

Ferdinand Magellan's Voyage and its Legacy in the Philippines

Emma Jackson
History
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd.
Lynchburg, Virginia 24515 USA

Faculty Advisor: David Snead

Abstract

During the fifteenth century, the expanding Spanish empire changed the course of history for the lands that it conquered. The economic and territorial rivalry between the two Iberian powers, Spain and Portugal, led to Ferdinand Magellan's famed attempt to circumnavigate the globe in 1519. Magellan, the Portuguese explorer sailing for Spain, intended to find a western route to the lucrative Spice Islands, but instead he found himself in the Philippine Islands. Magellan and his crew developed relationships with the Filipino natives and won the first converts to Christianity in the country. In an effort to demonstrate Spanish military power to their new Filipino allies, the Spanish entered into a battle with the Chief Lapu-Lapu, in which Magellan lost his life. This paper seeks to explore the significant cultural and societal impact that Magellan's expedition left in the Philippines. Magellan's exploration of the Philippines paved the way for the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, introduced Catholicism and the revered Sto. Nino icon to the islands, and made a national hero of Lapu-Lapu, who still lives on in the memory of the people. This paper analyzes the primary source accounts of Magellan's voyage, government documents, newspaper articles, and secondary analyses of Filipino oral traditions in an attempt to understand the cultural impact of the first contact with Europeans in the Philippines. While a cursory fact in the west, Magellan's exploration of the Philippines and his death at the battle of Mactan changed the course of Philippine history and remain embedded in the national consciousness.

Keywords: Ferdinand Magellan, Philippines, Age of Exploration

1. Introduction

In the early sixteenth century, the growing Spanish empire desired access to trade in the Spice Islands, which proved a problem due to the Line of Demarcation decided in the Treaty of Tordesillas by Pope Alexander VI.¹ This line of demarcation roughly split the globe in half between the two Iberian powers, Spain and Portugal. To gain access to the Spice Islands, it was necessary for Spain to find a western route to avoid sailing through Portuguese territory. A Portuguese sailor working for Spain, Ferdinand Magellan, believed that a western route, going around South America, existed that would lead to the Spice Islands.

On their expedition, Magellan's crew discovered the Philippine Islands, among other territories. Unlike other peoples they encountered, the natives of what is now called the Philippines lived in a highly developed society that was connected to the eastern world through trade. Magellan entered into alliances with the natives and became entwined in tribal warfare. His expedition brought Christianity to the Philippines, which remains the dominant religion to this day. Magellan lost his life at the hands of Filipino natives while engaged in a battle against the now legendary figure, Chief Lapu-Lapu. Decades after Magellan's death, the Spanish would return to the Philippines to finish the process of colonizing the islands. Magellan's quest to find a western route to the Spice Islands helped shape the history and culture of the Philippine Islands and remains embedded in the national consciousness.

2. Body

In 1518, Magellan received support from King Charles of Spain, who agreed to sponsor his expedition.² The king agreed to finance the journey, promising percentages of the potential revenues to Magellan and his partners, as he expected the expedition to bring in large profits from the lucrative spice trade.³ Magellan's five ships set sail from the port of Seville on September 20, 1519.⁴ The voyage proved to be eventful and lacked nothing in setbacks and hardships. While anchored for the winter in St. Julian Bay in Patagonia, Magellan's crew mutinied, led by Juan de Cartegna, Gaspar Quesada, and Antonio de Coca.⁵ The expedition ran into further hardship when they lost the ship Santiago on an exploring expedition.⁶

After successfully finding the straight, named in Magellan's honor, and passing into the Pacific Ocean, the crew sailed for three months without finding any food, leaving many men malnourished and ill.⁷ The voyage chronicler, Pigafetta, notes, "daily we made runs fifty, sixty, or seventy leagues with the wind at the windward side or at the stern, and had not God and His blessed mother given us such good weather we would all have died of hunger in that exceedingly vast sea."⁸ After further misadventures with the natives on what they dubbed "Island of Thieves," Magellan's expedition landed on an island in what is now the Philippines on Sunday March 16, 1521.⁹ This European "discovery" of the Philippines impacted the courses of both Philippine and Spanish history.

