

Being Enriched by Our Indigenous Wellspring

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Abstract

How do we meaningfully celebrate 500 years of Christian faith in the Philippines given our unique historical precedents and context symbolized by the “cross” and the “sword”? This paper places the discourse within the historical, cultural and political milieu of the often marginalized and displaced Filipino Indigenous Peoples. Notwithstanding the manifold and longstanding challenges the Church faces in her attempt to inculturated and be in dialogue with the indigenous peoples, this paper proposes that we drink from our own indigenous wellspring so that we may have a better appreciation and meaningful celebration of not just our Christian faith, but our indigenous identity as well.

When Christianity Reached Philippines

In his seminal book *World's Apart, An Explorer's Life*, Robin Hanbury-Tenison summarized the history of the Embera Choco Indians who live in forests that traverse between Panama and Colombia in Latin America:

(They)... lived as far as they could from the coast, far up the little hidden tributaries, where no settlers penetrated, where they could hunt and fish and grow a few crops without having put upon by black or white outsiders. They are a gentle people...who have survived by never fighting back but instead choosing to melt into the jungle, friendly to them, unfriendly to those who do not understand it. Quite possibly the first mainland Indians seen by visitors from the old world, for Columbus sighted the Darien isthmus on his last voyage. They have resisted change for nearly 500 years.

First came the Conquistadores, carrying the gold looted from Peru from one coast to the other through the swamps and over the mountains. Then the pirates who preyed on them, ambushing and fighting on land in the bays and open seas around the coast. Later black slaves from Africa were brought to dig for gold in the hills and work plantations of sugarcane and coffee. When they escaped and in time were freed to settle the river estuaries, the Chocos moved back into the interior.

Later still men came to dig the Panama Canal and great ships moved from ocean to ocean, cities grew and fishing fleets tapped the rich offshore shoals to feed them. Through the centuries, while slavers hunted their bodies, missionaries their souls. The Choco retreated a little further, protected by the inhospitable jungle and the malarial swamps.¹

This might as well be a summary of the history of our Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines, and particularly in Mindanao. Before the dawn of the conquest era, they followed the lifeways of their ancestors, living mostly in peaceful co-existence with the world around them. However, major changes took place in the 15th to the 18th centuries, when Spanish *conquistadores* and *frailes* – who were all colonizers on a mission on behalf of their monarchy – occupied their ancestral territories.

As Spain's occupation was taken over by the Americans, the changes became even more disruptive of the indigenous lifeworld specially in Mindanao. As plantations were opened up and homestead programs promoted, migrants from the north further displaced the aboriginal peoples. Hunting their bodies (by those who would exploit their land and labor) and souls (by missionaries who believed that God sent them to heathens to save them from damnation) became the pattern of power-relations between those who came from the outside and the local population of Moro and Lumad peoples.

To trace how this colonization process began, we need to return to the historical narratives of how our ancestors were coerced into subservience to foreign powers five hundred years ago. On the 16th of March 1521, the first Spanish expedition headed by Fernando Magallanes (aka Ferdinand Magellan) reached our shores.

With this entry in his journal, Pigafetta – who accompanied Magallanes – recorded what took place that fateful day:

Saturday, the 16th of March, 1521, we arrived at daybreak in sight of a high island, three hundred leagues distant from the before-mentioned Thieves' island. This isle is named Zamal. The next day the captain-general wished to land at another uninhabited island near the first, to be in greater security and to take

¹ Robin Hanbury-Tenison, *World's Apart, An Explorer's Life* (London: Arrow Books, 1984), 199-200.

water, also to repose there a few days. He set up there two tents on shore for the sick, and had a sow killed for them.

Monday, the 18th of March, after dinner, we saw a boat come towards us with nine men in it: upon which the captain-general ordered that no one should move or speak without his permission. When these people had come into this island towards us, immediately the principal one amongst them went towards the captain-general with demonstrations of being very joyous at our arrival. Five of the most showy of them remained with us, the others who remained with the boat went to call some men who were fishing, and afterwards all of them came together. The captain seeing that these people were reasonable, ordered food and drink to be given them, and he gave them some red caps, looking glasses, combs, bells, ivory, and other things. When these people saw the politeness of the captain, they presented some fish, and a vessel of palm wine.²

But Magellan's exploration ended tragically with his death in the hands of Lapu-Lapu, leading to the failure of his expedition. There were a few more attempts to colonize the islands after Magellan but did not succeed. It took four more decades before Miguel Lopez de Legazpi succeeded in establishing Spain's foothold in the islands. From 1565 until 1898 – a long period of more than three centuries – *las Islas Filipinas* was Spain's main colony in Asia.

Within this period, the Roman Catholic Church was not only established across the country – except in areas that could not be penetrated by the Spanish forces especially the hinterlands where indigenous people resided and Muslim Mindanao – but got entrenched.

²“Pigafetta's Account of Magellan's Voyage” in *The First Voyage Round the World by Magellan*, with Notes and Introduction by Lord Sanley of Alderly (London, The Hakyult Society: 1874), 163-164. See https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_First_Voyage_Round_the_World/Pigafetta%27s_Account_of_Magellan%27s_Voyage (accessed 22 October 2017).