Synkrētic Nº2 (Jun. 2022), 117-130

The soldier who teleported from Manila to Mexico*

Luis González Obregón†

TRANSLATED BY *Zach Lindsey*‡

I

Restrain your terror, reader, for we're not talking about a spirit from another world, but rather a mysterious person who appeared one morning in the central plaza of Mexico City back in the 16th century.

The apparition certainly came from another world, but with its own flesh and blood; he travelled comfortably and without fatigue, and in less time than it has taken this pen to write these opening lines—though not by his own will.

We have found this little-known event in certain ancient parchments. It is verified by very serious authors, known for their veracity and theology. But let us get on with the story…that is to say, with the history.

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* Luis González Obregón, 'Un Aparecido [An Apparition]', in Chapter 19, *México Viejo: 1521-1821. Noticias Históricas, Tradiciones, Leyendas y Costumbres* (Paris: Librería de la Viuda de C. Bouret, 1900), 181-185. This work is in the public domain.

† Luis González Obregón (1865-1938) was a Mexican writer. He wrote for *El Nacional*, was a member of the Mexican Academy of Language, and director of the Mexican Academy of History. He lived in Mexico City, Mexico.

‡ Zach Lindsey is a copy editor for the Institute of Maya Studies and holds an MA in Anthropology from Texas State University. He lives in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Mexico.

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In his book *Events in the Philippine Islands*, the prosecuting attorney for the appellate court in New Spain and consultant for the Holy Office of the Inquisition Dr Antonio de Morga[1] notes that, in Mexico, they first learned of the death of the governor-general of the Philippines Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas[2] the same day that he died. However, he doesn't discuss how or why they knew.

Certainly, in that day and age, when submarine cables had not even been dreamt of, it was surprising that on the same date on which an event happened, it was known from a distance as great as that separating Mexico from the Philippines.

This event, to which Dr Morga alludes in such a superficial and mysterious way, is narrated by others in more detail, although they attribute it to supernatural causes.

They say that, on the morning of 25 October 1593, a soldier in the uniform of those who lived in the Philippines appeared in the central plaza in Mexico City, and that this soldier, with rifle shouldered, asked everyone who passed by that place the usual and ritual, 'Who goes there?'

The chroniclers add that, the night before, he was standing sentry in a gateway of the wall which defends the city of Manila. Without realising it, and in the wink of an eye, he found himself transported to the capital of New Spain. There the case was considered so exceptional and stupendous that the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition involved itself in the matter. After serious inquiries and the full legal process, it condemned the soldier, who had appeared so miraculously, to return to Manila. This time, though, he had to go the slow way, through Acapulco. This time, the road was longer. The spirit of Lucifer, who had caused the soldier's unexpected and sudden arrival, was to have no hand in the soldier's return.

II

The events that we have described are recorded in thick parchments written by revered chroniclers of the orders of San Agustin and Santo Domingo. The details of the death of Gómez Pérez Dasmar-

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iñas described by one of these writers are particularly interesting to us.

Of all the nations that engaged most frequently in trade with the Spaniards in the Philippines was Japan, which was appreciated not just for its culture and politics, but for its well-designed cloth and other rich trade goods.

As governor of the Philippines, Gómez Pérez received an ambassador from the Emperor Taycosoma.[3]

'Around this time,' says Friar Gaspar de San Agustín, 'two ambassadors returned to Manila after a meeting with the king of Cambodia. One was Portuguese, named Diego Belloso, and the other Castilian, named Antonio Barrientos. They brought two beautiful elephants as gifts for the governor; these were the first ever in Manila. The purpose of this embassy came down to asking the governor for friendship, alliance, and aid against the king of Siam, his neighbour, who was trying to invade them. Governor Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas received the ambassadors warmly, and appreciated the gift. Not having enough manpower to offer the kind of help that the king wanted, he dispatched the ambassadors to give the king of Cambodia hope and, repaying him with another gift, established a good trade relationship between the two nations.'[4]

However, Dasmariñas realised this was an opportunity to conquer the Maluku Islands. To this effect, he sent an explorer, Brother Gaspar Gómez of the Society of Jesus, and acquired copious information from a second, one P. Antonio Marta who lived in Tidore.

