

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## Early French Contacts With The Philippines

H. de la Costa

*Philippine Studies* vol. 11, no. 3 (1963): 401—418

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

# Early French Contacts with the Philippines

---

H. DE LA COSTA

SOME of the documents in the series "Extreme Orient" of the Colonial Papers in the Archives Nationales, Paris, refer to the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> They cover the period 1685-1797 and consist chiefly of reports of agents of the Compagnie de Chine and the Compagnie des Indes,<sup>2</sup> and of officers of French naval units stationed in Eastern waters. They are of great importance taken by themselves, but may serve to round out our knowledge of the part played by the Philippines in the general pattern of trade relations and power politics in the Far East in the eighteenth century.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is an excellent printed catalogue by Férreol de Ferry. *La série d'Extrême-Orient du fonds des Archives coloniales conservé aux Archives nationales*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> A first Compagnie de Chine was organized in 1660. When it was absorbed by the Compagnie des Indes in 1664, it ceded its rights to the China trade to Jourdan, de la Coulange and Company, which began operation at Canton in 1697-1698 and may therefore be considered the second Compagnie de Chine. In 1713 a third Compagnie de Chine was chartered, but lost its identity in the merger effected in 1718 of all French trading companies in a single Compagnie des Indes. In 1776, after the suspension of the charter of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales, a French consulate was established at Canton. It is interesting to note that the Canton consulate was for a time (1840-1846) subordinate to that at Manila, whose official title was "Consulat général de France dans l'Indochine."

On 12 December 1685 Veret, an agent of the French China Company, wrote home from Siam as follows:<sup>3</sup>

Trade with the Philippines. They have need of French haberdashery of all sorts. Hats. Cloth of gold and silver. Raw and finished silk. Carpets of all colors. All kinds of colored taffeta. Cloths of Surat and the Coast. Tonkin textiles. Benzoin. Ivory. Tin. Pepper. Rice. Musk.

What may be obtained from the country: Pesos. Sugar. The seashells which have currency in Siam as small change.

It is possible to do more than four or five hundred thousand *écus*<sup>4</sup> worth of business in this country, and this would provide the cash needed to trade in other ports in these regions, thus making it unnecessary to export money from France.

This brief report is of interest in several respects. First, it presages the principal role which Manila would play in the so-called "country trade" in Asia throughout the eighteenth century, namely, as a source of the silver currency needed to make purchases at other Far Eastern ports, especially Canton. It is well known that the China goods which the Manila merchants shipped yearly to Acapulco were paid for in Mexican silver. If English and French merchants trading to China could obtain some of this silver, it would exempt them from bringing bullion from their respective countries, where the precious metals were in short supply.

Secondly, it is interesting that Veret should mention sugar in addition to silver pesos as a possible Philippine export. It has generally been thought that the Philippines did not export sugar until the late eighteenth century; but Veret here corroborates a piece of evidence which the present writer has come across elsewhere. Certain instructions given by the rectors of the College of San José of Manila to the Jesuit lay-brothers who managed the college estates, dating from the seventeenth century, have been preserved, and it seems clear from these instructions that the estates were producing sugar not only for domestic consumption but for the market. It may be inferred that other agricultural estates (in which the en-

<sup>3</sup> Archives Nationales, Paris (ANP), *Fonds coloniaux* C<sup>1</sup> 22, fols. 159-159v.

dowments of colleges, hospitals and religious houses in Manila principally consisted) were doing the same.

It is curious, however, that Veret should report the Philippines, a rice-producing country, as needing to import rice. Either he was misinformed, or there was a temporary shortage at the time he wrote his report. The latter is not unlikely, as roads were practically non-existent in the Philippines at the time, and so a failure of the local crop—from an unseasonable typhoon, drought, or locusts—could very well create a shortage in Manila.

But throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Philippines normally exported rice, and exported it precisely to Canton. In 1788, for instance, the shortage of rice occasioned by a revolt in Formosa created a large demand at Canton for Philippine rice, and led the Chinese authorities to exempt ships of Philippine registry from the usual customs duties. Of a French vessel from Pondicherry which had run into difficulties with the Chinese customs the Company agent said that if it had brought rice instead of cotton cloth it would have been saved all that trouble.<sup>5</sup> The demand at Canton for rice was not, however, constant but cyclic; and by 1838 the French consul at Manila had worked out the period of the cycle and the reason for it—or thought he had.<sup>6</sup>

At any rate, the prospects of trade at Manila looked very good indeed to Veret in 1685; but there was one big difficulty. Writing to the directors of the Company the following year, he pointed out that Manila was closed to all foreign ships “except they be Portuguese, Moorish or gentile.”<sup>7</sup> This was indeed the invariable Spanish policy, tenaciously held until the very dissolution of the empire in the early nineteenth century. However, just as England and its North-American co-

<sup>4</sup> Roughly a quarter of a million pesos.

<sup>5</sup> Haumont du Tertre, “Journal” (1787-1788), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 16, 143v.

<sup>6</sup> Adolphe Barrot to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 June 1838. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, *Correspondance commerciale: Manille* 1, 147v-148.

<sup>7</sup> 5 November 1686, ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 23, 90v.

lonies found ways to circumvent this policy of exclusion in the West Indies and South America, so English and French ships managed to enter Manila Bay by the simple device of flying some non-European flag and presenting an Armenian or East-Indian as the nominal owner of the vessel and its cargo. Everyone concerned was privy to the fiction, but the letter of the law was kept while a mutually advantageous trade was carried on.

Mutually advantageous, because while the English and French traders were happy to get silver pesos, the Manila Spaniards were equally happy to get the European manufactures which they had to sell. Spanish industry had for a long time been unable to supply the needs of the empire, and it was precisely the demand for European manufactured goods in the ever more populous and prosperous viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru that had given rise to the American contraband trade. Some of these manufactures, obtained initially at Jamaica or Honduras, found their way to the Philippines on the returning Manila galleons; but having passed through several hands they were of course extremely expensive. The same goods brought directly from England and France to the East could be sold far more cheaply, and this was what "Moorish" and "gentile" ships could count on for a welcome when they dropped anchor beneath the guns of Cavite fort.

There was, no doubt, always an element of risk. The governor-general at the moment might have an inelastic conscience, or he might be at odds with the merchant community. It was in order to eliminate the risk that one of the directors of the *Compagnie de Chine*, De la Haussaye, proposed an alternative in 1715, namely, to introduce French goods into Manila by way of Canton. His proposal is a good clear statement of the situation.<sup>8</sup>

There is a considerable trade established between the Chinese and the Manilla Islands or Philippines which are under Spanish rule . . . Europeans are rarely admitted there, and never without risk. The uncertainty of being able to do business there is an insuperable obstacle

<sup>8</sup> "Mémoire présenté au comte de Toulouse, amiral de France," ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 9, 105-105v.

in the way of merchants who would ship a cargo from Europe destined solely for the Philippines. And yet, that country consumes a considerable amount of European manufactures, such as linens, cotton lace, gold and silver lace and braid, beaver hats, playing cards, etc., which these islanders obtain by means of the galleons which set out from Acapulco, a port of Mexico, which country the English supply with all these goods by way of Jamaica and Honduras. Now, the ships of the China Company need not go out of their way to call at the Philippines; and they can, if they choose, convey these goods there by means of the Chinese; they are not, therefore, under the same disadvantage as other European traders. And there is good reason to believe that the Company can easily find a lodgment in this trade, for by purchasing these goods in France direct from the manufacturers, it can sell them at a much lower price than do the Spaniards of Acapulco, whose shipping costs are much higher, who are not satisfied with a narrow margin of profit, and who do not have access to these goods except through the English, whose mark-up on their sales to the Spaniards is not less than 100 per cent; to which must be added the cost of overland transport from Honduras to the port of Acapulco, which is on the South Sea.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing original in De la Haussaye's proposal, for fifteen years earlier another French agent at Canton, Benac, had had the same idea, and what is more, had carried it out successfully at least once. Benac, who had some unsold plate glass on his hands, reported that he was planning to consign them to Manila, for if they did not find a sale there, the Manila merchants could always send them to Peru. But he was certain that they would be in great demand at Manila, "for there are coaches there, and they put mirrors in the churches of the country and in the houses of the Spaniards."<sup>9</sup>

Nor was it only glass that Benac intended to sell at Manila; according to another Company agent, Saillot, he was making up a whole cargo of goods to send there, because it was without a doubt "la ville la plus négociable des Indes par le grand nombre d'argent qui en soit." Some time later Saillot adds that he had learned from a Spanish merchant that the goods which Benac had consigned to Manila had sold very well indeed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Canton, 20 December 1700 (summary), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 17, 173-173v.

