Cracks in the Parchment Curtain
and Other Essays in Philippine History
(Emended Edition, with Index)

by

William Henry Scott

Foreword: Renato Constantino

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In view of the historic events which have just been surveyed, it hardly seems necessary to invoke religious bigotry or fanatical hatred to account for the Moro Wars. True, Spanish military efficiency was no doubt enhanced by a piety that eased kings' consciences and a prejudice which released conquistadores' adrenalin. No doubt, too, their victims' religion was as much a target as their trade: after all, any community wealthy and cohesive enough to build a mosque was probably strong and determined enough to defend both its religion and its trade. Yet it is hard to doubt that the same wars would have been fought under the same circumstances and with the same motives even if those Muslim targets had been Portuguese or Chinese—or Hottentot.

Crusades the Moro Wars may well have been, and true crusading zeal may have fired them. But if so, they were crusades for commerce, not for Christ.

Filipino-Spanish Face-to-Face Contacts 1543-1545

The first attempt by any European power to occupy the Philippine Archipelago was an unqualified failure: it not only failed to occupy, but of the 370 men who tried, only 146 survived until the final evacuation two years later. The rest were either dead or enslaved. This was the Ruy Gómez de Villalobos expedition of 1543-1545 sent out by the Viceroy of Mexico under orders from Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to establish a colony near the Portuguese-occupied Spice Islands of the Moluccas. From the standpoint of European expansion, it accomplished nothing. From the standpoint of the Filipino people, it accomplished almost nothing—it simply stamped them for four centuries with the name of a 14-year-old Iberian prince. It is therefore not surprising that the whole debacle receives little attention in standard histories of either Spain or the Philippines.

Yet for purposes of understanding the unhispanized Filipino people on the eve of foreign conquest, the eye-witness accounts left by the Villalobos expedition are worthy of scrutiny. Members of the expedition spent 16 months wandering around the archipelago looking for food and waiting for winds that would take them back to Mexico. One ship alone, the little San Juan de Letrán with a skeleton crew of only twenty men, logged more than 5,000 kilometers in Philippine waters, including those of the San Bernardino Strait between Luzon and Samar and the San Juanico Strait between Samar and Leyte, and completely circumnavigated the Island of Mindanao. The first-hand reports of these ill-starred conquistadores are rich in the details they observed in face-to-face contact with dozens of Filipino chiefs, hosts, and antagonists—the size and shape of their ships, the amount of gold they wore on their persons, or the potency of their poisoned arrows. More importantly, the details of Philippine foreign contacts provide a glimpse of the political and economic scene in the archipelago in a day when Luzon was still the eastern terminus of a Malaccan trade route, Cebu and Butuan were international entrepots, and Sarangani Island was the last landfall for
southbound traffic headed for the Moluccas.

It was on Sarangani Island that the first face-to-face contact was made on April 1, 1543. There were only four settlements on the island at the time, and adults in any one of them might easily have remembered earlier European contacts. In 1521, for example, a Spanish ship had kidnapped two of their pilots, and in 1526 they themselves had sold three Spaniards to Shariff Kar-bung-un of Maguindanao—one of them a debt slave, the other two outright purchases. They therefore responded unambiguously when two Spanish boats now approached their shores, and drove them off with arrows, wounding five or six of their occupants. They had no firearms of their own but they knew what to expect, so they augmented the palisade of tree trunks which was their first line of defense with a barricade of boats pulled up on the beach and filled with sand. When the attack came, they retired to a fortified settlement in the hills naturally protected by cliffs, evacuated their women and children, and put up a spirited resistance before withdrawing in the face of Spanish firepower, carrying as much gold and porcelain as they could and burying the rest. Then while the invaders were looting and digging up the village, they all escaped to the Mindanao mainland.

The next contact was made at the mouth of the Pulangi River where the reputation of a Maguindanao trading center had attracted the hungry Spaniards. The local ruler, Shariff Makaalang Saripada, no doubt had his own memories of earlier contacts. In 1521, Spaniards had kidnapped an uncle of his who escaped by jumping overboard off Sangi Island and swimming ashore with his small son on his back, though the child lost his hold and was drowned. When the Spanish ship now put a boat in the water to sound the bar at the mouth of the river, they quickly surrounded it and attacked, killing one Spaniard and wounding the others. As the survivors sailed back to Sarangani, hungrier than ever, they established a third contact. Sighting ripened rice fields along the coast, they landed and started to harvest, but paid for the crop in Spanish blood when the owners of the fields killed several of them before taking to the hills. Their next contact was of a very different kind—two boats from Ternate with Portuguese officers aboard, who put some Moluccans ashore to encourage their Mindanao trading partners not to sell food to the Spaniards and to offer military assistance if needed. Then they delivered a diplomatic note to Villalobos demanding that he depart and stop harassing what the note referred to as vassals of the Portuguese King.