Determined to achieve his goal, he acquired four galleys and a number of other vessels with a good number of soldiers, and on the pretext of helping the king of Cambodia they left Manila on 17 October 1593. They were accompanied by notable people and important religious figures.

The armada set sail from Puerto de Cavite on the 19th of the same month and year. On the 25th, however, an easterly wind forced the galley Capitana to abandon the others in the Punta de Santiago. This in turn forced Gómez Pérez to anchor in the Punta de Azufre. As the current was fierce, he had ordered the Chinese[5] he had brought

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with him to row harder. But there were 250 Chinese, and they were angered from being reprimanded with such ferocity by the governor. They resolved to rob the galley and all its supplies, and to do so they would have to kill all the Spaniards. This was easy because the rebels were many and armed.

Their scheme hatched, that very afternoon the Chinese all dressed in white tunics to be able to identify each other, and after having slit the Spaniards' throats, they waited until Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas was leaving his cabin and they split his head in two. His body, along with the others, was thrown into the sea, and, in such a devious way, the criminals got what they wanted.[6]

III

There is no lack of chroniclers, as sensitive as they are harsh, who say that his death was punishment from Heaven. And it's true that, in his life, Governor Pérez Dasmariñas did not exactly agree with the Bishop of Manila, Friar Domingo de Salazar. They repeatedly argued about the affairs of church and state.

Take from that what you will, but the chroniclers note that in both Manila and Mexico, supernatural signs announced the death of the governor.

In Manila, for example, there was a fresco of Gómez Pérez among the portraits of the knights of the various military orders in the entrance hall of the monastery of San Agustín. On the same day he died, the wall on which the portrait was painted cracked, dividing the head of the governor in the same way his actual skull had been cleaved in two by his assassins.

'It's worth pausing to note,' concludes Friar Gaspar de San Agustín, 'that the same day of the tragedy of Gómez Pérez, they knew about it in Mexico through Satanic arts. A group of women who were inclined to such practices transported a soldier who was working at a sentry post on the wall of Manila to the Central Plaza [Zócalo] of Mexico City. It was done without the soldier feeling a thing, and the next day he was found wandering around with his weapons in the plaza. He was asking everyone around him who they

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were. But the Holy Office of the Inquisition of that city ordered him to return to the Philippines. There, he met many people who later assured me of the certainty of this event…'

When confronted with such an assertion by such a wise and prudent source, we should defer to the authorities and resign ourselves to repeating:

> If you the reader don't believe me,
> I'm just telling you what I heard.[7]

Commentary

This story tells of a strange occurrence reported to have happened in the Spanish colonial era. It may represent an attempt to rationalise the deep relationship between Mexico and the Philippines despite their geographical remoteness from each other. While Mexico is on the periphery of the Indo-Pacific, this story highlights the dense historical, political, and intellectual threads by which it is woven into the cultural fabric of the region.

The story is true in the sense that its author, González Obregón, may have heard or read it first-hand as he says. He does not appear to have overly embellished it. González Obregón has done a lot of the work for the reader to help them understand the history of the transported soldier story. He quotes Gaspar de San Agustín, an important historian and member of the clergy in Manila. San Agustín, who wrote the earliest-known version of the transported soldier story, notes that he was in the Philippines when he first heard it.

Another mention of the story, this one just ten years before González Obregón's Mexican version, appeared in José Rizal's footnotes to his 1890 edition of Antonio de Morga's 1609 *Events in the Philippine Isles*. We can surmise on this basis that the story probably came from the Philippines and moved to Mexico. But establishing when and how is more difficult.

Many questions surround Gaspar de San Agustín's 17th century story. The soldier "teleported" in 1593 but San Agustín did not

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write his famous work until 1698, more than a century after the supposed event. He reportedly did not leave for the Philippines until 1667, which puts more than half a century between the event and his arrival in Manila. San Agustín admits to having heard the story indirectly from 'many people'.

