>William Henry Scott, “Boat-building and seamanship in classic Philippine society,” *Philippine Studies* Vol. 30 (Third Quarter 1982), p. 373. The same essay has been included in the book *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*.

<sup>2</sup>Mira Karjalainen, in her *In the Shadow of Freedom: Life on Board the Oil Tanker*, Helsinki: The Finish Society of Sciences and Letters, 2007, essays at length of the modern discourses on freedom based on 10 years of her being “seaman” and “researcher”. While this work presents persistent claims on the nature and scope of “freedom” that may be worthwhile to pursue in connection with the Filipino seafarer experience, it will probably take much effort to do so at the moment. Hence, her exciting insights will be reserved for later projects.

<sup>3</sup>Spaniards in the Philippines used the term *caracoa* to refer to the Indonesian *korakora*, says W.H. Scott (in “Boat-building and Seamanship in Classic Philippine Society,” *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain and other Essays in Philippine History*, Manila: New Day Pub, 1982, p. 64.) He adds that these were “sleek, double-ended warships or low freeboard and light draft with a keel in one continuous curve, steered by quarter ruddes, and carrying one or more tripod masts mounting a square sail of matting on yards, both above and below with double outriggers on which multiple banks of paddlers could provide speed for battle conditions, and a raised platform amidships for a warrior contingent for ship-to-ship contact.” For more on the caracoa, see *Ibid*, pp. 65-70.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 373-374.

the *caracoa*, Scott further surmised, was—like the experienced seafarer of yore—the symbol of freedom from subjugation (expressed often as payment of tribute).

While trade-raiding continued as part of the economic activity during most of the Spanish colonial period, it might be asked, how did the Filipino seamen who fell under Spanish might fare in exchange for their “liberty”? Since for the most part, seafaring meant was being on board Manila galleons and its counterparts after 1815, how was it carried on or practised with new knowledge and technology? This short essay explores some answers to these questions.

At the onset too it should be stated that the term “seaman” has been an evolving one, from the sense that Scott and other writers had taken it as those men involved in sea craft (*barangay*, *caracoa*, etc.) at the time in pursuit of legitimate, as in trading, and not so legitimate activities (as in slave-raiding, etc., which was not outlawed in these parts, but constituted a principal economic activity) up to being engaged (compensated or not) on so called *naos*<sup>5</sup> (galleons) or *buques* (ships, defined as *nave o barco cum cubierta para navegaciones o empresas nauticas de importancia*).<sup>6</sup> Hence, the term “seaman” is herein used rather loosely, unlike the way it is qualified today by relevant international instruments and legal provisions.

### **Freedom and the Seaman: “Inclination for the Sea”?**

While there seems to be collective and concerted vilification and indictment of the *indio* (Filipino) character, seamen were taken differently, at best positively, by colonial accounts. It can also be said there could be extreme views (two are cited hereunder) on the seaman, perhaps not realizing the particularity of working at sea—namely, the craft as both place of work and home, the all-male population, and the persistent dangers that go

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<sup>5</sup>Bernardo Gomez de Brito distinguished the galleon known to most and the so-called *nao* in these words:

The ships used in the *carreira da India* were principally carracks and galleons, smaller vessels being only occasionally employed. The carrack, or Nao (“Great Ship”) was a type of merchant ship used by the Venetians and Genoese in the later Middle Ages; but it was the Portuguese who brought it to its greatest and most spectacular development in the *Nao da Carreira da India* during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Broadly speaking, a Portuguese East Indian carrack was a large merchant ship, broad in the beam, with three or four flush decks, a high poop and forecastle, but slightly gunned for her size, and often a sluggish sailer. A galleon, on the other hand, was primarily a fighting ship, and a lighter and handier vessel than a carrack as a general rule, but more slightly gunned, and with a less cumbersome form of poop and forecastle. The distinction between carrack and galleon in Portuguese and Spanish terminology was not always a hard and fast one, and in the course of the seventeenth century, it became very difficult to draw an exact line between the two types. Although galleons usually did not exceed 500-600 tons, whereas carracks were frequently over 1,000, yet galleons of 800-1,200 tons were not exactly uncommon. Some of these larger vessels were termed *Naos* and *Galleones* indiscriminately, even by men who sailed in them.

<sup>6</sup>Marcelo Martinez, *Diccionario de la administracion española* (Madrid: Imp. de J. Lopez Camacho, 1892), Tomo II, Parte 1, p. 182.

with sailing, not to mention the technological knowledge limitations that go with it. The absence and presence, therefore, of freedom hinges of these important considerations, then as now, in trying to understand—from a non-seaman’s viewpoint—why the men of sea were such. Ultimately, one may realize that the sea itself *is* freedom and sailing is freedom personified, and that everything imposed on both the sea and sailing constitutes the encumbrances to said freedom. As freedom itself is a social construct made real by the individuals and groups who want to pursue it, seamen could be given to the cultural, social and historical—not exactly legal or moral—milieus defining or conditioning such freedom.<sup>7</sup> (Additionally, one may even hazard the view against Pierre-Yves Manguin’s<sup>8</sup> insinuation that the linguistic determinism in his *bangka-bangkay* linkage (the boat as death-symbolic) goes against the popular notion of an after-life. This writer, with better anthropological data, will pursue this point sometime in the future.)