Just then a Spanish vessel showed up which had been lost during a storm at sea before the fleet even reached Mindanao.

This was a galliot, a small vessel with oars as well as sails; it had been driven ashore on Limasawa Island where it stayed for two months before heading south with a load of rice and other foodstuffs to look for the Commander. Villalobos sent it right back to the Visayas for revictualing, accompanied by the San Juan which was to stock up for a Pacific crossing and then head for Mexico. This double goal was accomplished in Leyte and Samar—which the Spaniards called the Filipinos—and the San Juan sailed off into the Philippine Sea on August 26, 1543. The galliot didn’t get back to Sarangani with supplies until October, and Villalobos then decided to move north to the Visayas himself. Unfortunately, a strong current flows south along the east coast of Mindanao at about the speed of a Spanish galleon, so, with no winds at that season to overcome it, he had to seek shelter only halfway up the coast. Then, more sensibly, he made use of three Philippine barangays whose outriggers and shallow draft fitted them better to hug the reef-ringed shore. They were sent out with the galliot, one after the other, in early November—two with about thirty men in each, and a smaller faster one called a cataluza with only sixteen aboard.

The galliot was the first to run into trouble. Somewhere in the Visayas its crew was ambushed while trying to buy food, and eleven killed: the survivors were soon so weak from hunger they could neither row nor sail, and so drifted helplessly back down to the Mindanao anchorage, empty. Villalobos then desperately sent them to “Resurrection Bay”—now Mayo, Davao Oriental—for repairs, and when they did not return, went to look for them. At Resurrection Bay he found no more sign of them than a letter at the foot of a tree saying they had set sail for the Moluccas because of the prevailing winds and current. So, with nothing more to look forward to than starvation in Mindanao, Villalobos gave up and followed, reaching Tidore in April 1544.

The little cataluza, meanwhile, had fared even worse. It ran aground near the mouth of the Abuyog River on eastern Leyte, and was seized and destroyed by Filipinos who took all its occupants captive. (Three of them survived to serve their Filipino masters eighteen or twenty years, and a Mexican cabin boy was adopted, married, and tattooed into Visayan society and then poisoned by a jealous Cebuana lady 25 years later.) The other two barangays reached Abuyog a little later, one of them after losing fourteen men on the northeast coast of Mindanao. After waiting a month and suffering two more deaths, they decided to shift to Samar. There, at the mouth of the Basey River, one of the boats was wrecked in the middle of the night with a loss
of ten lives, so the other one headed back to Resurrection Bay with an Augustinian friar in command, leaving 21 of their comrades divided up as guests—or hostages—in the homes of local chiefs. At the foot of the tree in Resurrection Bay, they found a note from Villalobos, so, leaving a note of their own, they set out to follow him. But off the Talwoods Islands they were caught in a typhoon and blown 1,000 kilometers to the north; forty days later they managed to make Basey more dead than alive. There they learned that the Mexico-bound San Juan had returned and ransomed off their comrades, taken them on board, and sailed off. The last barangay was now too badly damaged to be seaworthy, so they beached it under one of the houses, move in with Filipino hosts, and waited to be rescued.

The San Juan had not made it to Mexico. Running into a storm in the North Pacific, it had been blown back to the Marianas, and then returned to the Filipinas where it reached the north coast of Samar on October 31, 1543—at the very time, that is, when Villalobos was abandoning Sarangani and dispatching all those little boats. They anchored in a well-protected harbor in the thickly populated bay at the mouth of the Catubig River, and were so well-received by the inhabitants that they were even shown the local gold mines. They were able to buy all the rice and pigs they wanted in exchange for Chinese porcelain they had looted in Sarangani, and then they sailed westward from village to village because the strong northeasters winds prevented them from rounding the eastern headland. In one town they were cordially received by a Chief Kobos who made them presents and gave them a calatuc because their own ship's boat had been stolen. (They got it back by holding Kobos hostage—"thus repaying him for his good will," as the Spanish account says—and then, learning that another chief by the name of Turris had been party to the theft, went ashore, took his town, and killed him.) Then, on January 3, 1544, in the treacherous currents off the northwestern corner of Samar, they did just what dozens of Spanish vessels were to do for the next three centuries—ran aground in San Bernardino Strait. The San Juan hung up on the rocks for two days before they got her afloat by jettisoning cargo, and was damaged in the process.

