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The Manila Galleon: Cradle of a Fusion Culture

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Transpacific Engagements

TRADE, TRANSLATION, AND
VISUAL CULTURE OF ENTANGLED EMPIRES
(1565–1898)

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The Manila Galleon: Cradle of a Fusion Culture

Fernando N. Zialcita

It was on board the galleon that we became the Philippines.
—Nick Joaquín¹

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This essay argues that the transpacific Manila Galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco (1565–1815) gave birth to present-day mainstream Philippine culture. I provide a brief overview of Philippine culture on the eve of Spanish conquest, the factors that facilitated intercultural fusions during the Spanish period, and specific examples of cultural intermixing in the Philippines.

Before Spain annexed the archipelago in 1565, two kinds of people lived in it. In the forests and isolated seashores, Negritos (variously called *Aeta*, *Ati*, *Agta*) practiced hunting and gathering, together with slash-and-burn cultivation.² In the lowlands lived peoples who spoke a mosaic of Austronesian languages, such as Tagalog, Bisaya, and Kapampangan, among others.³ Settling near waterways, they constructed their houses on stilts either on or beside waterways, where they fished, swam, or rode in their outrigger boats. Manila was located in the Tagalog-speaking region. The men wore loose shirts (*baro*) over short trousers. The women wore a *baro* over a tubular skirt—common all over Southeast Asia—held in place through folding and tucking (Fig. 1).⁴ Like other islanders, they invoked the spirits of their ancestors and of natural forces such as rocks, ancient trees, and crocodiles.⁵

The Austronesian-speaking lowlanders engaged in swidden agriculture because the rugged, densely forested landscape made this more practical. However, in areas like the lake region of Luzon where fresh water overflowed the surrounding shores,

farmers practiced the more laborious, wet rice cultivation.⁶ The basic political unit was the barangay, which consisted of thirty to 100 households of people interrelated as kin. It was governed by a lord-master (datu), often from a leading family.⁷ However, among Tagalogs, four to twelve barangays clustered to form a *bayan* (township).⁸ A datu, respected for his wealth and courage, stood out among the other chiefs as the paramount leader, but he may not have had direct control over followers of subordinate datos.⁹ These were chiefdoms, rather than true states.¹⁰

One important source of wealth was trade within and outside the archipelago. Highly prized were Chinese products, particularly silk and porcelain, which in Luzon were exchanged for forest products: wax, honey, civet, and wood for ballast. Manila transshipped products originating in other Southeast Asian ports. But existing trade was not so large that the Chinese would want to settle as migrants in large numbers, nor did Luzon produce goods with a large market in China.¹¹ Another obstacle was the absence of a central authority over the independent barangays and chiefdoms that at times warred with each other. The Chinese had been accustomed, for three millennia, to living in a state whose sovereign, the emperor, maintained order over hundreds of thousands of subjects through a bureaucracy and an army. A network of cities gave the Chinese state a physical framework. Contrasting sixteenth-century Manila with its Southeast Asian neighbors, the scholar Robert Reed argues it was not yet a true urban center, though in transition to it.¹² In 1570 there were forty Chinese men with their wives living in Manila, while the town's population itself, in 1571, was 2,000 men plus women and children.¹³

The Cradle

Various forces converged to create a new fusion culture: the foundation of a Spanish-controlled colonial state centered in Manila, a universal religion (Catholicism), and the in-migration of other cultural groups, such as Spaniards and Chinese. Contrary to colonial interpretations, the conquest of the archipelago was drawn out and violent.¹⁴ However, the resulting extension of the Spanish state constituted the infrastructure around which the future Philippine state would develop. Here originated the latter's boundaries (Batanes to Tawi-Tawi and Scarborough to Samar) and administrative framework (barrio/barangay within a municipality within a province within a nation). With the soldiers came the Catholic priests who preached that submission to Christ liberated souls from damnation. Because settlements were scattered and thinly populated, it was difficult to preach the Gospel and to collect tributes to sustain the state. In response, missionaries, themselves from a rural background, propagated the use of the efficient Chinese plow to facilitate the propagation of sedentary, wet rice cultivation.¹⁵ The result of this process of sedentarization and nucleation is that the core of Philippine municipalities is the church and plaza.¹⁶

To sustain the state, tributes, the compulsory sales of goods and labor services from the peasantry, and revenues from the Chinese were collected. To this was added the Mexican *situado*, derived from a tax on the galleon's merchandise in Acapulco, which was remitted to Manila.¹⁷ The Manila Galleon trade sustained the city as well. Well-minted Mexican silver became the currency in China and East Asia. By 1603 the Chinese around Manila numbered 20,000.¹⁸ Because they offered a wide variety of

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Fig. 1. A Tagalog couple, *Boxer Codex*, ca. 1590. The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.