For example, as *indios* in general were pictured as indolent, slow, and fun-loving individuals by church, bureaucrat and expatriate chronicles regardless of location, age or gender, the native seamen have been described invariably as patient, hardworking, sacrificing, or stoic. The reason behind these attitudes may become clearer if work circumstances of the seamen were considered—for a man of the sea needed to work and live often under the same set of, circumstances.

Francisco Leandro de Viana, a writer of the period, admired the seemingly indistinguishable “experienced seafarer” from the common sea-loving Filipinos in these words:

There is not an Indian (*indio*) in these islands who has not a remarkable inclination for the sea, nor is there at present in all the world a people more agile in maneuvers on shipboard, or who learn so quickly nautical terms and whatever a good mariner ought to know.. They can teach many of the Spanish seamen who sail in those seas.... . There is hardly an Indian who has sailed the seas who does not understand the mariner’s compass, and therefore on this trade route there are some very skillful and dexterous helmsmen.... When placed on a ship from which they cannot escape, they fight with spirit and courage.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>James C. Scott, in his essay “Freedom and Freehold: Space, People and State Stratifications in Southeast Asia” (in David Kelly and Anthony Reid, editors, *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 37-64), presents the (Western) idea of freedom as that of being an “attribute of the individual” which presupposes the role of the state as the guarantor of said freedom. In Scott, one finds the notion of freedom in relation to “non-state spaces” that include untaxed areas. Moreover, he avers that “the historical basis of freedom in pre-colonial, and much of colonial Southeast Asia was physical mobility—the capacity to flee the reach of the state” (p. 50).

<sup>8</sup>See footnotes 12 and 13 below.

<sup>9</sup>Francisco Leandro de Viana (Note: The exact source of this quotation is temporarily lost to this writer). The Newberry Library says that it possesses, among others, the de Viana reports relating to the trade of the period. At <http://www.newberry.org/collections/PhilMss.html> .

Given the waters around and between all the islands of the country, only more or less permanent mountain-dwellers would be exempt from the aforementioned description but they too just might be using the great river systems as highways in more or less similar ways. Without further elaboration, it should be said that the quotation above should be analyzed as to mere impression or factual description lest the reader take such positive words literally.

Many years after these de Viana words were immortalized, an American visitor to the islands towards the end of the Spanish colonial era praised seamen, but in a different (i.e., criminal) light:

As sailors, too, I do not believe they can be equalled. For, lithe, active and fond of water, the Malays have shown their inclination for the sea. Their pirates, coursing in *prahus*, have till a few years ago, for centuries infested the bays of the eastern Archipelago, looking for towns or villages onshore and taking as booty such foreign merchandise as they able to overcome... The pirates in their own waters preyed upon their own countrymen, by whom they were feared no less by than the Spanish or English freebooters of old by their own countrymen.<sup>10</sup>

While the same “inclination for the sea” persists in the above quoted passage, said tendency is illustrative of how knowledge and skill could be put to anti-social use. Surely, the period between the former (de Viana exited from the colonial scene sometime after the British conquest of Manila in the eighteenth century) and latter descriptions was marked by profound economic, political, and social changes, and Filipinos had different reactions to such changes. It would be foolhardy to conclude that the pirates were born into and nurtured by the Filipino coastal society without linking or associating it to the specific historical context.

In ending this part, it should be added that seamen who steered the bigger, sturdier *barangays* perhaps categorized the sailors who boarded them as being of better skills, at least. The distance and the elements also served to test the endurance, skills, and the speed of those who ventured into the open sea, river or lake. It was impractical for smaller crafts to sail in deep seas, more so in inclement weather, but what the Spanish colonizers saw in the sixteenth-century Philippines proved that the native population by then had been sailing from one island to another in comparatively smaller vessels.

### **Sailing to Distant Waters**

Seamen proved to be the most useful factors of Spanish imperial advance in the East. Consisting of diverse nationalities and ages, they manned the Magellan, Villalobos,

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<sup>10</sup>Ramon Reyes Lala, *The Philippine Islands* (New York: Continental Pub., 1898), p. 81. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Greg Bankoff notes, smuggling and piracy persisted as common crimes from/at sea. See his *Crimes, Society and the State in the Nineteenth Century Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996), pp. 82-83. Cf. James Francis Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi: Globalization, Maritime Raiding and the Birth of Ethnicity* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2002).