Then, proceeding down the western coast of Samar, they learned about the San Juanico passage from a chief called Sir Kudubay, but were attacked by three boats while taking soundings in the calatuc. After fighting their way free, they learned about the two boatloads of Spaniards on the Leyte coast at Abuyog. But, mindful of their Commander's plight when they had left him six months before, they headed for Sarangani instead.

There, of course, they did not find him, and so concluded that he must be among those Spaniards back in Abuyog. They therefore cut trees to replace their damaged mainmast and bowsprit, losing a boatswain to Sarangani vengeance in the process, and then set sail. Since the northeasterlies were still blowing, they headed west along the south coast of Mindanao—carefully avoiding the mouth of the Pulangi River, of course—and passed between Zamboanga and Basulan into the normal trade route from Borneo and Sulu to the southern Visayas. They had a good trip, bought whatever they needed along the coast, put in at Limasawa, and then rescued their comrades in Basey. From them they learned that Villalobos had transferred to the coast of Mindanao the preceding November, so they sailed back to Resurrection Bay and picked up their mail, so to speak—a letter from Villalobos announcing his departure for the Moluccas, and another from the Augustinian friar dated only nine days before, stating that he was following the Commander in the last surviving barangay. Since the San Juan had no way of knowing that the friar and his barangay had meanwhile been blown back to Samar, they left their own letter, proceeded south, and reached Tidore two months later.

Before the San Juan arrived, however, Villalobos had sent a rescue mission in two ships supplied by the Sultan of Golo (northern Halmahera). The performance of this little taskforce provides a nice testimony to the advantages of making use of native boats, native crews, and native skills: it successfully accomplished its mission without losing a life, firing a shot, or missing a meal. Leaving Tidore just as the southwest monsoon was starting to blow at the end of May, they hired two blacksmiths and an interpreter in Minahasi, Suwalesi, and another on Balut Island opposite Sarangani who proved to be as full of information about Filipino people, politics, and natural resources as a modern tour guide. From Balut they sailed right up the Mindanao coast which no Spanish ship had been able to navigate—stopping off at the tree in Resurrection Bay en route, of course—called at Limasawa, and then ransomed off five Spaniards in Leyte and thirteen in Samar, repaired the damaged barangay with the help of the Suwalesi blacksmiths, and bought back a Spanish car non which divers from Basey had recovered from the sunken barangay. Their only failure was their inability to meet the price demanded for three Spanish captives on the west coast of Samar, who were thus left behind to spend the rest of their lives serving their Filipino masters as warriors. (The last of them, Juan Torres, disappeared with thirty of his Filipino townmates on a raid in 1562.) With the arrival of the three Giloin
and Philippine vessels in Tidore in October 1544, the first Spanish attempt to establish a colony in the Philippines came to its ignominious end. Its commander himself died six months later of a tropical fever—or, as the Portuguese said, a broken heart.

All these unhappy adventures gave the Spaniards plenty of time to observe Filipinos and Filipino behavior: there was hardly a day from early 1543 to late 1544 when they did not have some sort of face-to-face contact. They fought, traded, and made blood compacts with Filipinos; they slept in their houses, ate their food, and sailed in their boats; they killed and captured them and were killed and captured by them; and some of them served them as slaves for decades afterwards. Their recorded observations are therefore interesting enough to be quoted at length. Italian pilot Giovanni Gaetano of the San Juan, first Spanish ship to circumnavigate Mindanao, for example, provides our first general description of that island:

This island is very large: after circumnavigating it we found that it was 2,200 kilometers around, and extends mainly east and west; its highest latitude will be in 11° 30', the lowest in 5° or 6°. It is inhabited by many and varied people: there are Moros, gentles, and different kings and lords who wear certain clothes without sleeves, short, like Marlottas, which they call patolas, and the rich have them of silk like taffeta, and the other people of cotton and in different styles. They have many offensive arms of iron and steel, such as scimitars, daggers, and spears; and defensive arms they make of animal hide, which is tougher and stronger than that of Anta. In a certain part of the island which the Moros rule over, there is small artillery. There are pigs, deer, and buffalos in that island, and other animals of the chase, and Castilian chickens, and rice and palms and coconuts. There is no corn in it, but they use rice for bread, and a bark which they call sago, from which oil is extracted as from palms and they make bread of it in that land. There is very special gold, which is dug out of mines in the same land; they value it, and use it for exchange, and wear chains and jewelry made of it. On the headland of this island on the west, there is much cinnamon, and the Portuguese touch there when they go to the Moluccas.¹

Garcia Descalante Alvarado, who commanded the final rescue mission in the Gilolo ships, recorded some information he got from Leyte Chieftain si Kating—a though he thought that was the name of his barrio rather than his own name, a common error in 16th-century Spanish accounts.

