

Mercene, Floro L. 2007. *Manila Men in the New World: Filipino Migration to Mexico and the Americas from the Sixteenth Century*. Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press.

Guilty by association?

It is not often that one encounters a volume that traces the historical roots of out-migration from the Philippines. The book by Mercene offers a rendering of a certain aspect of the history of the so-called Filipino “diaspora” that has not been touched upon so much even by historians or demographers. This has to do mainly with the native Filipino *indios* who arrived on the Spanish galleons and eventually settled in Mexico and different parts of the Americas from the late 16th to the early 19th centuries. The time frame is generally considered to be period of the galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. Mercene attempts not so much a history of the Manila-Acapulco trade but a history of the migration of “Manila Men” or “Chinos” as they were commonly referred to in those days since the term “Filipino” had a more restricted application at the time.

Aside from the lively exchange in goods between Manila and Acapulco, the galleon trade also induced the transfer of “Manila Men” to the Americas.

Many of these *indios* from the Philippines who arrived in the “New World” served as crew on the galleons. They eventually abandoned ship and settled in different parts of “New Spain” (as Mexico was then called) and the Americas, including Acapulco, California, and Louisiana.

Mercene makes several explorations into the difficulties and character of these “Manila Men” despite the limited historical documentation of their presence in the New World. He mentions the establishment of a Filipino colony in Saint Malo in New Orleans in the 1890s. He describes what life must have been like for Filipinos during the California “Gold Rush” of the 1840s. He records the names and

personal backgrounds of some of the Filipinos known to have enlisted in the US Navy and Cavalry during the US Civil War of the 1860s. He cites many of these sources and presents them in different parts of the volume that would make a worthwhile read for those interested in early "Filipino" history in the US and Mexico (or in early US and Mexican history itself). To some extent, however, this also became the weakness of the volume.

Mercene seems to conflate his collected diaspora narratives with his largely historical narratives. Several chapters actually speak more to the history of the colonization of the Americas than what would have been the intended focus of the volume – the Filipino diaspora to the Americas. Hardly any mention is made of these "Manila Men" in at least three chapters out of a total of fourteen. Where were the Manila Men? In some of the other chapters, the presence and participation of Filipinos is only implied. Moreover, it would also seem that the "diaspora" was not at all a massive exodus: "In Lima, Peru, about four Filipino sailors joined the expedition" (59); "Filipino sailors had lived in this peninsula (Baja California) since the eighteenth century" (86); "Quite a few Filipinos joined the exodus as evidence pointed to the fact that there were some Filipinos in the party of Portola and Serra that founded the first settlement of San Diego" (70); "Father Nicolas Tamara of the local mission and his Indian neophytes provided the starving crew – many of them Filipinos – with fresh water, fresh meat, wine and brandy, vegetables, eggs, fowls, and best of all, fresh fruit, the prickly pear, a sure cure for scurvy" (88).

In the last chapter, Mercene evokes the very close ties between Mexico and the Philippines and of how many things Mexican have actually originated from the Philippines or been influenced by the "Manila Men." This only underscores the extensive impact of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade.

Much of what Mercene brings up about these "Manila Men" is from personal anecdotes of elderly Mexicans as they recall their

forefathers invoking their arrival from some place or another in the Philippines. The difficulty of tracing these ancestral origins is underscored by the fact that the “Manila Men” were not documented migrants as their contemporary counterparts are. Can these early emigrants from the Philippine islands be considered the ancestors of modern-day migrants? If one is to examine their hardships overseas, one can say that they both have a common historical affinity.

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