Saavedra, Loaysa, and Legazpi expeditions.<sup>11</sup> The long voyages from Spain across the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans and between the different Philippine islands took heavy tolls on the men seeking adventure and fortune. To some foreign sailors, the Philippines would become their permanent homes or final resting places: some were given drinks laced with poison by the hostile natives or were immediately and summarily punished in a mutinous aftermath.<sup>12</sup>

One can see that despite the undeniably large role played by seamen in the colonial project, the man of the sea was the least understood or appreciated. Those in the sea profession usually console each other by recounting hardships and constructing make-believe lore that their deeds really mattered, and that their long experiences and hardships were their only basis for any claim to fame.<sup>13</sup>

Following is some basic information about seamanship which changed but little in the centuries before and after the advent of the Spanish. In terms of navigation skills and instruments, Scott says,

Filipino mariners did not practice celestial navigation, though Visayans distinguished the major constellations to set their agricultural calendars. Their observations of the heavens were for meteorological purposes: by the appearance of the atmosphere, the hue thickness and configuration of clouds, the direction, force and steadiness of winds, and the color of the sun and moon—(...)—they could predict typhoons three or four days in advance, and less accurately, the amount of moisture to be expected a whole season in advance. They knew the Chinese mariner's compass—they called it *padaloman*, literally, “place for needle”—but used it mainly at nighttime. For the most part, they navigated by piloting—that is, by proceeding from one landfall to another, following islands

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<sup>11</sup>In fact, Spanish writers herald the heroism of most colonizers with tremendous sea and military experiences combined. See for example, Pio A. de Pazos, *Heroes de filipinas* (Santander: Imp. military A. Cargo de A. de Quesada, 1888). Extant records of the Magellan and other expeditions also cover a substantial number of pages detailing compensation for the *marineros*, as distinguished according to rank, nationality, and assignment on board. See for example, “Sueldos de los marinos que andan en las naos,” Documento Num. 47, 1518-19, *Relacion detallada de los gastos hechos para la armada de Magallanes*, Sevilla, 19 de Agosto 1518-20 de Septiembre 1519, Casa de la Contrataciones. Est.32, caj. 3, leg. 7/26. Cited in *Coleccion general de documentos relativos a la islas filipinas existentes en el Archivo de India de Sevilla* (Barcelona: Compañía general de tabacos de filipinas, 1918).

<sup>12</sup>“Resumé of Contemporaneous Events,” in Emma Blair and James Alexander Robertson, compilers, *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1893* (Philippine Reprint—Mandaluyong: Cacho Hermanos, 1973). [hereinafter referred to as *BR* for brevity] vol. 2, p. 153-154.

<sup>13</sup>Earlier on, in 1586, the King of Spain instructed Gov. Gen. Gomez Perez Dasmariñas to allocate variedly discriminating (between Spaniards and Filipinos) sums from tribute collections for the provisioning and construction of two hospitals from the next available *repartimiento* for, among others, sailors in Manila, given the fact that services for both groups were bad or useless for the care of the sick. See “Instructions to Gomez Perez Dasmariñas,” in *BR* Vol 7, pp. 143-144. Meanwhile, the centrality of Manila in the galleon project severely limited the role for example of cities like Cebu (which tried to participate by sending two ill-fated ships two Mexico in 1596 and 1597). Bruce L. Fenner, *Cebu under the Spanish Flag, 1521-1896: An Economic and Social History* (Cebu City: San Carlos Publications, 1985), p. 36-37.

cannot actually be seen, their presence is betrayed by ocean currents, floating objects, the movement of birds or fish, and especially cloud formations on the horizon and the kind of lightning they display.<sup>14</sup>

It was the *caracoa* which was greatly used by Spanish colonizers in waging a war against Muslim Filipinos, but what they did not understand was why caracoa seamanship demanded that the sailors be outside the boat and in the water.

Scott notes: “To bail out a swamped vessel, for example, they went over the side to rock it and slosh out the water with paddles; and when emergency speed was needed, the paddlers on the outrigger floats were literally in the water.” At least two Chinese writers, he claims, Chang Hsieh and Chao Ju-kua, failed to understand caracoa seamanship. One of these them remarked on Visayan seamen in the thirteenth century:

They do not travel in boats or use oars, but only take bamboo rafts for their trips; they can fold them up like door screens, so when hard-pressed they all pick the up and escape by swimming off with them.<sup>15</sup>

The *caracoa* was intended for use by warriors in treacherous inter-island waters and for piracy. The *joanga* served other uses because at least one of them was the flagship of Raja Sulayman’s 300-crewman fleet in the Muslim fortification of Manila when the Spaniards, in search of an overseas mercantile empire, colonized the Philippines for the next three centuries beginning in 1565.

In mid-seventeenth century, for example, the Jesuit priest Francisco Colin wrote before Christianity reached island of Bohol, “one of their chiefs ordered that he be buried in a type of boat they called *barangay*, together with seventy slaves in arms, ammunition and victuals, in the same manner that he used in his lifetime when he would go out to raid and plunder.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Filipino Seamen on the Galleons**

With *polos y servicios* and the Manila galleon, seamen (experienced or not) simply became the principal tools of Spanish accumulation. There has been little added information to Schurz’s magnum opus about seamanship during this period.

The crew complement of the galleon was called the *lista*. Depending on the size of the galleon, a crew of 60-100 persons was assembled in the earlier years. In the 1730s, the

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<sup>14</sup>William Henry Scott, “Boat-building and seamanship in classic Philippine society,” *Philippine Studies* Vol. 30 (Third Quarter 1982), p. 359.

<sup>15</sup>Chao Ju-kua, cited in Scott, “Boat-building...”

