

The Macabebes

The Macabebes occupy a footnote in Philippine history, albeit a controversial and sometimes contentious one. They come from the town of Macabebe, on the southeastern part of the province of Pampanga, bordering the province of Bulacan. As Pampangos, their language is Kapampangan vs. Tagalog for Bulacan. It is only about 60 kilometers northeast of Manila. Macabebes served with the Spanish army during most of Spain's three centuries of Philippine colonization. During the Philippine revolution against Spain that started in 1896, the Macabebes remained loyal to their Spanish officers. When the Americans came in 1898, the Macabebes switched loyalty. Starting out as guides to the American troops, the group became the Macabebe Scouts, forerunner of the Philippine Scouts. The Americans were reluctant to have armed Filipinos within their midst but the Macabebes demonstrated their reliability. They were instrumental in the carefully planned and executed ruse that resulted in the capture of General Emilio Aguinaldo, the Philippine Republic's first president and military commander. Historical records indicate that hardly a shot was fired. Aguinaldo's troops thought the Macabebes were friendlies, bringing in American POW's.

For their role, the Macabebes were reviled in some quarters, lasting well into the middle of the 20th century. They were called "*dugong aso*" (dog blood), "*putas*" (whores) and "*traidor*" (traitors). They may have hastened the capture of Aguinaldo, but it was only a question of time before Aguinaldo was brought to heel. Macabebe Scouts or not, Aguinaldo was on the run, with the unit he was commanding directly less than battalion size. Some say he could have carried on a guerilla war, but that was exactly what he was doing. However the Filipino army had already suffered 16,000 dead. As in most wars, civilians suffered the most. The most conservative estimate is 200,000 Filipino civilian deaths. The United States had hardly flexed its muscle. During the Civil War 35 years earlier, the Federals mustered an army that swelled to 2 million. Since then the U.S. population had more than doubled.

With that introduction to the Macabebes, my purpose in writing is to delve into the Macabebes' intriguing origins. Some historians believe they are descended from Mexican Indians brought over by the Spaniards. Teodoro Agoncillo, the most prolific Filipino historian, is one of those who believe that the Macabebes are Mexican Indians from the Yaqui tribe. In my view this is not likely. The Yaquis are a small tribe in northern Mexico, fiercely independent and kept fighting the Spanish intermittently until Mexico won independence. In fairness to Agoncillo, the attribution was made by other authors such as Renato Tayag.

Another school of thought is similar, believing that the Macabebes are descendants of the Nahuatl people of Mexico. (Some Filipino writers refer to them as Nahuatl but that is the language, the people are called Nahuatl.) This is a lot more plausible vs. the Yaqui contention. Nahuatl population is 50 times greater than the Yaquis and they maintained the closest contact with the Spaniards. Some scholars count about 250 Nahuatl words that have found their way into Pilipino, the national language of the Philippines. Some examples are *palengke* (market), *tiangge* (flea market), *sili* (chili), *singkamas* (turnip) and *pitaka* (wallet). Come to think of it, one of the oldest Maya sites in Mexico, predating Christianity, is called *Palenque*. One writer even goes so far as to say that *nanay* (mother) and *tatay* (father) are originally Nahuatl. I don't buy that one either.

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Surely, the earliest Filipinos had words for someone as important as their parents. However there should be no question that Nahuatl was a more advanced language than any Pilipino language or dialect. After all it was the language of the Aztecs. My favorite word is *xocolātl*, of course. If in fact the Macabebes are Nahuas, there should be a lot of Nahuatl words in their dialect (if there is a Macabebe dialect) or in Kapampangan. I've been within a few kilometers of Macabebe more than a dozen times but never visited. That's on the list for the next trip.

I found a picture of a group of men armed with rifles, identified as Macabebes. They are fearsome looking, with long hair well below the shoulders. They sure don't look like the average Filipino or any of our indigenous tribes. Another picture shows scores of men milling around in an open area, described as Macabebes waiting to enlist with the American army then engaged in fighting the Filipino revolutionaries. The pictures are authentic but anyone can write a caption.

Since I couldn't find any documentation, there are two ways to settle the issue of whether the Macabebes are originally from Mexico. First is the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain. The archives contain the records of Spain's colonization of the Americas and the Philippines. There might be some record on whether the Spaniards recruited (or most likely conscripted) the Nahuas to serve the galleon trade, then later established settlements. They might even have records of the galleons and their crews. I'm presently trying to navigate the Archivo website.

If documentation from the Archivo General is lacking, the only other way would be DNA testing of Macabebe townspeople and compare them with the Nahuas. The challenge would be choosing which Nahuas. They are a large community, with over a million Nahuatl speakers. I'm looking for volunteers. Anyone going to Seville? Know any Nahuas in central Mexico?

Finally, it should be noted that from that small beginning of Macabebe Scouts, the Philippine Scouts became a mainstay of the U.S. forces in the Philippines. It isn't known how many of the Macabebes stayed to make a career with the Scouts or how many enlisted later, but in the coming decades, the Scouts grew to nearly 12,000 Filipino troops under American officers. The Scouts acquitted themselves well in battle. The first Congressional Medal of Honor awarded at the start of World War II was made to a Filipino sergeant with the Philippine Scouts. At the end of the war, the surviving Scouts were given the option of American citizenship.

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