Having picked up the Spaniards, I sailed along the coast of Abuoy Island [Leyte], and the indios [i.e., Moluccans] in the boats captured an old Filipino along the coast, from the town of Sicatinga, and because he had made peace with the Chief, I ransom him from those who had taken him, and took him back to his town. Desiring to get information from him about various things of the land, I took him to the Reverend Fray Gerónimo Santisteban, with a Spaniard who knew that language, and when I asked him if there was any large town on the Island of Abuoy, he said, yes, that on the other side of the island on the northeast was a large town called Sugut [perhaps Tacloban or Carigara?], and that junks go there every year belonging to the Chinese who normally stay there and have a house there with their merchandise. What they buy there, he said, was gold and some slaves; he also told me that in the Island of Zubu [Cebu] there were living Spaniards from Magellan’s time, and that Chinese are accustomed to come there to buy gold and certain jewelry because that island has it. And near Zubu, he said, there was another large island which is called Bulane [Butuan], which is rich in gold, and junks from many places come to it and trade with them. On the north side of Tandaya [Samar], he said, is an island which is called Albay, and there are gold mines in it. And on the same north side of Tandaya, he said, there is another island, ten days’ journey from Tandaya in their ships, which is called Amuco. The people there are white and bearded, and in some parts of it they eat human flesh. They have large ships, and some artillery; they trade with other islands and with China, and have a lot of gold and a very great quantity of silver. From the Philippines to that island, he said, runs a chain of islands.²

Since the Spaniards were in the Philippines for purposes of trade, they naturally took note of any signs of trade which al-

ready existed. At Sarangani, for example, "a lot of gold was
found and some bells, different from ours, which these people
prize for their festivities; and much perfume was found—musk,
ambergris, civet, benzoin, storax, and others in both cakes and
oils, which they buy from Chinese who come to Mindanao and
the Filipinas [i.e., Leyte and Samar]." They also naturally took
note of anybody else, Filipino or non-Filipino, who was there for
the same purpose. Even Portuguese Governor Antonio Galvano
of Ternate was able to publish their observations of mercantile
shipping in waters west of Samar:

There are also ships with ears, 20 meters long and four
and a half meters wide, with boards 8 cm. thick, and they
said that they sailed in them to China; that if they wished
to go there, they would give them pilots for the trip, and that
it would be no more than five or six days' travel. Boats
and calcuzes also came to them, well wrought and nicely
adorned, and the lords were seated above and down below
some negroes with kinky hair, according to their stations.
On being asked where they got them, they replied from some
islands near Cebu and Mindanao where there are many, at which
the Spaniards were greatly surprised because there are no
black people for more than 1,800 kilometers from there.¹

The dynamics of power seem quite clear from the Spanish
experience. Wherever they went ashore in small numbers from
small boats with no Filipino guide or companions, they were
attacked, killed, captured, or held for ransom. But when they
showed up in a man-o-war, they were only attacked when the
attackers' settlements were beyond range of the ship's guns—as
in the case of Sarangani and Maguindanao. (Even these rice
fields they raided along the Mindanao coast were protected by
coral reefs: when Villalobos later sent a warship with 70 soldiers
against their owners, it ran aground five kilometers away and
was lost with all arms and supplies.) They were also attacked
while taking soundings in strategic waters—at the mouth of the
Pulangi River, for instance, or the western entrance to the San
Juanico Strait. It is to be noted further that they were not attac\ked
when they were traveling in Moluccan boats manned by
Moluccan warriors: quite the opposite, on their way back to
Tidore, they were approached by Sarangani chiefs who wanted
to sue for peace.