<sup>16</sup>Francisco Colin, *Labor evangelica de los obreros de la compaña de Jesus en las islas Filipinas* (Barcelona 1900-02), p. 69. Cited in Pierre-Yves Manguin, “Shipshape societies: Boat symbolism and political systems in insular southeast Asia,” in David G. Marr and A.C. Milner, eds. *Southeast Asia in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1980), p. 197.



king of Spain advised that a galleon of 500 tons required a crew of 150 men, although some ships had about 250. Galleon officers consisted of the commander, two mates, three or four pilots, two bosuns, two bosun's mates, two constables, and two surgeons. But in the earlier years, Schurz noted,

an officer with the impressive title of *capitan del mar y guerra* (captain of the sea and war), was second in command of each vessel. The commander was always known as general or "general of the sea", and when there were two galleons, the officer in charge of the *almiranta*, or second vessel, was styled "admiral". Each ship also carried a notary, chaplain commissary, caulker, carpenter, diver, and chief steward. Two officers who had no actual concern with the actual work of navigation were the *contador* or accountant, and the *veedor* or overseer. On the return voyage from Acapulco there was added a *maestre de plata* or master of the silver, and sometimes there were several captains of the troops carried to reinforce the garrisons in the Philippines or the Moluccas. The number of officers was generally multiplied unnecessarily to make places for friends of the governor or of the viceroy.<sup>17</sup>

Such positions enriched both the appointing officers in government and elsewhere and the Spanish officers appointed to the positions mentioned. No matter that these officers, as one described, were "mere youths without experience in naval affairs", as long as they pleased those to whom they owed their appointments and their personal ambitions, but to the financial ruin of the Spanish regal treasury that needed all the money to support the colonial administration work and to weather all attacks (Moro, Dutch, British) against it. Of course, no native was appointed to any officer position because the pay alone was a much coveted opportunity to further gain from the galleon trade, as in smuggling.

#### **Wages of officers and crewmen on the galleon**

Commander	4,325 pesos
Admiral (commander of theAlmiranta)	2,900 pesos
Mate	400 pesos
Pilot	700 pesos
Bosun	325 pesos
Bosun's mate	225 pesos
Notary	225 pesos
Chief Steward	225 pesos
Master of the water rations	225 pesos
Constable	325 pesos
Cooper	325 pesos
Caulker	325 pesos
Gunner-West-bound	225 pesos

<sup>17</sup>William, Lytle Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, 1959, p. 261. [A technical problem caused loss of page numbers of subsequent citations.]

Sergeant-major	600 pesos
Adjutant	412 pesos
Ensign	865 pesos

Source: Cited in Schurz, 1959.

An aspirant for the position usually had to buy it from the governor-general who did most of the appointments at the price of 600-10,000 pesos. The returns on this small “investment” could be astonishing: 50,000-100,000 pesos from gratuities from Manila-based Spanish merchants; four percent commission on the registered cargo; commissions from Mexican or Peruvian merchant and officials, and returns from the aspirant’s own “business”. And to consider that these were the most probable returns only in the seventeenth century! To the Filipinos went the job of keeping the galleon either sailing or afloat or safe from pirates. They comprised the biggest portion of the *lista* and were generally categorized as mere “common seamen” (or ordinary seamen today). In the seventeenth century, native seamen reportedly received 48 pesos/year plus 15 gantas of rice per month.<sup>18</sup>

Common Spanish seamen received 100 pesos while the Filipino “common seamen” received 48-60 pesos, oftentimes delayed by many months owing to the unpredictability of the fate of galleons. Most of the Filipinos went to sea “without clothes to protect them(selves) against the cold, so that when each new dawn comes, there(were) three or four dead men.” Most were either afflicted with pneumonia and scurvy and a nun’s convent had to raise lemons to provide vitamin C supplement to the Filipino crewmen. Rations grew “scarce and foul” during the voyage. The lack of fresh vegetables and the deterioration of provisions because of the absence of food preservation equipment caused the terrible scourge of scurvy which one chronicler called the “Dutch disease.”

Scurvy which “makes all the mouth sore, putrefies the gums and makes the teeth drop out” was also called sea-scurvy. Beriberi, also called *berben*, “swelled” the body and made the “patient die talking.” “*Gorgojos*” as Spaniards called vermin, and bred in biscuits, cabins, beds and food the crewmen ate and caused a “universal raging itch”. Gemelli Careri noted others of the “gorgojos” type, “There are several other sorts of vermin of sundry colors that suck the blood. Abundance of flies fall into the dishes of broth, in which also swim worms of several sorts.” He shared these “misfortunes” of eating what were served for the meals. He intimated:

For the boatswain, with whom I had agreed for my Diet, as he had Fowls at his Table the first Days, so when we were out at Seas he made me fast after the Armenian manner, having Banish’d from his Table all Wine, Oyl and Vinegar; dressing his Fish with fair Water and Salt. Upon Flesh Days he gave me Tassajos Fritos, that is, Steaks of Beef, or Buffalo, dry’d in the Sun, or Wind, which are so hard that it is impossible to Eat them, without they are first well beaten. At Dinner another piece of that same sticky Flesh was boil’d without any other Sauce but its own hardness, and fair Water. At last he depriv’d me of the

<sup>18</sup>Vicente Valdepeñas *The Emergence of the Philippine Economy* (Manila: Papyrus Press, 1977), p. 47.