Fig. 2. Carl Johann Karuth, *An Old Man Greeting a Spanish Mestiza*, 1858. Zóbel Collection, courtesy of Georgina and Alejandro Padilla y Zóbel.

basic services, Antonio de Morga, the Spanish governor-general of the Philippines, reported that “without them, the city cannot survive.”¹⁹ Pedro Murillo Velarde, S.J., in 1749 claimed that Manila resembled Jerusalem during the first Pentecost because of its diversity: Negroes from Africa and Asia, Chinese, Japanese, Borneans, Javanese, Malays, Bengalese, Armenians, Persians, Turks, and peoples from Europe, Spain, and the Americas. There was no other city like Manila elsewhere.²⁰ Fifty-four years later, Joaquín Martínez de Zúñiga, O.S.A., made a similar observation.²¹ The historian David Irving writes that Manila was “the world’s first global city.”²²

A social pyramid existed where the topmost tier was occupied by Europeans. Nonetheless, as in Mexico, where separation rather than segregation was in place, social boundaries were elastic.²³ Fernando the Catholic, king of Spain, decreed in 1503 not only that unions between Spaniards and his new indio subjects were legal but also that there should be intermarriage so that the latter should become *gente de razón* (people with reason).²⁴ Pope Paul III promulgated *Sublimis Deus* in 1537, stating that the indios were humans worthy of baptism.²⁵

Despite the social hierarchy, Catholics worshipped together in church. The popular icons were dark-skinned like the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was originally worshipped across the Pacific, in Mexico. Marital unions crossed racial lines. The French visitor Father Taillandier, S.J., reported in 1711 that many of Manila's residents were "*mestizos de europeos, indios y chinos*," scions born of mixed parentage: European, native, and Chinese (Fig. 2).²⁶ For services to the Crown during the British occupation from 1762 to 1764, Antonio Tuason, a Chinese mestizo (the son of a Chinese father and native mother), was knighted and given a coat of arms in 1783–1784.²⁷ Some prominent families today, such as the Rocha and Legarda families, descend from unions between peninsular migrants and Tuason's wealthy descendants. So-called "Spanish" families of the Philippines often have Chinese and native origins as well.

Mixing also took place in school. The Colegio de San Juan de Letran was founded by the Dominican priests in 1620 to educate orphans of Spanish soldiers (Fig. 3). Nonetheless, in 1629, Andres Malong and Cristoval Punzalan, both of native Filipino origin as denoted by their family names, were admitted.²⁸ Founded in 1611, likewise by Dominicans, the University of Santo Tomas admitted natives and Chinese by the eighteenth century. In 1781 the rector chancellor asked the government to exempt students from paying tributes and supplying *polo* (corvée labor) and personal services. These were the native-born from Tondo and Tambobong. He also stated that *mestizos de sangley*, descendants of Chinese men and native women, should be admitted into higher studies, for "we are all equal."²⁹

Mestizo Culture

In order to describe the Filipinos' mestizo culture, let us imagine a visit to a town somewhere in the Tagalog region during Christmas.³⁰ For nine days prior to Christmas, mass is said at 4:00 a.m. to enable farmers to pray before beginning work at dawn. The *Misas de gallo* (Rooster's Masses) culminate in the *Misa de aguinaldo*, literally the Gift Mass, celebrated at midnight of December 24 (Midnight Mass). To light up the darkness, paper lanterns (*parol* in Tagalog from the Spanish *farol*) hang from windows. Originally Chinese-style lanterns of bamboo and paper with tassel tails, they assumed star shapes to symbolize the Bethlehem star, while the tassels were transformed into paper tails. Overhead, hundreds of colored paper buntings (*banderitas*) flutter from strings strung across the street. Paper for celebrations is another Chinese custom that Filipinos welcomed and passed on to Mexicans.