<sup>10</sup> Madras, 28 February 1701 (summary), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 17, 177, 178-178v.

Not only did French manufactures enter Manila through Canton, but Philippine products found their way to France by the same route. In 1767 the Canton agents of the Compagnie des Indes commissioned Don Remigio de Laguna, a Manila merchant, to purchase for the Company 4,000 pesos' worth of mother-of-pearl and *sibucao*, a red dyewood which the directors were especially anxious to obtain.<sup>11</sup>

But to return to De la Haussaye. That enterprising businessman had his eye not only on the silver of Manila but also on the spices of the islands further south. Borneo in particular caught his interest.

It is a well known fact to all who sail the China seas [he wrote] that the Dutch have by no means established themselves in all the islands where spices grow, and particularly the island of Borneo . . . which is on the same latitude as the Moluccas . . . This island has the particular advantage of producing an excellent variety of cinnamon which is in no way inferior to that of Ceylon. True, the islanders are ignorant of the techniques by which the bark is seasonably gathered and prepared for export, for the Dutch have taken good care not to show them how. And since up to the present no trader has called at Borneo to learn at first hand what commodities may be obtained there, the islanders have no regular trade except what they carry on by means of the small boats in which they bring to the Dutch of Java and Sumatra the raw products of their island. The company has been made aware of this situation, and has taken steps to establish a trading connection with these islanders, in the hope that by this means they will be led to desire a permanent trading post. We shall take care to make them realize how useful such a post would be to them, since as things are no nation has any trade with them.<sup>12</sup>

But this project of a French factory on Borneo came to nothing; it was the English East India Company, through the far-wandering Dalrymple, that succeeded several decades later in founding a settlement at Balambangan. The French however continued to seek out ways and means of obtaining spices independently of the Dutch monopoly, and in 1748 Pierre Poivre presented a plan to the Compagnie des Indes which the direct-

<sup>11</sup> Conseil de Direction de Canton to Compagnie des Indes, 8 January and 30 December 1767, 20 February 1768, ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 11, 16-16v, 23, 43-43v.

<sup>12</sup> "Mémoire," ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 9, 104v-105.

ors thought worth trying. Poivre's plan was to smuggle spice seedlings from the Moluccas by way of the Philippines, plant these seedlings on the French island of Mauritius, and thus endow France with what would be, in effect, a Spice Island of her own. On 2 June 1750 he took passage at Mauritius on the *Mascarin* bound for China, bringing with him a quantity of European trading goods and 9,000 pesos in cash.<sup>13</sup>

Arrived at Canton, he contracted with a Chinese dealer to have 8,000 pesos' worth of silk goods specially manufactured for the Philippine market, and on 21 April 1751 set sail for Manila on the Portuguese vessel *Santa Rita*, taking his China silk and European manufactures with him.

Poivre's project was not as fantastic as it sounds. The governor of Mauritius, who was quite dubious about it at first, was persuaded to give it his approval by what he learned from two Spaniards who happened to stop by on their way from the Philippines. These Spaniards, who had resided for some time in Mindanao, told him that it was perfectly feasible to obtain spice seedlings from the Moluccans who regularly traded with the Philippines in defiance of Dutch restrictions.