Satisfaction of gnawing a good Biskit, because he would spend no more of his won, but laid the King's allowance on the Table; in every mouthful whereof went down abundance of Maggots, and Gorgojos chew'd and bruis'd on Fish Days. The common Diet was old rank Fish boil'd on fair Water and Salt; at noon, we had Mongos, some thing like Kidney Beans, in which there were so many Maggots, that they swam at the top of the Broth, and the quantity was so great, that besides the Loathing caus'd, I doubted whether the Dinner was Fish or Flesh. This bitter Fare was sweetened after Dinner with a little Water and Sugar; yet the Allowance was but a small Coco Shell Full, which rather increas'd than quench'd Drought.<sup>19</sup>

Water, if available, was rationed. The large crew complement and the small water supply therefore posed problems known until then. At no farther than the mid-Pacific, water was already in very short in supply, at which time the rain-god<sup>20</sup> and the water constable were busy. On leaving Manila, water was carried on 2,000-4,000 earthen jars "proportionate to the number of people on board." A few galleons carried water in 500 pieces of large sealed bamboos called *bombones* (after *bumbong*, a water container still used in rural Philippines). A *bombong* was "eight Spanish length and as thick as a man's thigh." When these containers had become empty, rainwater was captured in large mats and drained into the jars and *bombones* in a trough-like manner.

The seaman called *alguacil de agua* (water constable or "master of the water rations") took charge of collecting, guarding and dispensing the rainwater supply. Largely wooden in composition, the galleons were protected from emergency situations like fires by prohibiting smoking in many areas. Those who violated this rule were either put on the bilboes (or iron shackles used as punishment via iron restraints)<sup>21</sup> for 15 days on bread and water or condemned to serve a year without pay. In stormy weather, the ovens were not lighted and all the foods were served cold. Unprotected lamps were all put out after sunset. Deaths in the galleons, as in the shipyards, decimated the crew. Schurz explains:

Sometimes nearly all on board were stricken and the mortality became frightful. Eight died on the *almiranta* of 1606 and many more after she reached Acapulco. A galleon of 1620 lost 99 and the remainder, unable to continue onto Acapulco, were taken ashore at Val de Banderas on the Guadalajara coast. The *capitana* of 1620 lost 105, and two galleons a few years there overboard 140 persons, while the survivors nearly perished of hunger; 114 died on the two galleons of 1643.<sup>22</sup>

## How they Lived and Died and Survived

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<sup>19</sup>Schurz, p. ?.

<sup>20</sup> Ancient Filipinos worshipped a pantheon of "gods," actually deities that ruled heaven and earth, man and nature and were the objects of reverence and supplication. Among these was the "rain god" that was worshipped to provide water for agriculture and to request for bountiful harvest. See, e.g., Lily Rose Tope, *Cultures of the World: Philippines*, New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2002, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> See Alice Morse Earle, *Curious Punishments of Bygone Days*, Herbert Stone and Company, 1896.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.?

Commerce and trade dictated how seamanship developed during the remaining years of Spanish colonialism. Routes had to be established where economic activities, including passenger travel, expanded. One source that there were “tres clases” de comercio: *pequeño, gran y al oeste del Horno*,<sup>23</sup> referring to small domestic coasting trade (cabotaje), trips to nearby foreign ports, and trips to Europe, principally Spain, correspondingly. In the islands, the following domestic routes were named by a traveler: Manila, Olongapo, Subic, Cape of Sampaloc (Quezon?), Bolinao, Lingayen, Agno Grande, Sual. He said:

These lines serve the archipelago twice a month: the northwestern line reached five or six stops at Aparri at the mouth of the most important river of Luzon, the Rio Grande of Cagayan; the southern line at extreme point—Tabaco, a port on the Pacific Ocean, on the southeast coast of Luzon, in the grand gulf of Lagonoy; the third line goes around the southern islands through the Sulu Sea. From every point of view, supplies, food, and conveniences, one is not very well off on the three lines. Let us hope that the company which just took place of the one that has transferred me to so many ports of the Archipelago will be more indulgent to travelers.<sup>24</sup>

Those who sailed on their small craft were affected by swollen rivers and had to live by other means. Others lucky enough to carry on their chosen profession were pictured by contemporaneous accounts as being given to drinking, petty stealing, or taking advantage of local hospitality.

It was hunger that made them so bold. The crew, who had taken some of their own produce to Manila, had spent, the proceeds of their venture, and had started on their return voyage scantily provided with provisions, with the hope and intention of soon reaching their home, which they would doubtless have done with favorable wind. A few Indians unite to charter a small vessel, and load it with the produce of their own fields, which they set off to sell in Manila.