When the Spanish made landfall in the Philippines, they encountered a developed society, one not at all isolated from the outside world. As early as the ninth century, the Philippines were engaging in trade with the Chinese by way of Arab traders.¹⁰ The Filipinos possessed a written language, likely inherited from Sanskrit or Arabic.¹¹ The Filipinos already had some knowledge of Europeans when the Spanish first made contact as the people of Cebu were aware of the Portuguese due to their trade connections. A merchant from Siam warned Rajah Humabon, the ruler of Cebu, that he should respect the white men, who he confused as Portuguese, because they conquered "Calicut, Malacca, and all India Major."¹² Jose Amiel Angeles argues that the Philippines treated the Spaniards as they would any other potential enemy or ally because they perceive them as being their equals.¹³ The Filipinos, coming from a developed society, "did not show any of the shock that the inhabitants of the Americas faced upon encountering Europeans."¹⁴

The Spaniards first came into contact with native Filipinos from Homonhon Island on March 18, 1521.¹⁵ Shortly after they met and built a positive relationship with Rajah Colambu of Butuan Island.¹⁶ According to Pigafetta, Magellan showed the Rajah's men the many spices that the Spanish carried with them in order to honor them.¹⁷ The men indicated that some of those spices grew in the place where the Spanish were going, which could have meant the Moluccas (the Spice Islands) or the Philippine Islands themselves.¹⁸ Magellan had motivation to find islands rich in resources such as spices because he was promised a heavy percentage of the revenues from two of the Islands he discovered, after King Charles picked six islands for himself.¹⁹ As the Moluccas were already claimed by Portugal, Magellan's hope for territorial gain lay in islands such as the Philippines that were previously unknown to Europeans. Magellan's desire to take two Islands for himself could explain why Magellan's expedition stayed in the Philippines for so long, when their goal was to find the Moluccas.²⁰

A lasting impact of Magellan's time in the Philippines is the spread of Catholicism in the islands. On Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521, Magellan's crew celebrated the first mass in the Philippines.²¹ The Kings Rajah Colambu and Rajah Siagu were present at the mass and showed reverence to the cross.²² Richard Field argues that the first mass was most likely heard onboard the ship on March 16 but was not recorded by Pigafetta, as he only recorded departures from regular displays of religion such as eating meat on Good Friday.²³ The expedition arrived at the Island of Cebu on Sunday April 7 and sent an ambassador and an interpreter, Magellan's slave Enrique, to meet Rajah Humabon, the king of Cebu.²⁴ John Leddy Phelan notes that, "It was not until his arrival in Cebu that the religious sentiments of Magellan's nature began to assert themselves with vehemence and ardor."²⁵ Magellan instructed the people of Cebu in the faith and they requested that the Spaniards leave them one or two men to teach them.²⁶

Magellan's missionary efforts came to fruition when Humabon, along with five-hundred of his men, were baptized into the Christian faith on Sunday, April 14.²⁷ When Humabon expressed interest in becoming a Christian, Magellan instructed him and his followers that they must burn their idols and worship the cross that the Spanish erected. Magellan baptized Rajah Humabon as Don Carlo in honor of the Spanish king.²⁸ Humabon's desire to become a Christian may have been driven by politics. Pigafetta records that Magellan promised to make Humabon the most important king in the region because of his desire to become a Christian.²⁹

On the other hand, it seems the Rajah's wife sought baptism freely and quite genuinely. When shown an icon of the child Jesus, the Queen, who was given the name Juana, "was seized with contrition, and weeping, asked for baptism."³⁰ Magellan gave this icon, the Santo Niño to the queen and it was attributed with a miraculous healing that led to the newly converted natives burning local idols.³¹ The Legazpi expedition, tasked by King Phillip II to explore the islands found by Magellan, rediscovered the Santo Niño icon and the Filipino people have revered the icon from 1565 until

the present.³² Christianity, which Magellan was the first to introduce to the Philippines, remains the dominant religion with many modern Filipinos proudly proclaiming “that they are the only Christian nation in all of Asia.”³³ The Santo Niño icon continues to play an important role in the devotional lives of faithful Filipino Catholics. Even into the Twenty-first century, the Santo Niño icon remains the de facto patron of Cebu Island.³⁴

Magellan’s time in the Philippines culminated in his death during the Battle of Mactan, a battle whose legacy remains controversial for modern Filipinos. On April 26, a chief named Zulu came to pay tribute to the Spanish but claimed he was prohibited because of Chief Lapu-Lapu of Mactan Island, who would not subject himself to the Spanish.³⁵ Magellan sent a message to Lapu-Lapu that if he would obey the Spanish king, recognize the Christian king Humabon as his sovereign and pay tribute to them, then they could have a friendly relationship, but if not the Spanish were ready with their weapons.³⁶ Lapu-Lapu refused, sending the reply, “that if we[the Spanish] had lances, they[Lapu-Lapu’s men] had lances of bamboo.”³⁷ One scholar theorizes, based on Filipino practices of using deception in warfare, that Chief Zula was in an alliance with Lapu-Lapu and went to lure Magellan into a trap; however, the more likely motivation is that Zula wanted Magellan to defeat Lapu-Lapu because they were rivals.³⁸ Regardless of it being a trap or not, Magellan went into battle against Lapu-Lapu to make a show of European power.