It may be that a Spanish soldier first told this story to folks there for the fun of it, perhaps to children, and that it caught on. Many Spanish soldiers in the Philippines came from Mexico, and any that came from Spain had to stop in Mexico on the way. 'Far from the image of adventuring, fortune-seeking professional soldiers of pure Spanish ethnicity,' as Stephanie J. Mawson writes, 'the companies of soldiers stationed across the Pacific consisted of half-starved, under-clothed and unpaid recruits, many of whom were in fact convicts, and were more likely to be Mexican mestizos than pure-blood Spaniards.'[8] The average Spanish soldier would therefore likely have been able to describe Mexico City.

Still, even if a soldier had in fact been transported to Mexico City and forced to come back to Manila, he was likely long-dead by San Agustín's time. If he had been twenty at the time of his transportation, he would have been ninety-four by the time San Agustín arrived in Manila.

It would cast light on this mystery if an earlier version of the story were found. But the death of the governor of the Philippines was an important event, and the violence of it shocked people as far away as Mexico City. It is therefore no surprise that the governor's death does appear in earlier sources. A letter from the Viceroy of New Spain to the royal court in Spain detailed below does mention the governor's death and its fallout, for example, though not the supernatural events.

In his 1609 work *The Discovery and Conquest of the Molucco and Philippine Islands*, Bartholomew Leonardo de Argensola describes Governor Dasmariñas as a 'person of high reputation', but he notes that opinions on the governor were conflicted.[9] Given his claim that 'the Devil had possess'd' the Chinese sailors,[10] de Argensola would presumably have mentioned the stories of the transported soldier

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and the fractured painting if he had been aware of them. But he does not.

The timeline described by de Argensola also raises another problem for the interpretation of the story. In his account, it appears unlikely that the death of the governor was even known in *Manila* the day it happened. Thus, a soldier on sentry duty in Manila who teleported to Mexico City that evening would not have been able to take that information with him.

González Obregón's version of the narrative translated above implies that the speed at which the news travelled shocked one "Dr. Morga". Antonio de Morga is an important source because his 1609 *Events in the Philippine Isles* describes the governor's death and its fallout in detail. de Morga was in Mexico City around the time of the death.

But de Morga's actual comments are less dramatic than González Obregón implies. He proposes that the people of New Spain first suspected the death because they noticed a delay in the ships coming from the Philippines. This would make sense, as the governor's death coincided with a one-year hiatus in mercantile traffic until early 1594 due to storms.[11] But even this development must have taken some time to notice as only two or three ships a year usually embarked on the journey across the Pacific. Later in his work, de Morga mentions that, when he arrived in Mexico in 1594, its people still did not know about the governor's death.

Unfortunately for those fond of a good mystery, de Morga doesn't mention teleporting soldiers at all, nor do Argensola or the viceroy. It would therefore appear that the details of the myth were not cemented until many years after the governor's death.

In 1890, the famous Filipino thinker and polymath José Rizal translated de Morga's work into contemporary Spanish for a Filipino audience. He added a footnote to the passage about the way in which people in Mexico City learned of the governor's death: 'Remember the story of the soldier transported by witches to the Plaza in Mexico City—de Morga says he can't know how the news arrived.'[12] While de Morga does say this, he also suggests the much more mundane explanation of shipping delays.[13]

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In any case, this footnote could imply that the story of the transported soldier was well-known in the Philippines by the 1890s, as Rizal asks us to remember a story which we are assumed to have heard before. But besides the work by Gaspar de San Agustín mentioned in the translation above, earlier iterations of the story are difficult to source in any Spanish-language book.

What was only a skeletal narrative in the late 1600s gradually grew skin and muscle over the centuries. At an unknown time, and much like its protagonist, the myth crossed the ocean from Manila to Mexico City. When it arrived, whether around the time that San Agustín's book, printed in Madrid, finally reached Mexico or later, the story confirmed what many people had heard: strange things had been afoot in Mexico after the governor died. Even if people in both places told the story in preceding centuries, it seems to have started blossoming in the 1800s.