Surrounding us are townspeople in their picturesque garments. From the eighteenth century to the 1940s, the everyday apparel of Filipino men consisted of loose cotton trousers and a loose cotton shirt without cuffs and without a collar to be worn over the trousers. The name is revealing—*camisa de chino* (Chinese shirt). Sometimes a scarf would be tied around the neck; it could also be worn over the head as protection. Mexicans call this paisley scarf *paliacate* to denote its origin in Paliacut, India. In the Philippines, it is simply called *panyo* from the Spanish for scarf. For special occasions, the men wore a shirt (*baro*) made from pineapple leaf fibers, *piña*, with collar and cuffs; its translucency may have been inspired by muslin, the Indian cloth, while the cutwork embroidery may have a European origin. The women, too, wore a translucent blouse (*baro*), likewise of *piña*, over which they

draped a shawl (*pañuelo*) for modesty's sake. But this too had cutwork.³¹ A more affordable alternative to the piña, both for men and women, was translucent *sinamay* woven from abaca fibers. The women wore a long skirt (*saya*), over which they wrapped an overskirt (*tapis*). Significantly, until the 1930s, when the blouse and the skirt were sewn into one ensemble (*terno*), the blouse and skirt were worn separately from each other, as in the rest of Southeast Asia. Baro in Malay/Indonesian is *badju*.

As we approach the church, we enter a plaza. In earlier times, four small chapels would have stood at each corner of the plaza, called in Spanish *capilla posa*; in the Philippines, as in Mexico, outdoor ceremonies formed an essential role in the liturgy. In pre-Christian Mexico, only the priests could enter the Indigenous temples. Under Christianity, Palm Sunday processions wound around the plaza stopping at each *capilla posa*, where children dressed as angels scattered flowers on the priest who represented Christ. In front of larger Filipino churches, stone representations of Chinese lions stand, as in China, to confound evil spirits. Christianized, the lions supposedly represent Christ, the Lion of Judah. Beginning in the eighteenth century, octagonal bell towers became popular, most likely as allusions to the *ba gua*, the octagon-shaped feng shui energy maps. When they stand separately from the church (for protection against earthquakes), they resemble eight-sided pagoda towers. Within the church, the ceilings are of wood, not stone for fear of earthquakes, and are painted with frescoes.

Our virtual host's house is a two-story edifice: stone below and wood above.³² On top is a hipped roof of tile (if built before the 1880 earthquake) or of galvanized iron (if constructed after that). The roof structure, as in Indigenous houses all over Southeast Asia, rests on sturdy wooden posts that merely sway during tremors. The windows are covered with wooden panels consisting of wooden strips laid out in a checkerboard pattern. Traditionally, shell panes called *capiz* (*Placuna placenta*) were inserted. Although they resemble the Chinese and Japanese custom of using translucent rice paper over checkerboard panels serving as windows and doors, the use of shells in window panes came from Goa (India) to Manila during the first half of the seventeenth century.³³ Eventually, their use spread to Canton.³⁴

The food at the holiday table features meat and noodle dishes. To flavor them, they are sautéed, as in China and Spain, using garlic and onions, and as in the Mediterranean, with a lavish use of tomatoes. The Southeast Asian marine environment provides them with ingredients for fish sauce (*patis*) and with shrimp. Rice cakes (*bibingka* in Tagalog and *binka* in Malay) festoon the table. They are flavored with sugar, shredded coconut, and Spanish-derived innovations—butter and cheese. But the latter is churned from carabao milk.

During this Christmas visit, we hear the Indigenous language of the region surrounding Manila, Tagalog, which, like other Philippine languages, belongs to the Austronesian family of languages. Many words in it are Spanish in origin, some are Chinese, and some are even Nahuatl from Mexico. In the twentieth century, English words appear. Father is addressed as *tatay*, mother as *nanay*, which are derived from the Nahuatl *tatatli* and *nanatli*.³⁵ Both "papa" and "mama," of Spanish origin, are also used. Parents address their children as *anak*, also used in Malay/Indonesian, but also as *hijo* and *hija* from the Spanish. Siblings address the eldest brother as *kuya*, the



eldest sister as *ate*, both from Hokkien: 哥仔 (*ko á*) and 阿姊 (*ah ji*) 阿兄 (*a hya*).³⁶ Siblings and cousins of parents are addressed with Spanish terms, *tio* and *tia*.

Conclusion

The Manila Galleon trade had unintended consequences. One of these was the formation of a new, fusion culture in Manila, the most distant extension of the Spanish Empire. Originally, it facilitated the consolidation of the state and of Manila as a city, thanks to the inflow of Mexican silver. But a common religion and a state policy of encouraging intermarriage, plus social mixing, resulted in a culture that combined influences from Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The result is present-day mainstream Filipino culture. Many foreigners and Filipinos ruefully complain that this culture is not typically “Asian,” forgetting that it originated in the Manila Galleon trade, the first transpacific network to link continents together with Manila as its hub.

Fig. 3. Carl Johann Karuth, *A Beata and an Intern of San Juan de Letran College*, 1858. Zóbel Collection, courtesy of Georgina and Alejandro Padilla y Zóbel.