On April 27, 1521 Magellan and forty-nine of his men waded onto the shores of Mactan to face Lapu-Lapu, having refused an offer of aid from Rajah Humabon, in order to show the natives the power of the Spanish.³⁹ Phelan argues that by throwing himself into the work of spreading the gospel, Magellan “reached a state of spiritual intoxication” that clouded his judgment leading to “the unwise ultimatum to Lapu-Lapu to abandon paganism, the battle of Mactan, and a heroic but unnecessary death” which “followed each other in rapid sequence.”⁴⁰ Pigafetta records that the Spanish struggled to defend themselves against fifteen hundreds of Lapu-Lapu’s men who were armed with arrows and bamboo spears.⁴¹ In a retaliatory effort, Magellan sent men to burn houses in the village which served to further enrage the native warriors.⁴² Magellan, immortalized by Pigafetta as “so noble a captain” was tackled and killed by Lapu-Lapu’s men.⁴³ Magellan’s confidence in European weapons proved to be ill-founded when faced with Lapu-Lapu’s forces.

Much of the western world remembers Magellan as the first man to circumnavigate the globe, not as the man who was killed by natives in the Philippines. In contrast, the battle of Mactan remains embedded in the Philippine national consciousness. Jose Amiel Angeles declares that “every Filipino schoolchild knows the local chieftain, Lapu-Lapu, who defeated a small force of Europeans under the command of the famous Portuguese explorer and conquistador,” and “This battle [battle of Mactan] has entered into the canon of Philippine history and, indeed is etched in Philippine nationalist consciousness.”⁴⁴ The battle of Mactan remains an event that Filipinos celebrate. The Island of Mactan holds a yearly festival to celebrate the “Kadaugan sa Mactan” meaning “victory at Mactan,” which features a dramatic reenactment of the battle on the beaches of the island.⁴⁵ While an obscure fact in the west, the battle of Mactan holds an important place in the history of the Philippines.

In the battle of Mactan, Lapu-Lapu acted as a defender of his people against the foreign invaders. Angeles notes that “Lapu-Lapu is a national hero, and his victory over Magellan is extolled as a typical example of prehistoric Philippine martial prowess.”⁴⁶ Lapu-Lapu’s esteem in the Philippines is enough to warrant a national holiday. In 2017, the Philippine congress passed a bill that marks April 27 as Lapu-Lapu day.⁴⁷ In the explanatory note to the bill, Senator Richard J. Gordon celebrates Lapu-Lapu as the “first successful defender of the Philippine shores “and declares Lapu-Lapu as “the first national hero of the Philippines who resisted and repulsed the Spanish invaders and pushed them back to the seas, defending the land he calls home, now part of the Philippine territory.”⁴⁸ As a byproduct of Magellan’s voyage to the Philippines, a national hero and cultural figure was created.

Magellan’s voyage to the Philippines influenced the oral tradition in the islands. In 1952 Jovito Abellana recorded the “Aginid bayok Sa Atong Tawarik,” a dance-epic that was passed down to him by his grandfather.⁴⁹ The Aginid contains the oral tradition regarding Magellan’s voyage to the Philippines, giving it a uniquely Filipino perspective on the events. The poem focuses on the arrival of the Spanish to the Philippines. Going farther than Pigafetta’s account, the Aginid recounts Humabon’s lineage and Lapu-Lapu’s return to his home in Borneo.⁵⁰ In an article introducing the Aginid and another text that revolves around Magellan’s time in the Philippines, Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo claims the Aginid characterizes Humabon as “braver and more cunning than Lapu-Lapu.”⁵¹ Also differing from Pigafetta’s account, the poem records how Humabon and Lapu-Lapu restored their friendship in the aftermath of the battle of Mactan.⁵²

Natives of Cebu also memorialized the battle of Mactan in ritual dances. Philippine dance traditions express the local significance of both the battle of Mactan and the giving of the Sto. Nino icon. Sala-Boza explains,

The impact of the battle on the collective consciousness of the Cebuanos, in combination with the impact of the Sto. Nino on their lives, cannot be ignored as it was a vastly significant historical event which devotees felt themselves psychologically bound to ritually express as a mock battle in the traditional *sinulog* "ritual

dance" which incorporates religious overtones related to the Sto. Nino. Though the Battle of Mactan highlights Lapulapu's triumph over Magellan, the sinulog shows that the Spaniards eventually triumphed during the next expedition, in a spiritual and temporal conquest - the sword and the Sto. Nino.⁵³

The consequences of Magellan's voyage were both martial and religious. The Filipino people remember not only the battle of Mactan, but also the gift of the Santo Niño icon. Both elements of Magellan's time in the Philippines, the spiritual and temporal, shaped the local consciousness, as indeed the Spanish returned and completed both works started by Magellan.