The strait between the islands resemble beautiful wide rivers with charming spots upon the banks inhabited by small colonies; and the sailors generally find the weather gets squally towards evening, and anchor till the morning breaks, The hospitable coast supplies them with fish, crabs, plenty of mussels and frequently unprotected coconuts. If it is uninhabited, so much the better. Indian hospitality is ample, and much more comprehensive than that practised in Europe. The crews are accommodated in the different huts. After a repast shared in common, and washed down by copious draughts of palm-wine, mats are stretched on the floor; the lamps—large shells, fitted with rush wicks—are extinguished and the occupants of the hut fall asleep together. Once, I was sailing tin the bay of Manila after a five-day cruise, we overtook a craft which had sailed from the

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<sup>23</sup>Manuel Buzeta and Felipe Bravo, *Diccionario Geografica-Estadistica-Historico de las islas filipinas* (Madrid, 1851), p. 250.

<sup>24</sup>Alfred Marche, *Luzon and Palawan*, Translated by W.A. Burke (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1970), pp. 104-105 [Filipiniana Book Guild is hereafter referred to as FBG for short.]

same port as we had with a cargo of coconut oil for Manila, and which had spent six months upon its trip. It is by no means uncommon for a crew which makes a long stay in the capital to squander the whole proceeds of their cargo, if they had not done it before reaching town.

...

As we sailed along, we saw coming towards us another vessel, the *Luisa*, which suddenly executed a very extraordinary tack; and in a minute or two its crew sent up a loud shout of joy, having succeeded in stealing a fish box which the fishermen in Marinduque has sunk in the sea. They had lowered a hook, and been clever enough to grapple the rope of the floating buoy. Our captain was beside himself with envy of their prize.<sup>25</sup>

The naughty playfulness of Filipino seamen seem not too isolated—but perhaps that too could be explained. Now, if others would complain of something else, it could be because Filipino sailors were trying to earn a living and testing other seamen's patience. The French navigator Jean Francois Galaup de la Perouse complained in his 1767 account of an "Indian" pilot whom he took to guide his boat's exit to Cavite:

The captain sent me his boatswain's mate, an old Indian who did not inspire me with much confidence; we agreed, however, that I should give him 15 *piastres* to pilot us to Cavite; and on the 25th, at daybreak, we sailed and stood through the south channel, the old Indian having assured us that all our efforts to enter by that of the north, where the current always set to the westward would be in vain. Although the distance from Port de Marivelle (Mariveles) to that of Cavite is only seven leagues, were three days in making this run, coming to an anchor every evening in the bay, in muddy ground. ... we should have done still better to follow this (M. Dapres') guide than the Indian pilot who was very near running us aground upon the bank of San Nicholas: he would, in spite of our representations, continue his stretch to the southward and in less than a minute we shoaled from 17 fathoms to four.<sup>26</sup>

The reader should realize that the objects of these kinds of display of negative attitudes were persons unknown to Filipino seamen. The psychologist may see this as a defense mechanism as the basis for such treatment of strangers. Abroad or on high seas, the seamen's story took a different turn, for the worse.

How Filipinos suffered from the capture of the galleon *Nuestra Señora de Cavadonga* by the British ship *Centurion* demonstrates the life-and-death struggle of native seamen:

Indeed, the suffering of the poor prisoners, though impossible to be alleviated, were much to be commiserated; for the weather was extremely hot, the stench of the hold loathsome beyond all conception, and their allowance of water but just sufficient to keep them alive, it not being practicable to spare them more than at the rate of a pint a day for each the crew themselves having only an allowance of

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<sup>25</sup> Fedor Jagor, *Travels in the Philippines* (FBG, 1965), p. 60, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Francois Galaup de la Perouse in Tome Pires, et. al., *Travel Accounts of the Islands, 1513-1787* (FBG, 1971), p. 367.

a pint and a half. All this considered, it was wonderful that not a man of them died during their long confinement except three of the wounded who died the same night they were taken; though it must be confessed that the greatest part of them were strangely metamorphosed by the heat of the hold; for when after above a month's imprisonment they were discharged in the river of Canton, they were reduced to mere skeletons and their airs and looks corresponded much more to the conception formed of ghosts and spectres than to the figure and appearance of real men.

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In 1657, the entire crew of the *San Jose* were reported to have died and the ship was found drifting off Guatulco below Acapulco. The *San Jose* had left more than a year before. All its provisions were gone and there was no one on board who could lift a hand to rope or wheel. Everyone had perished of pestilence or starvation, and when sighted, the silent galleon with her freight of silks and cadavers was drifting southward into the tropics.

An unaccounted number of Filipino seamen also died as the Moros stepped up harassments of the galleons. These Moro attacks against the galleons, and consequently the largely Filipino crew, became one of the threatening forces that undermined the economic institutions which were relied heavily upon to finance the colonial government. The Spaniards responded by ordering the construction of many *carocoas* manned and used by the Christianized natives to fight the Moros. "The Moros responded to such designs with (further) violence and warfare. Moro buccaneers harassed Spanish shipping, and so were dubbed "pirates." Moro expeditions carried on *jihad* (holy war) to the coasts of the Visayas and Luzon where their war vessels periodically raided, killed and plundered Christian(ized) settlements," wrote Peter Gordon Gowing in a recent book. English and Dutch pirates Francis Drake, Thomas Cavendish, William Dampiers and Wooden Rogers also attacked galleons on the high seas as their respective royalties sought to corner as much precious currencies and goods for their mercantilist build-up and eventual imperialist conquests.