There appears in Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* a similar short story dated 1832, 'Governor Manco and the Soldier', about a Spanish soldier who dashes from Castilla to the Alhambra in Spain.[14] In this story, the soldier is the one asked 'Who goes there?' when he arrives.[15] Both stories may play on tropes popular among the Spanish, including in this region which Irving had visited. But this story lacks the witches of the Manila-to-Mexico legend, the distance is much smaller, and the transported soldier is no messenger of death. The American writer Thomas Janvier suggested that, other than their remote ancestor in Arabian magic carpet stories, they were unrelated.[16]

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the transported soldier story had become popular in the Spanish-speaking world and beyond. Shortly after González Obregón's Mexican version in 1900, an English version of the story by Thomas Janvier appeared in *Harper's Magazine*. Janvier claimed that the story was 'current across all classes of the population of the City of Mexico.'[17]

While Janvier mentions the González Obregón version, and his version begins similarly, certain aspects of the soldier's personality seem to have been taken from Irving. This could mean that the Janvier version was an amalgam of the González Obregón story and

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the previously unrelated Irving story, rather than a story he had heard from 'all classes' in the street of Mexico City.

In 1910, two years after publishing in *Harper's*, Janvier noted the similarities between his and Irving's stories but argued that they were unconnected. 'The transportation by supernatural means of a living person from one part of the world to another,' he writes, 'is among the most widely distributed of folk-story motives.'[18]

The major difference between the Irving story and the 1593 transported soldier narrative, according to Janvier, is that the latter includes actual events which, while historical at the time of San Agustin's writing, were nonetheless real. Janvier claims that the issue became so important at the time that even the Viceroy of New Spain investigated it. No extant historical sources suggest that the viceroy took an interest in the alleged paranormal circumstances related to the governor's death.

New versions of the story appeared into the 1930s and 1940s. In 1964, an issue of the Mexican comic *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia* brought the story to new audiences.[19]

The comic strip's writer invented a backstory about Governor Dasmariñas and his brothers. Despite its frivolous tone and anti-Spanish bent, the comic follows Spanish tradition by explaining the soldier's teleportation as the consequence of the reprehensible behaviour of Dasmariñas. In this version of events, the governor raped a woman and murdered her husband in Mexico before arriving in the Philippines. As far as I know, there is no historical evidence for either claim.

The writers seemed uninterested in the Philippines, with most of the action involving Governor Dasmariñas taking place in Mexico. Despite the Mexican government having declared 1964 to be the "Year of Philippine-Mexican Friendship", like many Mexicans, the artist had probably never visited the country and therefore lacked a frame of reference.

In modern Mexico, variations of the story appear in Mexican tabloids and occasionally in well-respected publications including *México Desconocido*. It has also made its way into United States culture, where some accounts attribute the mystery to witchcraft,

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Satanism, inter-dimensional warping, and aliens among other conspiracy theories.

The story takes on an altogether different meaning in light of the colonial and modern relationship between Mexico and the Philippines. Art does not exist in a vacuum. It encodes the social, cosmological, and political values of its creators and the culture in which they live.[20] The same is true of narrative, which is rarely devoid of the symbols of the culture from which it emerges. It is no accident, then, that the soldier teleported from the Philippines and not from somewhere else, and it is no accident that he ended up in Mexico City of all places.

In the Spanish colonial era, the distance between Mexico City and the Philippines was difficult to overcome. To transport goods between Manila and Acapulco on Mexico's Pacific coast, the Spaniards built Manila galleons, which were some of the largest trading ships then in existence, which regularly made the journey across the Pacific Ocean between 1565 and 1815. They also created strict laws about who could travel and when.

The Spanish crown encountered issues in ensuring the compliance of conquistadors in New Spain because of the distance between the colony and the metropole. Messages between Spain and Manila took a painstakingly long time to send—and were often filtered through Mexico.