This Moluccan connection is not surprising: it represents
one of the Filipinos' major trade connections outside the archi-
pelago. Only five years before the Villalobos expedition, the
Portuguese had baptized five or six Mindanao chieftains and
taken their sons off to Ternate where they were taught to read
and write in the Governor's house. The same governor also
introduced adult Filipinas to produce Portuguese mestizos in the
fort itself, as well as two Mindanao species of palm trees and a
particular kind of melon. The western tip of Mindanao was one
of the landfalls on the Malacca-Borneo-Sulu-Moluccas route: ships
veered right at Sarangani and proceeded to Halmahera via the
Talaud and Sangi Islands. That is why Descalante's Talaud
interpreter was so knowledgeable about the area—e.g., "Along
the coast of Celebes [i.e., Mindanao], he showed me the towns,
and told me that it was a very thickly populated island in the
interior, but that the coast was depopulated because of their
wars."² It is tempting to think that this Moluccan connection
reflected a common faith—that is, Islam—but since the Muslim
Sultan of Ternate was allied with the Portuguese in a 25-year-
old war with the Muslim Sultan of Tidore who was allied with
the Spaniards, a common love of profit in the spice trade would
seem a more likely explanation.

The China connection is also clear in the accounts. Gold is
reported to be their main object, a mineral mentioned repeatedly
in all five accounts from the Villalobos expedition, as well as in
every other Spanish account between 1521 and 1571. Indeed, the
reader gets the impression the Spaniards never saw a Filipino
who was not wearing gold on his person—whether earrings, neck-
laces, bracelets, or dental inlays. The Chinese are also reported
as being in the market for slaves; they apparently bought five
of Magellan's men who survived the Cebu Massacre of April 1,
1521. (It is necessary to say "apparently" inasmuch as Visayans
later in the century were referring to Moro ships from Luzon
and Borneo as "Chinese" because they dealt in Chinese goods—
such as two that were anchored in Butuan in Descalante's time
buying gold and slaves.) The porcelain, silk stuffs, and metal
gongs which appear as their major merchandise are to be ex-
pected, but the great amount of perfumes and unguals found in
Sarangani is noteworthy since these are non-Chinese products of
the tropics. The same is to be said of the patac cloth re-
ported in Mindanao: this is evidently a non-Chinese product of
Indian origin, and was reported from the Malay Peninsula as

¹Ibid., p. 132.
²Antonio Galvano, Tratado dos Descobrimientos antigos e modernos
(1562; 3rd ed. Oporto 1731), pp. 277-278.
long ago as a Chinese trade report of 1349. What is significant about these products is that they are evidences of a much more cosmopolitan commerce than mere trade runs between the coast of China and the Philippines.

But it is a third connection, mentioned for the first time in the Villalobos accounts, which is most interesting—Si Ratiniga's description of "Amuoco" with its bearded white men, artillery and large ships, direct trade with China, and abundance of gold and silver. This is a pretty obvious reference to Malacca which is, in fact, reached from the Philippines by following a "chain of islands"—that is, Luzon, Mindoro, Caramanian, Palawan, and Borneo. But it is not north of Samar ten days beyond Albay. What is evidently being reported here is that Philippine connections with Malacca are maintained through Moro traders in Luzon, but that people on the southeastern coast of Leyte are too far away to realize the difference. At the other end of this trade route, the Portuguese in Malacca made a similar error in reverse: they thought the Luzones were people who lived in Borneo. So they reported the fiercest warriors in the allied forces Sultan Mahmud threw against Malacca from Bintang in 1525 as being Luzones from Borneo, and so, too, the 1541 Mercator globe of the world shows "Luzon" as a tiny island off the northeast coast of Borneo. Not until 1645, when Villalobos was languishing in the Portuguese Moluccas, did they learn the real position of Luzon, when Peter Fidalgo sailed 1,500 kilometers up the western littoral of the archipelago and noted that the natives were happy to exchange gold for silver at the rate of two to one. This Filipino sensitivity to the value of silver coinage is one more testimony to the archipelago's participation in an international commerce which was already literally globe-circling in the 16th century.

It was precisely the desire to enjoy part of the proceeds of this globe-circling international commerce which motivated the Spaniards to come back to the Philippines twenty years later. By that time, the desire was deep enough to have dimmed the memory of all those Spaniards who had starved to death on Sarrangani Island or died, raving mad and in agony, after eating poisonous crabs and lizards. Now even a survivor like Juan Pablo Carrión was hankering for another try. Perhaps it was fond recollections of the hospitality of Filipino chieftains like Iberein of Samar, who carried a thousand pesos of gold on his person and whose oarsmen were collared in gold, which moved Carrión to recommend still another expedition in the following glowing terms:

The fleet can stop in the Philippine Islands, which are islands of friends with whom trade and treaties have already been established, and there are still eight Spaniards there from the fleet in which I sailed. They are islands very well supplied with all manner of foodstuffs, and islands of great commerce, very rich and large. They are in the best location in the whole archipelago; their language and ports are known, and even the names of the chiefs who rule in them, with whom treaties have been made and proven trustworthy. They are a people of great good sense and culture.