But confronting such hardships would prove that seamen were fast learners themselves, if they survived the ordeal: some Filipino crewmen jumped ship and settled in various parts of central and north America, notably California and New Orleans. In two recently released books by Lorraine Crouchett (*Filipinos in California*) and Marina E. Espina (*Filipinos in Louisiana*),<sup>28</sup> these "Manila men" or "Luzon Indians" were said to have played a "prominent if unrecognized role in the exploration and settlement of California."

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<sup>27</sup>Guillaume Joseph Jean Baptiste Le Gentil de la Galaisiere, *A Voyage to the Indian Seas*. Translated by Frederick Charles Fischer. (FBG, 1963), p. 221-222.

<sup>28</sup>I have seen only Espina's 99-page book which was gifted to the UP Diliman Main Library. The book was published in Louisiana by A.F. Laborde & Sons in 1988. Espina recounts how Filipino seam en established their refuge in Louisiana after jumping off the galleons, drifted down the Mississippi River and established the "Manila Village" on Baratara Bay near the Gulf of Mexico. Both books are excerpted in Floro Mercene's review of both books in "The saga of the Luzon Indians," *Philippine Graphic*, July 2, 1990, pp. 33-36. The subsequent descriptions are from said Mercene book review. Malcolm H. Churchill takes Espina to task in a more analytical and critical re-reading of the mythicized Filipino settlement formation in

Crouchett came up with a definite finding that four unknown Cebuanos who worked on the Spanish ship *San Pablo* were part of the 129-day record-making voyage from Cebu to Acapulco in 1565. Francisco Mansalay, the lone Filipino survivor in the 1587 pirate attack led by Thomas Cavendish, was one of at least three Filipinos dumped in Capul in northern Samar. Evidence further identifies Filipinos who lived in Baja California in 1768, in San Blas, Mexico in the early 19th century, and one named Gaspar Molina, a shipwright who was commissioned by the Jesuit priest Fr. Juan Ugarte to build the *Triunfo de la Cruz*, the boat used in 1720 to explore the Sea of Cortes and prove that California was not an island.

Another sailor from Manila, Antonio Miranda Rodriguez, recruited in San Blas, who looked for his friends after passing through Los Angeles, California, has now gained fame as one of the *pobladores* (founding-settlers) of that place. Some descendants of these Filipinos even joined the American fight against the British in 1812, some even teaching the art of *arnis* (stick-fighting). Schurz's *Manila Galleon* adds that Spaniards begrudged the Filipinos for the latter's ability to teach the natives of Acapulco how to make wines that competed with brandy sales and their facility with getting along with foreign women, perhaps a trademark of the lovelorn sailor whatever race or nationality.

### **Institutionalizing Seamen's Education: *Escuela Nautica de Manila***

One colonial legacy is the professional education and training of Filipino seamen. The present-day Philippine Merchant Marine Academy (formerly Philippine Nautical School) in Zambales (then located at Fort Bonifacio) takes pride in being the first such school for teaching would-be officers on board vessels. The background information of the apparently secular (given the prescribed courses) school speaks for itself:

Academia nautica: establecida en Manila en 1820; es tambien digna del mayor aprecio como veremos en el lugar corespondiente: su instalacion se debe a las repetidas instancias de la junta de comercio, la cual had establecido catedras para la enseñanza geometria, trigonometria rectilinea y esferica, cosmografia y pilotage, con una clase geometria practica aplicada a la construccion de cartas y planos hidrograficos, manera de delinearlos, etc. La escuela se dirige por la reglamento especial, y los gastos se cretean de los fondos de *averias*, siendo de incumbencia de la mercimada junta la admission de discipulos.<sup>29</sup>

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Louisiana. See his "Louisiana History and Filipino Settlement," *Bulletin of the American Historical Collection*, vol. XXVII, no. 2 (April-June 1999), p. 25-48.

<sup>29</sup>Buzeta, p. 164. (Italics in the original.) Spanish writer-mariners took extra effort to specify the wind and water currents factors and other important elements of safe and successful sailing in Philippine maritime territory, utilizing verified information from English and French mariners. See for example, Camilo de Arana, *Derrotero del archipelago Filipino* (Madrid: Direccion hidrografico, 1879), a thick volume on technical information about navigation.

