Looking for interpreter zero: (2) Enrique, Magellan’s slave interpreter

How Enrique, a Malay-speaker acquired by Magellan during the siege of Malacca, became an interpreter and go-between as the expedition searched for the Spice Islands.

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Much of what we know about the fleet initially led by Ferdinand Magellan 1519-1522 comes from the man he recruited as his chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta. Without him we would know much less about the fate of the five ships and the 270 men on board. He was one of the first travel-writers, had an interest in languages and was involved in trade and negotiations throughout the expedition. His lively account of the journey includes many references to Magellan’s Malay-speaking slave, Enrique.

Magellan had acquired Enrique during the 1511 siege of Malacca. He had travelled back to Europe with his master, was with him at his first meeting with the Spanish Privy Council in Seville in 1517 and is mentioned in the will Magellan drew up before he set sail – he was to be freed and receive a legacy. He was included in the expedition as Magellan thought he would be useful if and when the expedition reached the Spice Islands.

In March 1521, having discovered his eponymous Strait and named and sailed the Pacific, Magellan had his three remaining vessels dock at what he mistakenly believed to be the Spice Islands. Enrique did not understand anything said by any of the natives he met: they were in fact in what was to become the Philippines. He was, however, able to communicate with the rulers of the islands, as Malay was the lingua franca of diplomacy and trade, and known to the region’s elites.

That was how Enrique came to negotiate for Magellan and represent the King of Spain. On Good Friday, 1521, he arranged for the rajah of the island of Limasawa to send fish and rice to the ships. When the rajah came on board, he was fed, given a demonstration of the effectiveness of armour and invited to take Pigafetta back to shore on a visit. Enrique was also involved in converting the ruler and his brother to Catholicism. He played a key role in similar dealings with Rajah Humabon of Cebu.

The expedition came to grief when the explorers became involved in a dispute between two chiefs on Mactan Island. Magellan was killed by Si Lapulapu’s fighters on April 26, 1521 and Enrique disappears from the records shortly afterwards. Pigafetta was one of the 70 survivors of the
journey which is how Enrique’s contribution is known. Magellan’s slave interpreter also lives on as Panglima Awang, the patriot hero of a 1958 Malaysian novel by the Malaysian writer Harun Aminurrashid.

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