The trouble was that no less a personage than Dupleix also thought the idea an excellent one, and tried to forestall Poivre by offering a reward of 20,000 pesos to the first man who would send him from Manila 25 seedlings each of two kinds of spices. This offer he transmitted through the supercargo of a vessel which set sail from Pondicherry to Manila in 1750, a Spaniard named Carvallo. Thus, when Poivre arrived, he was disagreeably surprised to find that his plan was public knowledge, at least within the merchant community. As he reported to his principals, Dupleix's offer had no takers, "but the publicity given to the secret and the large reward held out by M. Dupleix made the carrying out of the project considerably more difficult."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Rapport de la mission du Sieur le Poivre á la Cochinchine et autres lieux. avec l'extrait de ses lettres" (1750-1757), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 3, 98-118. We have here omitted all mention of Poivre's activities in Cochinchina.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 103v-104.

However, Poivre decided to go ahead. First, he sold his cargo at a profit of 23 per cent, which he considered a very modest profit indeed. He apologized for it by explaining that one of the Manila galleons of that year had not made port, and so silver was scarce. He then tried to charter a vessel to go south for the seedlings, but found that the government was requisitioning all private craft for an expedition against the Sultanate of Sulu.

It will be recalled that the reigning Sultan, Mohammed Alimud Din, had received Christian baptism and had sworn allegiance to Spain as Fernando I of Sulu. But upon being allowed to return to his dominions, he was discovered to have renounced Christianity—if indeed he ever seriously accepted it—and to be actively plotting against Spain. So at least the Spanish authorities at Zamboanga claimed. They put him under arrest, and Sulu rose up in arms.

It was a bad time to be looking for spice seedlings; but Poivre, nothing daunted, went directly to the governor-general himself, the Marquis of Ovando, "adroitly sounded out his views, gradually made him privy to his secret mission, aroused his interest in it, and so led him to enter into an agreement regarding the execution of the project."

The principal terms of the agreement, according to Poivre, were as follows.<sup>15</sup> First, the governor-general would issue orders to the governor of Zamboanga to send a vessel manned by Mindanao natives to the Moluccas, with instructions to bring back at least 25 or 30 plants of each type of spice, and as many freshly gathered seeds of the same as they could obtain. Secondly, the governor of Zamboanga would also be asked to persuade the Sultan of Magindanao, who happened to be friendly at the moment, to send out some of his own vessels on a similar mission. No mention is made of what remuneration, if any, the governor-general or the Philippine government would receive for these services, but doubtless that point was settled to the satisfaction of both parties, for the necessary orders were issued on 5 August, and the governor of Zamboanga acknowledged receipt of them on 15 October.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Unfortunately for Poivre, the Marquis of Ovando learned at this point of the reward offered by Duplex. It seems strange that he had not done so earlier, but perhaps the business community of Manila had decided that in this, as in similar cases before and afterwards, the less officialdom knew the better for all concerned. At any rate Ovando suddenly took fright, fearing above all that the Dutch would not only hear of the French scheme but also of his own involvement in it. He therefore countermanded the orders he had sent to the governor of Zamboanga, explaining rather lamely that his interest in acquiring spice seedlings had been motivated by nothing more than curiosity.<sup>16</sup>

But Poivre was not to be brushed off in so cavalier a fashion; after all, an agreement was an agreement. It is not clear what kind of pressure he exerted, but he finally got Ovando to accept an alternative plan. This was that they would jointly fit out two small vessels, and that Ovando would then give them a commission as privateers for the ostensible purpose of raiding Sulu shipping, but with spice seedlings as their real object. Accordingly, Poivre chartered two ships from a Spanish merchant whom he calls "Oscotte," put them under the command of a capable *mestizo* seaman, and dispatched them on 1 March 1752.<sup>17</sup>

The ships reached Zamboanga in early May; whereupon the commander of the Spanish forces there promptly pressed them into service in the war against Sulu—orders which the captain could not very well refuse in view of his commission as privateer.<sup>18</sup> The vessels were not released from service until 7 June, when they immediately proceeded to Magindanao to

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 105v.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 105v-107. José Montero y Vidal gives Oscotte's name as Oscoti in his *Historia de la piratería malayo-mahometana* (2 v., Madrid: Manuel Tello, 1888), 1, 322.