A dictionary on the Spanish administration clarified that as a special school, together with the *escuelas de bellas artes and ingenieria*, the nautical instruction was a professional one, similar to those in other countries at the time:

Escuelas de nautica: la enseñanza de nautica es profesional segun el art. 61 de la ley de 9 de septiembre de 1857, y sus estudios se determinan en los arts. 65 y 66. Hay escuelas publicas de nautica para pilotos en Barcelona, Bilbao, Cadiz, Cartagena, Comiña, Gijon, Malaga, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, San Sebastian y Santander.<sup>30</sup>

By March 1859, the new law on public instruction required practical seamanship on board vessels and decreed that the nautical school had “dos secciones, “ namely, “*la de pilotos y la de constructores navales*.”<sup>31</sup> The school offered a four-year course with usually 50-60 “predominantly Indian” students passed management from Board and Tribunal of Commerce to the commandant-general of the naval station.<sup>32</sup> It might be wrong to draw more conclusions about the operation of the nautical school but it is a fact that the devastating earthquake of mid-1863 flattened the structures inside the Intramuros, and with them the nautical school. It took a good number of years before such structures were replaced, more so the governor’s palace that was relocated to the site of present-day Malacañan. The handful of extant primary sources about the said school at the Philippine National Archives in a thin bundle labeled “Escuela de Pilotaje/Escuela Nautica de Manila” deal only with what remains of the school’s *presupuestos* (budget) papers.

When he founded the said school just around the middle of the nineteenth century, Robert MacMicking mistook it for a naval institute but described it thus—at the time that the term Filipino was beginning to take concrete meaning from labels applied to island-born Spaniards (*creoles*) and crossbreds:

At this place, boys are very well trained up in the scientific and theoretical part of their profession; but unfortunately from some cause or other, their education afterwards as practical seamen does not keep pace with it, and they generally are as much behind our British or American shipmaster in all relating to the sea as can be well conceived, although they are not unfrequently (sic) superior to them, and at least are equal, in their theoretical attainments.

At this school, many of the *creoles* and *mestizos* of Manila have shown to the world that they did not want the ability to learn when they had good master to instruct them; but good heads and hands are seldom found together. In fact, I rather think that the lads educated here are taught too much (if that be possible), and by being so, have their ideas raised above their stations; for many of them

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<sup>30</sup>Marcelo Martinez, Tomo V, Parte 1, p. 307.

<sup>31</sup> Martinez, *Diccionario de la administracion española*, Tomo VI, parte 2, p. 797.

<sup>32</sup>“Nautical School,” in *BR* vol. 45, pp. 240-243. It is said that the school was not well-attended by the time of the American occupation because of “little protection, lack of means and of opportunities, afforded upon the conclusion of course” (p. 243).



are, by a great deal, much more like gentlemen than a number of merchant skippers or mates in our British ship whose horny fists and tar-stained dress make pretensions to outward gentility.<sup>33</sup>

It would seem that the nautical school was doing well notwithstanding the kinds of remarks made of it by various writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. However, while the nautical school reportedly received a hefty budget of Pesos 80,470 for the year 1894-1895 together with seven other state-run professional schools, at least one writer targeted it for conversion into a “Escuela Superior de Navegacion y Comercio” during the year of Revolution of 1896, considered the first one in Asia to give birth to a republic.<sup>34</sup>

### **Postscript: In Lieu of a Conclusion**

It is commonplace to view the Filipino seaman as a natural product not only of his physical environment (namely, the surrounding seas) but also the of the tradition writ large on the necessity of the historical economic demands and the colonial enterprise that brought him far and away from his home and people. Focusing on the plight of the Filipino (read *indio*) seamen during the long centuries of Spanish rule, one finds testimonies to the argument that they had suffered a lot, in fact paid a high price, while under subjugation. The 250-year long galleon trade brought many lessons about crossing the Pacific and exposed the seamen to experiences previously unendured. It exposed Filipinos to a shared fate of environmental and community destruction—whether or not this helped construct identity and fired nationalist sentiment may be a proposition with an agreed resolution.

The other side of the story is that foreigners, Spanish mariners and other foreign visitors/chroniclers also became familiar with the character, skill, and predisposition of Filipinos when they travelled or worked on vessels staffed by them. It remains to be verified if Filipino seamen who succeeded to regain freedom on distant shores indeed established colonies they and their descendants could call their own.

Seamanship remains important to Filipinos. Formal education and training through the nautical schools and the advent of increasing demand by the metropolitan centers on the economies in the periphery have conspired to lure a great many to the possibilities of better life from sea jobs and to a life of adventure. The Filipino seaman’s job has become a source of pride and envy, of promise and despair, of freedom and captivity.

Nonetheless, seamanship is considered a valuable skill in the Philippines today, as it has been for the past 40 years or so with official encouragement. The kinds of views

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<sup>33</sup>Robert MacMicking, *Recollection of Manila and the Philippines during 1848, 1849 and 1850*, (FBG, 1967), p.165.

<sup>34</sup>Enrique Polo de Lara, *Estudios social y politico de las islas filipinas* (Sevilla: Imprenta de Andalucia Moderna, 1896), p.7, 114. (University of the Philippines Main Library- Filipiniana microfilm section).

generally expressed about seamen in the past have persisted, not because seamanship as a profession has remained as it was but perhaps because the sense of freedom enjoyed by seamen of the days of *caracoais* not as apparent as since the seas are now ruled by steel, technology, and capital that characterize modern economy and society.

Meanwhile, the training and sending of seamen abroad has become a much capital-mediated activity, and seamen's negotiated freedoms in this light are taking concrete forms that society is far too removed to realize, or even benefit from.