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any Filipinos in the United States are often included in the Hispanic-American mailing lists. Many Filipino Americans with Spanish family names often receive Latino advertising mailings. The question now is, “*Can (or should) Filipinos in America consider themselves part of the Hispanic-American community?*” Perhaps since 2008 is a leap year, Filipinos must make a virtual leap of faith to their Hispanic heritage.

I remember an incident in West Orange, New Jersey, in 1978. I was doing a business lunch with a Spanish-American entrepreneur in a Japanese restaurant in that city. The waiter, obviously of Japanese ancestry, was not fluent in English. He had a hard time getting our order. But when he heard me try to converse in my broken Spanish, he began to speak fluently in the Iberian tongue. He explained that he was born and raised in Peru, as he was a scion of Japanese settlers in that South-American country.

Editor’s Note: Excerpts of this article were published before in some Filipino-American publications in Los Angeles and Chicago and online in the www.pinoyonboard.com of New York.

Thus, I realized that day the presence of what I coined later the “Missing Latinos in America (MLA).”

The HispanoAsian-American Community

As I writer, I penned several years back an essay about the “MLA.” Unfortunately my essay was lost when my computer crashed way back in the mid-1990s and I failed to make a copy in a diskette or CD. I recall that I even posted excerpts of my essay in some e-forums. I will now

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rely on my memory in retelling the essay.

I said in my essay that even demographers in the United States failed to include several groups of Asians (Asian Americans) as components of the Hispanic-American community (or market). These Asians are the Filipinos (especially those with Spanish family names), the Japanese Americans who grew up in Peru and the once-thriving Chinese community in Cuba. Also included in the term “HispanoAsians” are the immigrants from Macao (the former Portuguese settlement in China) and the Indian settlers from Goa (the former Portuguese enclave in India). There are the settlers in what used to be a Hispanic Guam, with Filipinos accounting approximately for 27% of the island’s population. Sooner or later there will be immigrants from the former Portuguese colony of East Timor (off Indonesia). There are of course immigrants from South and Central America, Spain, Portugal and the former Hispanic colonies in Africa who are of Chinese ancestry. Yes, the Chinese (and Filipinos) are everywhere and some of them who migrated to the United States lived and studied first in Spanish-speaking countries.

The more than 3.0-million-strong Filipino-American community tops the number of the “MLA.” Certainly the HispanoAsians will swell the ranks of the Spanish-speaking (or Portuguese-speaking) Americans. The presence of these Latino-speaking Asians in America will reinforce the growing bilingual character and fabric of American society.

One of the biggest groups of these HispanoAsians came from Cuba. More than 50,000 Chinese were displaced by the Cuban revolution of former President Fidel Castro. Almost all of them fled also to the United States.

Rediscovering the “ñ-Filipinos”

A few years back the Newsweek magazine featured young Latino Americans on its cover and called them the “ñ-Generation.” I believe that I was ahead of the Newsweek by more than a decade in using the “ñ” adjective. In 1988, I wrote for a Filipino-American publication in Los Angeles about the “ñ-Filipinos.” I said that some Filipino Americans had the “ñ” in their family names but more often than not people merely use the “n” in addressing them. I might be remembered someday as the writer who coined the term, “ñ-Filipinos,” in referring to the “HispanoFilipinos.”

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The best example of the “ñ-Filipinos” is the first American judge of Filipino ancestry in California. He is the Honorable Mel Red Recaña, who is a judge in the Superior Court of Los Angeles, California. Nowadays lawyers and even some fellow Filipino Americans call him “Judge Recana.” They are unable to pronounce properly the “ñ.” And also because it is hard to type on the computer the “ñ.” My grandmother, Baldomera Sesbreño y Gabales of Bulusan town of Sorsogon Province, was a descendant of a Spanish settler.

The “ñ-Filipinos” have to be included in Latino-American affairs because soon there will be more of them than Puerto Ricans.

There are of course more advantages than disadvantages for Filipino Americans to start rediscovering the “ñ” (read, as the Spanish heritage) in them. The “ñ-Filipinos” find it easy in learning how to speak the Iberian tongue because there are so many Spanish derivatives in the various Filipino languages and dialects. Aside of course from carrying Hispanic names and some knowledge of their Latino heritage, many Filipino Americans find Spanish useful in their work.

The importance of including the “ñ-Filipinos” in Latino-American affairs is tremendous. Pretty soon there will be almost a similar number of “ñ-Filipinos” as there would be Puerto Ricans in the United States, including of course the nationals who remain in Puerto Rico. (There are Filipino Americans whose ancestors came from Puerto Rico. The United States exiled thousands of Puerto-Rican activists after the American-Spanish War of 1899 to Guam, Hawaii and the Philippines.)

Even in political contests, it will be easier for budding Filipino-American politicians to win electoral contests if they campaign as “ñ-Filipinos.” This was the experience of former Hawaiian Gov. Ben Cayetano, who managed to attract the support of the modest number of Hawaiian voters of Puerto-Rican ancestry. Perhaps the Hispanic voters of Hawaii were responsible for the reelection of the Filipino-American Governor Cayetano, who won a second term with only a one-percent plurality. Unless an “ñ-Filipino” candidate faces a Hispanic-American opponent, the Filipino American will (and should) easily get the Latino-American voters’ sympathy and support. More so if the “ñ-Filipino” candidate is fluent in Spanish.