This delay in news caused systemic issues for governance. Although Governor Dasmariñas died in October 1593, for example, the Viceroy of New Spain, Luis de Velasco y Castilla, wrote a letter to the crown in January 1594 which did not mention his death.[21] He first mentioned the death in a letter written in November 1594, a full year after it happened.[22]

A minor issue of succession to the post of governor was even resolved before the viceroy had been made aware of the governor's death. Had he wanted to influence this decision, he would have been completely powerless to do so.

As for strange happenings, the viceroy did not mention anything pertinent in his November 1594 letter, although some of its pages are now damaged and unreadable. Presumably, he learned of the

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death of Governor Dasmariñas sometime between January and November 1594, as ships from the Philippines took about six months to arrive.

Many members of the church saw the influence of the Satanic all over the Spanish colonies. Dennis Tedlock goes as far as calling people like 16th century Spanish bishop Diego de Landa 'possessed' by fantasies about devils.[23] Gaspar de San Agustín, too, mentions witches and warlocks frequently in his work about the Philippines.

The González Obregón story suggests that Dasmariñas was no friend to the bishop, and may have been trying to increase the state's influence over the church.

After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, by which time generations separated new storytellers from the death of Dasmariñas, the meaning of the story had changed. In the early 1800s, Mexico sought to redefine its relationships with colonial-era trading partners. While some of these relationships fractured, one which deepened even as its form changed was that with the Philippines.

The Manila galleon system, which utilised Mexico to transport trade goods from Manila to Spain for two hundred and fifty years, ended shortly before Mexico won its independence. While Spain would have to secure its supply of goods from the Philippines through other ports, trade flows between Mexico and the Philippines remained steady.

Today, the historical depth of this relationship remains politically useful, with the Mexican government describing the Philippines as the 'ideal entry bridge for Mexico's products in Southeast Asia'.[24] The Philippines is currently Mexico's 19th most valuable trading partner, while Mexico is the Philippines' 14th largest export market, the largest of any American country after the U.S.[25]

But maintaining these relationships took a lot of work over two hundred years. Beyond the daily grind of processing customs permits, Mexicans and Filipinos had to develop deep cultural affinities and people-to-people links. As well as being connected by migration, language, and possibly fashion (the *guayabera* and the *barong*

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tagalog shirts may be related), Mexico and the Philippines had substantive intellectual exchanges about independence.

One early supporter of Mexican independence, Epigmenio González, spent time in a prison in Manila where he may have influenced the burgeoning Filipino independence movement. Even as Filipino captain Andrés Novales was helped by Mexicans in his one-day uprising and effort to crown himself emperor in 1823, the Filipino Ramón Fabié y de Jesús joined Mexico's own independence movement, for which he too was executed.

The story of the transported soldier allowed people in the Philippines to "know" the people of Mexico and vice-versa by creating fictional places where their differences seemed less profound. In colonial Spain, stories such as this one might have served to shrink the empire to a more manageable scale.

Everyday Mexicans who told the story in the 1800s and early 1900s understood how far away the Philippines was. But although they likely understood that they were connected by a shared past and common dreams, most Mexican people would still only have known about the Philippines through news stories, word of mouth, and popular legends like this one.

This may explain the enduring appeal of the story of the transported soldier who crossed such a vast distance in the space of a witch's spell. And just like that, through his appearance in Mexico, these trading partners from different worlds became instant neighbours.

The other stories in González Obregón's book mix indigenous American narratives and European ones, and many of these legends, including of people turning into animals, are distinctly Mesoamerican. 'An Apparition', with its references to old Spanish documents, seems to skew more toward the European side. The final line of the narrative likely references a European source, for example. But González Obregón's reminder that the story can be entertaining even if it's not exactly true, and yet his refusal to admit that it is not true, parallels Mesoamerican storytelling practices.[26]

Specifically, it reminds me of something my teacher of Yucatec Maya used to tell me after she would tell stories about ghosts or

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goblins. At the end, I would ask, 'Do you believe that?' She would shrug and answer with a question: 'Do you?'

What is important is not the truth of the teleporting soldier, but what it says about the history and interests of the people who tell it. That it continues to entertain all these years later does not hurt, either.