3. Conclusion

While attempting to find the Spice Islands by circumnavigating the globe, Magellan instead found himself in the Philippines. Magellan and his crew built relationships with the natives and attempted to win them over to Christianity. Rajah Humabon and his wife were baptized, with hundreds of their subjects following suit. Magellan's missionary efforts were the first time Christianity was preached in the Philippines and Catholicism remains the most widely practiced religion in the Philippines. Filipino faithfuls still revere the Santo Niño Icon that Magellan presented to Queen Juana. The battle of Mactan, during which Magellan was defeated by Lapu-Lapu, remains embedded in the national consciousness. Filipinos regard Lapu-Lapu as their first national hero who defended their shores from foreign invaders. Generations passed down rich oral history and dance traditions that recount the story of the battle of Mactan and tales about the Santo Niño icon. Magellan's arrival in the Philippines paved the way for Spanish rule, introduced Christianity to the islands, and still lives on in the stories and cultural practices of the Filipino people.

4. Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. David Snead for his guidance during the writing of this paper and for encouraging me to present my research at NCUR 2020. I would also like to thank my high school history teacher, Mr. Greg Fronk, for fostering my love for world history and my interest in Ferdinand Magellan's story.

5. References

-
- 1 Richard J. Field, "Revisiting Magellan's Voyage to the Philippines," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 34, no. 4 (December 2006): 314.
 - 2 E. F. Benson, *Ferdinand Magellan* (Edinburg: T. and A Constable LTD., Printers, 1929), 75.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Ibid., 113.
 - 5 Stefan Zweig, *Conqueror of the Seas: the Story of Magellan*, Trans. by Edan and Cedar Paul (New York: The Viking Press, 1938):178-181.
 - 6 Antonio Pigafetta, *The first voyage around the world, 1519-1522: an account of Magellan's expedition*, Ed. by Theodore J. Cachey Jr (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2007):17
 - 7 Ibid., 24.
 - 8 Ibid., 25.
 - 9 Ibid., 30.
 - 10 Teodoro Agoncillo., *History of the Philippino People* (Quezon City: C&E Publishers, 1990): 24.
 - 11 Ibid., 56.
 - 12 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 43.
 - 13 Jose Amiel Angeles, "The Battle of Mactan and the Indigenous Discourse on War," *Philippine Studies* 55, no. 1(2007): 10.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 30-31.
 - 16 Ibid., 34-37.
 - 17 Ibid., 31.
 - 18 Field, "Revisiting Magellan's Voyage to the Philippines", 315.

-
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 316.
- 21 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 37.
- 22 Ibid., 37-36.
- 23 Field, "Revisiting Magellan's Voyage to the Philippines," 319.
- 24 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 41.
- 25 John Leddy Phelan, "Prebaptismal Instruction and the Administration of Baptism in the Philippines during the Sixteenth Century," in *Studies in Philippine Church History*, Ed. by Gerald H. Anderson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969): 23.
- 26 Ibid., 45.
- 27 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 48-50.
- 28 Ibid., 50.
- 29 Ibid., 49.
- 30 Ibid., 50.
- 31 Ibid., 52-53.
- 32 Astrid Sala-Boza, "The Sword and the Sto. Niño: Señor Sto. Niño de Cebu History Revisited," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 36, No. 4 (December 2008):269.
- 33 Onofre D. Corpuz, *The Philippines: Modern Nations in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965): 35.
- 34 Sala-Boza, "The Sword and the Sto. Niño," 271.
- 35 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 56.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Angeles, "The Battle of Mactan and the Indigenous Discourse on War," 50.
- 39 39Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 58.
- 40 40 Phelan, "Prebaptismal Instruction and the Administration of Baptism in the Philippines during the Sixteenth Century," 23.
- 41 Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World, 1519-1522*, 56-57.
- 42 Ibid., 57.
- 43 Ibid., 58.
- 44 Angeles, "The Battle of Mactan and the Indigenous Discourse on War," 1.
- 45 Marlen Limpag, "Kadaugan Features Battle of Mactan Reenactment," MyCebu.ph, <https://mycebu.ph/article/kadaugan-battle-of-mactan-reenactment>, 9.
- 46 Angeles, "The Battle of Mactan and the Indigenous Discourse on War," 1.
- 47 Congress of the Republic of the Philippines, Senate, An Act to Declare April 27 Lapu Lapu Day, 17th Cong., 1st sess., S. No. 108., 2018.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Romola Ouano-Savellon, "Aginid Bayok Sa Atong Tawarik": Archaic Cebuano and Historicity in a Folk Narrative," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 42, no. 3/4 (2014):189-190.
- 50 50 Ibid.,
- 51 Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo, "Introducing Two Cebuano Texts in Translation: "Aginid" and "Sugilakbit"," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 182.
- 52 Ibid., 183.
- 53 Sala-Boza, "The Sword and the Sto. Niño," 254.