

## LESSON 3

### Mga Talang Pangkultura: Sa Palengke At the Public Market

Have you ever gone shopping at a public market in the Philippines? What was your experience like?

On October 13, 2010, a news item in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* announced that the vendors of the Langaray Public Market have banned plastic bags and instead started distributing woven bags called **bayong** to their customers.

I still have memories of the **bayong** from childhood—you went to the **palengke**, you brought your own **bayong**. Traditionally, before plastic bags and supermarkets became popular, shoppers went to the market daily (and later, once or twice a week) to buy fresh fish, meat, poultry, vegetable, and fruits. There were also areas when one could buy household items, dresses, even school supplies, and for those who get hungry, small eating places. Vendors rented stalls, and allowed haggling.

The **palengke**, sometimes called the **talipapa**, is translated into “market,” but perhaps more appropriately, should be called a “wet market,” and it is called “wet” because vendors (especially fish and seafood vendors) are constantly cleaning their stalls, making the ground wet.

People go shopping (in Tagalog/Filipino called **pamamalengke**) in the morning or in late afternoon and the market is usually quiet from noon until around 4 or 5 pm. Produce is sold not just by the kilo, but also through other means of counting items and weight, such as: **tumpok** (pile), for example, a **tumpok** of chili peppers; **salop** (or a **ganta**, which measures volume, but is roughly equivalent to a kilo), such as a **salop** of rice; **tali** (literally, something used for tying things together) or bundle, such as **isang taling kangkong** (a bundle of swamp cabbage), and **por piraso** (per piece), for example, **isang pirasong luya** or a piece of ginger.

But what was it like in 19th-century Philippines? Englishman Robert MacMicking writes in *Recollections of Manila and the Philippines During 1848, 1849 and 1850* (1851, 165):

In Santa Cruz market-place at Manilla, between the hours of six and eight in the morning and evening, an immense crowd collect to supply their household wants, and innumerable are the articles displayed in the shops;— here the cochineal of Java, there the sago of Borneo, or the earthenware of China. In the Bamboo Islands the more perishable commodities are exposed for sale; and fish being the principal article of the natives’ food (and also a favourite one of the white men), is found exposed for sale in large quantities. But all so offered is dead, even when the vendor is a Chinaman, although in his native country great quantities of it are hawked about the streets by the sellers carrying them alive, in water, so that the purchaser is certain always to have this food fresh and untainted by keeping; for even a few hours is sufficient to spoil it in this climate.

The market is well supplied with all descriptions of fish caught in the Pasig or the bay, most of which are well tasted; the fishermen of the villages in the neighbourhood being the principal suppliers. A small sort is found in the river very much resembling white-bait in taste. Shrimps are also consumed in large quantities. After the rains there may generally be procured, by those who like them, frogs, which are taken from the ditch round the walls in great numbers, and are then fat, and in good condition for eating, making a very favorite curry of some of the Europeans, their flesh being very tender.\*

Today, the **palengke** is given stiff competition by supermarkets and malls, although almost everyone agrees that it still gives the consumer the best bargains. Moreover, news reports of contaminated meat (called “double-dead” meat in the Philippines) and unsanitary butchering conditions have given some **palengkes** a bad reputation.

The **palengke**, however, is more than a marketplace. In many communities it is a place where the **suki** (regular customer) and the **tindera** can interact, one might meet a neighbor, and where haggling can be fun.

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\* MacMicking, Robert, *Recollections of Manila and the Philippines During 1848, 1849 and 1850* (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington, Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty, 1851), 165.