<sup>18</sup> It is curious that among the officers in the Spanish service who distinguished themselves in this war, one, César Fallet or Fayette, was a French Swiss, and another had what looks very much like a French name, Faveau; cf. Montero, *op. cit.*, 1, 17 and 18 *passim*. Which leads one to suspect that Montero's Oscoti may really have been born Oscotte, and hence a compatriot of Poivre.

hire pilots for the Moluccas. But by the time they got to Magindanao (27 June) it was late in the season; the southwest monsoon was established and the pilots assured them that it was no longer practicable to set sail for the south. They had no choice but to turn back, and by the end of September Poivre knew that his first attempt had failed.

The following month Manila received word that Governor Pulgar of Zamboanga had died. Ovando immediately appointed Manuel Aguirre to succeed him; but Poivre had other ideas. "This Spaniard," he reported to his masters, "was not the appropriate person to further our business; the only possible man for the job was M. Oscotte." Poivre accordingly went to work on the Marquis again, and after two months of intensive lobbying succeeded with the help of friends in getting Oscotte instead of Aguirre appointed governor of Zamboanga. On 12 February 1753 Oscotte left for his new post with 2,000 pesos in cash, advanced by Poivre for "the operations which he had agreed to undertake to obtain the seedlings."<sup>19</sup>

Soon afterwards (21 February), Poivre left Manila himself to return to Mauritius, where he arrived the following October. He was not entirely empty-handed. In spite of adverse conditions, he had been able to purchase from Moluccan traders at Manila some fresh nutmeg seeds which he succeeded in causing to germinate. Some of the seedlings he sent ahead; five he brought with him. Those he sent ahead all died; the five which he personally took care of survived the voyage, and he had the satisfaction of transplanting them in Mauritius.<sup>20</sup>

But since five nutmeg plants would hardly make a Moluccas of Mauritius, Poivre decided to return to the Philippines for more. This time Governor Bouvet gave him a frigate, the *Colombe*, with which to carry out his design, and on 1 May 1754 he set sail for Manila. He found a new governor-general in

---

<sup>19</sup> "Rapport." 107-107v. Aguirre was sent instead on an expedition to Palawan—an expensive failure which cost the colonial treasury 36,976 pesos and an armed galley captured by the Sulus; cf. Montero, *op. cit.* 1, 301.

<sup>20</sup> "Rapport," 108v.

office,<sup>21</sup> war declared against the Sultan of Magindanao, and communications severed between Manila and the southern Philippines by Magindanao cruisers. In January of the following year he decided to take the *Colombo* to Zamboanga and see Oscotte personally; but all Oscotte could tell him was that he had not been able to do anything about their agreement because of the war, which broke out soon after he reached Zamboanga. Thus Poivre had no choice but to try to obtain the seedlings himself. He was unsuccessful, and after calling briefly at Portuguese Timor, returned to Mauritius (8 June 1755). It would be interesting to learn what finally happened to the five nutmeg plants obtained at the cost of so much labor and ingenuity on the part of poor Poivre; but the records are silent on this point. The records, however, are interesting in what they do reveal of the freedom with which a capable and enterprising foreigner could go in and out of the Philippines in the eighteenth century, and the amount of influence he could exert in business and official circles there, all royal orders to the contrary notwithstanding.

Of course, Poivre as a Frenchman was in a more or less privileged position, considering that a Bourbon sat on the throne of Spain and a Family Compact united Spain to France in a close if somewhat uneasy alliance. In 1779, the Philippine government had occasion to invoke this Compact. Certain differences having arisen between the Portuguese of Macao and Manila merchants coming there to trade, Don Lorenzo Chacón was sent to see whether a settlement could be arrived at. If negotiations failed, he was to proceed to Whampoa and request the good offices of the French consul at Canton, basing his request on the France-Spanish alliance. The French consul, Vauquelin, being informed of this, promised to assist the Spaniards to the extent of his ability, "provided always that any steps I am asked to take will not be prejudicial to the interests and privileges of the French nation."<sup>22</sup>

Some years later the Manila government again sought the aid of the French at Canton, this time on a far more important

<sup>21</sup> Pedro Manuel de Arandía.