Notes

1 Antonio de Morga Sánchez Garay (1559-1636) was a senior Spanish official and lawyer in the Philippines, New Spain, and Peru. The work cited is Antonio de Morga, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (México: Casa de Geronymo Balli, 1609).

2 Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas (1519-1593) was the Spanish governor-general of the colony of the Philippines (1590-1593).

3 *An ambassador*: This may refer to Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) or to Harada Magoshichirō (1590-?), his retainer who corresponded with the Spanish governor on Hideyoshi's behalf. Hideyoshi was a samurai who led a campaign to unite Japan and became its leader. He then invaded Korea. He carried the title *taikō* and was regent of Emperor Go-Yōzei. Ubaldo Iaccarino, 'Merchants, Missionaries and Marauders', in *Crossroads*, Issue 10 (October 2014), 159.

4 Friar Gaspar de San Agustín, *Conquest of the Philippine Islands* (Madrid: Parte primera, 1698).

5 *The Chinese*: Probably refers to a mixture of majority-Chinese, Indian, and other Asian men.

6 Some accounts suggest that the Chinese rebels failed to reach China and were turned around to face execution in Manila. In that city, the 1593 rebellion led to Chinese people being segregated and placed under military observation. Richard Chu, *Chinese and Chinese Mestizos of Manila: Family, Identity, and Culture, 1860s-1930s* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 58.

7 Possibly a reference to the final two lines of the poem 'The student of Salamanca' (*El estudiante de Salamanca*) by José de Espronceda. The translator Nicolás Barbosa López renders these lines as: 'And reader, if thou say it is not true / As they have told it now I tell you'. See López, *Pessoa Plural*, No. 10 (Fall 2016): 391, lines 1011-1012.

8 Stephanie J. Mawson, 'Convicts or Conquistadores? Spanish Soldiers in the Seventeenth-Century Pacific', in *Past & Present*, Vol. 232, Issue 1 (August 2016): 95.

9 Bartholomew Leonardo de Argensola, *The Discovery and Conquest of the Molucco and Philippine Islands*, transl. John Stevens (London: J. Knapton, A. Bell, D. Midwinter, W. Taylor, A. Collins, and J. Baker, 1708), 125.

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10 de Argensola, *The Discovery and Conquest*, 139.

11 Junald Dawa Ango, 'The Cebu-Acapulco Galleon Trade', in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 2010): 154.

12 Antonio de Morga, annotated by José Rizal, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (Paris: Libreria de Garnier Hermanos, 1890), 36, footnote 1.

13 Antonio de Morga, annotated by José Rizal, *Sucesos de las Islas*, 36.

14 Washington Irving, 'Governor Manco and the Soldier', in *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, Vol. 1 (Francfort on the Main: Sigismond Schmerber, 1835), 1254-1259.

15 Washington Irving, 'Governor Manco and the Soldier', 1254.

16 Thomas A. Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), 159.

17 Thomas A. Janvier, *Legend of the Living Spectre, Harper's Magazine* (December 1908).

18 Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico*, 159.

19 Pablo Zambrano-Silva (ed.), *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia*, Vol. 38 (March 1964), available at: <https://tuul.tv/es/cultura/un-aparecido-leyenda-plaza-mayor>.

20 Robert Layton, *The Anthropology of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

21 Luis de Velasco y Castilla, *Carta del virrey Luis de Velasco y Castilla* (Jan. 1594), digitised at *Pares*, ref. MEXICO, 22, N.125.

22 Luis de Velasco y Castilla, *Carta del virrey Luis de Velasco y Castilla*.

23 Dennis Tedlock, 'Torture in the Archives: Mayans Meet Europeans', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (March 1993): 147.

24 Embassy of Mexico in the Philippines, 'Trade with the Philippines', in *Relaciones Exteriores*, available at: <https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/filipinas/index.php/negocios-y-comercio/tradewiththephilippines>.

25 Embassy of Mexico in the Philippines, 'Trade with the Philippines'.

26 For example, see Allen F. Burns (transl.), *An Epoch of Miracles: Oral Literature of the Yucatec Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

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