The Necessity of Being Bilingual

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My brother-in-law, Enrique de los Reyes, is an optometrist in New York. He was forced to learn again how to speak Spanish. Why? Many of his patients are Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans, who prefer of course to talk to their eye doctor in Spanish. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. My brother-in-law had to reinvent himself as a “ñ-Filipino.” Perhaps his knowledge of the Iberian tongue will now permit him to read the literary works of his grandfather, Isabelo (Don Belong) de los Reyes, who wrote principally in Spanish. Don Belong was one of the great writers of the Philippines, aside of course from being recognized as the father of Filipino folklore. He was also the founder of the Philippine labor movement in 1901 and the Philippine Independent Church in 1902. Don Belong also translated the Bible from Spanish to Ilocano, the language of Northern Philippines and many Filipino Americans, as one out of three of them has Ilocano roots.

There are now thousands of Enrique de los Reyeses who are able to converse in Spanish because their jobs require them to be bilingual.

Filipino priests are finding it to their advantage to be able to celebrate mass and deliver the homily in Spanish in parishes where the congregation’s majority is Hispanic. And America is running out of priests, as American seminaries are virtually shutting down for lack of enrollment.

There is no better incentive for learning Spanish than financial rewards to those who are able to speak it.

The hundreds of thousands of Filipino-American medical professionals are finding it useful to be fluent, or at least be conversational, in Spanish. The Latino-American community is now the largest minority group in this country. Latinos compose the majority in some counties in the Western United States.

There are now hundreds of Filipino teachers who are being imported to teach in American public schools, especially in areas that belong to economically-disadvantaged school districts. Pretty soon their number will be in the thousands, as the United States is facing a shortage of qualified teachers. One advantage of the teachers who are bilingual is that they get higher salaries. At least their entry-level pay is higher if they are proficient in Spanish. Even the parochial schools of the Archdiocese of New York “imported” hundreds of qualified Filipino

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teachers, many of whom were bilingual.

As Filipinos in the Philippines come to know of the advantages of being “ñ-Filipinos,” more and more of them will start to fall in love again with Spanish and their Iberian heritage. There is no better incentive for learning Spanish than financial rewards to those who are able to speak it, at least conversationally.

Elementary and high-school students in the United States are now offered Spanish as elective subjects. Many of them take it, as normally proficiency in Spanish is a major advantage in being admitted to colleges or universities after they finish high school.

When Filipino-American pre-school children watch cartoons on American television, many of the programs teach Spanish words and phrases. I noticed this fact when I was babysitting my then five-year-old grandson who was watching the “Dora, the Explorer” cartoon series. Dora was teaching the viewers the Spanish equivalent of English terms used in the TV dialogue.

The other fact of course is that the “ñ-Filipinos” use Spanish numbers when they speak Filipino in their households in America. They count “uno, dos, tres . . .” instead of “isa, dalawa, tatlo . . . ,” etceteras, etcetera. The “ñ-Filipinos” do not use “upuan” or worse, “salumpuwit,” when they refer to a chair; they call it “sil-ya,” which is of course a Spanish derivative of most Filipino languages.

The Coming Spanish Renaissance in the Philippines

Whether public and/or private educators in the Philippines like it or not, many Filipinos will start learning (or relearning) Spanish in the years to come. The Iberian tongue used to be one of the official languages of the Philippines. While fewer and fewer Filipinos used Spanish in their daily lives or academic pursuits in the 20th century, the opposite will happen in the coming years. After all, Overseas-Filipino workers (OFWs) and immigrants now number in excess of eight-million spread in more than 100 countries. We should remember that Spanish is the language of one-sixth of the world.

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My friends and I tried to jump-start the Spanish Renaissance in our community in the City of West Covina in California and in the County of Los Angeles. We organized the “Fiesta Hispana y Filipina” in June 1965 at the West Covina Civic Center and the Plaza Mall at West Covina. We were not able to do it again, as we got lukewarm support from city officials and the business community. But it was quite a first step in developing Hispano-Filipino friendship.

Aside from the need to learn Spanish among the Filipino Americans, there are more than 200,000 OFWs who work now in Spain. There are hundreds or even thousands of OFWs in Portugal, in Brazil and the rest of South (and Central) America. When these OFWs reach retirement age, many of them will return to the Philippines. And many of them will be fluent in Spanish. With a little encouragement and support from Spain, Mexico and the Hispanic-American community, especially the “ñ-Filipinos” in the United States, a Spanish Renaissance will happen in the Philippines.

The coming 500th anniversary of the voyage of Fernando de Magallanes and his motley crew from 19 countries will be the historical event of this century. When the world celebrates the exploits of Magallanes from 2019-2022, the Philippines will experience more Hispanic commemorative events. Millions of Latino tourists may be able to visit the landing sites of Magallanes in the islands of Samar, Leyte and Cebu, where the naturalized-Spanish explorer died in combat with native warriors. There will be of course a mad rush among the Philippine travel-related companies and their employees to become fluent in Spanish. This will certainly help in reviving the Spanish culture in the Philippines, especially if the hundreds of Spanish-built churches, fortifications and houses in many Philippine provinces are restored to entice further the coming of the Spanish visitors. And more visitors will come from the Latino world if the Philippine tourism officials would adopt the slogan that I suggested in 1992. I coined the tourism slogan, “The Philippines – the Only Hispanic Archipelago in Asia.”

The White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) that the American colonizers sent to the Philippines at the start of the 20th century managed to supplant Spanish with English in less than 50 years. (Now hundreds of Filipino and Filipino-American educators are teaching young Americans how to speak English and even some Spanish.) The second irony would be the “ñ-Filipinos” from the Filipino-American community leading the Spanish renaissance in the homeland. How ironic would it be? Only time will tell. As the Latinos put it, “Vamos a ver.” # # #

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