<sup>22</sup> Canton, 7 January 1779, ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 13, 95-95v.

affair. Mercury was an essential ingredient in the extraction of silver, and the mines of Mexico were running short of it. It reported at Madrid that China could supply mercury in the quantities needed, and Manila was immediately instructed to negotiate an agreement with Peking for large-scale purchases amounting to as much as six or seven million pesos. Since the Spaniards had no commercial or diplomatic post in China, the Philippine Intendant-General of Finances wrote to a French missionary at Canton, M. de Grammont, requesting information as to the best way of approaching the Emperor on the matter. De Grammont wrote back to explain that the offering of gifts was an indispensable preliminary to transacting business at the imperial court. If the Intendant was in the mood to spend 50 or 60 thousand pesos on presents, and was willing to send as Spain's official envoy a man of even temper ("un homme froid") endowed with infinite patience and the willingness to take advice, then he, De Grammont, would undertake to announce the embassy to the Emperor, arrange for its transportation to Peking by the imperial post, and direct the course of the negotiations so as to bring it to a successful issue.<sup>23</sup>

The intendant apparently did not expect that trade agreements with China would be so expensive, and asked for time to collect the necessary funds. Meanwhile the viceroy of Mexico, who either did not know that the Philippine government had taken the matter in hand or did not believe in its ability to do so, decided to send his own envoy. It was clear that the viceroy did not have a De Grammont to advise him, for his envoy landed at Canton with the peculiar notion that all that was necessary to go to Peking was to set out in that direction: "comme s'il ne falloit pour se rendre à cette capitale que se mettre en route."

And what is even more remarkable—and which clearly shows the extent of the ignorance under which the Spaniards of the New World labor regarding the manner of dealing with the Chinese—they thought that by giving this ambassador 2,000 pelts of various kinds of fur they were providing him with ample funds to defray all his expenses.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Haumont du Tertre, "Journal," ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 16, 124v-125.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-125v.

Haumont reckons that in normal times the sale of these pelts at Canton might have paid for half the expenses of the embassy. Unfortunately, the Mexican envoy could not have arrived at a more inopportune moment, for English ships had just dropped anchor, bringing with them so much fur from the American Northwest that the Canton market was flooded with this particular commodity. Thus the Mexican had no choice but to go on to Europe, taking passage on a French vessel, and report his failure to Madrid. As for the intendant-general of the Philippines, he seems to have considered himself superseded, and sulking Achilles-like in his tent did nothing further in the matter. The great quicksilver agreement between Spain and China thus became another fascinating might-have-been.

The Manila Spaniards, for their part, could and did provide the French with assistance in one important respect. As French maritime activity in the China seas increased, there were more and more occasions when French vessels damaged by storms or running short of provisions needed a port where they could be repaired and supplied. Now the most convenient friendly port equipped to do this was Cavite, the port of Manila, which was both dockyard and a naval base. In the first decade of the eighteenth century the *Compagnie de Chine* sent some ships to test the practicability of a commercial route to China by way of Cape Horn. Word reached Canton in 1705 that these ships had been sighted near the Solomon Islands, and might be in distress. The Company agent, Peschberti, accordingly wrote to Manila to inquire whether the government there had any more definite news, and to request that if any of the vessels should take shelter there, they be given all the assistance they required. The governor-general returned a very courteous reply, saying that they had no news of the French ships, but that if any of them turned up they would be shown every possible attention.<sup>25</sup>

Later in the century not only French merchant ships but units of the French navy in Eastern waters received the

<sup>25</sup> Peschberti to Directors, Canton, 24 November 1705 (summary), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 18, 206v-208.

courtesies of the port of Manila and were able to have extensive repairs done at the Cavite yard. Governor Basco y Vargas, himself a naval officer, was particularly obliging, until the establishment of the Royal Philippine Company in 1785 put limits to his hospitality. The agents of the Company at Manila claimed that the entry of European ships of whatever flag into the Bay, even though not for purposes of trade, was a violation of the Company's charter. Thus, when the French naval vessel *Marquis de Castries* was forced into Cavite harbor for repairs in 1786, Governor Basco ordered that she be attended to, but at the stubborn insistence of the Company's agents was obliged to present her captain with a bill of 8,580 pesos for services rendered.<sup>26</sup> And when the frigate *Précieuse* called not only for repairs but for provisions, Governor Basco was constrained to send a rather stiff signal to the commanding officer of the French East-Indies squadron, the Chevalier d'Entrecasteaux:

You must have learned from my earlier communications to the officers who have preceded you in that command what insurmountable obstacles are placed by existing treaties in the way of ships of European nations frequenting Spanish ports overseas, and how I have received the most definite orders on this point from my Government. I therefore hope that in future you will not make Manila a port of call, nor send hither any units of your squadron, until our respective Governments have come to some arrangement and you and I receive instructions to that effect.<sup>27</sup>

This did not, however, prevent the great La Pérouse from calling at Manila the following year, nor was he any the less cordially received and entertained during his sojourn. In his observations on the Philippines, which he fortunately sent ahead before he was lost at sea,<sup>28</sup> La Pérouse stressed the enormous agricultural, industrial, and commercial possibilities of the Islands, which the Spaniards were doing practically

---

<sup>26</sup> Richery (commanding *Marquis de Castries*) to Cossigny, Manila, 10 December 1786, ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 4, 57-57v.

<sup>27</sup> Manila, 19 December 1786 (French translation), ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 16, 93-93v.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Jean-Francois de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse, *Voyage* (ed. M. L.-A. Milet-Mureau), Paris: Imprimerie de la République, 1797; 4v.

nothing to develop, and the supreme strategic importance of the port of Manila. What, indeed, might not the Philippines become under the rule of some more enterprising European power, such as, for instance, France?

Other French naval officers were thinking along the same lines. More and more, it was being painfully brought home to them that France could not possibly compete with England either as a commercial or a naval power in Asia without a suitable base of operations. And what more suitable than these Spanish-held islands so close to China, Japan and the Moluccas; what more suitable than Manila itself? At any rate, Entrecasteaux thought it prudent to prepare for any eventuality by obtaining the fullest possible intelligence regarding Manila. Writing to a French official who was planning an Asian tour, he said:

You have had the goodness to assure me that in case the opportunity should present itself of your visiting Manila, you would exert every effort to obtain information as to the resources—particularly as regards naval stores and seamen—which this colony, so strategically situated, can furnish. No one knows what its possibilities are in this respect; up to the present time we have nothing but the vaguest notions. So enlightened a person as yourself will not permit any uncertainty on this subject to remain, but will provide us with the most accurate information possible.<sup>29</sup>

Two years later Louis XVI summoned the States-General, and for the next eight years Frenchmen were too much absorbed in their own affairs to bother about the balance of power in the East. However, by the time the Directory took charge of affairs, it must have been quite clear that the principal enemy with which the new Republic would have to measure its strength was England. There were even Frenchmen who perceived that England's power rested on her maritime supremacy, and this in turn on her possession of strategic bases. Such a man was a naval officer named Larcher, who on 16 Fructidor of the Year V of the Republic (1797) submitted to the Directory a "Project d'établissement aux Philippines et à la Cochinchine".<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> To de Montigny, Pondicherry, 15 May 1787, ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 16, 91.

<sup>30</sup> ANP, C<sup>1</sup> 5, 6-9.

It is the natural propensity of Powers endowed with ports [said Larcher] to engage in sea-borne trade. Their role is to supply land-locked peoples with the products that they procure, at a moderate price. This is but justice and sound policy.

When it becomes clear that one such Power is trying to control all of that trade, it becomes the duty of all the others to prevent it from doing so. Their self-interest demands it.

For some time now England has been moving toward mastery of the seas and control over all sea-borne commerce; she is, in fact, almost within reach of the objective she has set for herself. It is therefore high time to frustrate her designs, so injurious to all other peoples.

It is for the French Republic and Spain, whom right reason, self-interest and mutual good faith have made allies, to place a lawful limit to her ambitious projects.

How is this to be done? Clearly, France must do as England did: establish strategic bases from which to control the sea lanes. But bases mean colonies, and colonies mean oppression; often, oppression in its worst form, slavery. Is it then proposed that the Republic founded on principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity stoop to the ruthless ways of the unscrupulous English, even though it be in order to oppose them? Larcher perceives the difficulty but is not embarrassed by it.

The French Republic ought, therefore, to create establishments in harmony with her principles. It is in countries, in islands where the buying and selling of human beings is unknown, where this kind of traffic which philosophy condemns and which degrades humanity has not acquired the force of law, that such establishments must be founded with the consent of the natives or of the sovereign who rules them.

"In countries," says Larcher, and immediately adds, sharpening his focus, "in *islands*." It is clear in what direction his spyglass is pointed.

The Philippine archipelago seems to combine all the advantages we are looking for, no less by its location than by the number of its inhabitants and the value of its products. . . [It] is composed of an uncounted number of islands inhabited by a healthy, industrious and seafaring people. . . These islands contain all the rich resources of the old world and the new. . . It would be a simple matter to found a naval base there which no Power can challenge. . . The French Republic could there set up an arsenal and shipyards for her navy. . .

Carried away by the magnificence of his vision, Larcher brushes aside the pedestrian objection that Spain may have other ideas for her archipelago than to make a gift of it to the French. After all, he says, "Spain has never made use of the advantages which it offers, and will not do so, we may be sure, for a long time to come, whether because her form of government is opposed to it, or because it is incompatible with the Spanish character." It should be easy enough, therefore, to persuade the Spanish government to let France have at least a portion of the Philippines.

But how, it may be asked, will we get the Madrid government to cede one or several islands of this archipelago, seeing that we have nothing to offer in compensation? The answer is simple: it is to Spain's own interest to do so, for without such an arrangement the Philippines will inevitably, sooner or later, fall into the clutches of the English, who having once acquired them will never let them go.

The Spanish government has enough intelligence to realize that a French establishment in the Philippines will effectively protect its colony there against any design that the English may have against it.

Moreover—and for Larcher this seems to be the decisive argument—the Philippines has hitherto been a liability rather than an asset to Spain. Now a French "presence" there will put an end to that.

The example of an active and friendly neighbor will not be lost on the Spaniard. The commercial intercourse and ties of friendship which will unite the two peoples will give new life to the Philippines. The colonists will shed that indolence to which their character is only too prone, and which is aggravated by the tropical climate, and the natives will be brought to the full pitch of activity of which they are capable.

Larcher goes on to suggest, in a few lines, a similar establishment in CochinChina, but it is clear that it is on the Philippines that he would have the members of the Directory concentrate their attention. I have not been able to find out what these gentlemen did about it, if anything. Was Larcher's "Project" brought to the attention of Bonaparte? And did it, perhaps, bring a momentary gleam to that eagle eye?

This much is certain: the Spaniards were by no means willing to cede any portion of Philippine territory, even to

France; and after 1808, of course, especially to France. An attempt by Guizot to plant the French flag on the island of Basilan in the 1840's was vigorously and successfully protested; and Napoleon III had to be content with Larcher's second-best, Indochina. It must be said, however, that the Spaniards were quite willing to help France create in Indochina an establishment "in harmony with her principles", to the extent of sending Filipino troops to help persuade the Indochinese to accept so great a benefit.

As we said in the beginning, French activity with reference to the Philippines, and in it, during the period covered by these documents is not of great importance. Our study of it may, however, contribute a few touches to the general picture of how Western trade and politics linked such disparate elements as India, China, Southeast Asia and the Americas into some kind of community of interests. It also raises a number of problems which may be worth further investigation.

What exactly was the extent of the—at least nominally—contraband trade at Manila before the official opening of that port to foreign nations in the early nineteenth century? How much did the Philippines contribute to the "leakage" in the Dutch monopoly of spices? On what basis, and with what ease, were non-Spanish Europeans allowed to reside permanently in the Philippines, and to what extent did they actually do so? What part did they play in the economic and political affairs of the colony? And finally, what influence did the demand for silver, sugar and rice of the European nations trading with China have on the economy and society of the Philippines?

In seeking an answer to these questions, the documentary resources of the Philippines and Spain will doubtless continue to be our principal source of information. But neither can we neglect the considerable light which can be thrown upon them by the historical and diplomatic archives of Britain and France.