

# **philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints**

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

**Maria Serena I. Diokno's, ed.**

*Hidden Lives, Concealed Narratives:  
A History of Leprosy in the Philippines*

Review Author: Aaron Rom O. Moralina

*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 65 no. 4 (2017): 523–26

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

***Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*** is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies.soss@ateneo.edu](mailto:philstudies.soss@ateneo.edu).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

contributed to an appreciation of the evolution of Bulosan scholarship, this volume provides readers with an excellent starting point to expand the field and make it relevant amid contemporary challenges and issues.

**Leo Angelo Nery**

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Institute of Arts and Sciences  
Far Eastern University  
<lanery@feu.edu.ph>

MARIA SERENA I. DIOKNO, ED.

## **Hidden Lives, Concealed Narratives: A History of Leprosy in the Philippines**

Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2016. 293 pages.

Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, has attracted scholarly inquiry for a number of right reasons. For one, scholars can examine the ways by which societies and regimes of power have made sense of a disease that has caused mass suffering in different places at different times. While it is now known that the microbe *Mycobacterium leprae* causes leprosy, the disease's longevity had allowed it to gain various cultural meanings in the past, ranging from its Judeo-Christian association with impurity and sin to miasmatic interpretations to its association with lewd behavior and lack of hygiene— notions that are general knowledge in the literature. In the Philippines the history of leprosy has inspired scholarship, from Enrico Azicate's MA thesis, "Medicine in the Philippines: An Historical Perspective" (University of the Philippines, 1989) to Warwick Anderson's "Leprosy and Citizenship" (*positions* 1998:707–30). Yet, there are more stories to tell. Enriching the literature is the book *Hidden Lives, Concealed Narratives: A History of Leprosy in the Philippines*, commissioned by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) and edited by Maria Serena Diokno, professor of history at the University of the Philippines-Diliman and former NHCP chairperson. With Diokno are esteemed Filipino scholars, mostly historians, who authored the chapter essays. Marshalling materials that include missionary documents, travelogues, materia medica, health journals, as well as oral testimonies, the book retells Philippine history through the lens of the history of leprosy.

*Hidden Lives, Concealed Narratives* is composed of three parts that are organized chronologically. Part 1 looks into the precolonial and Spanish

colonial periods, during which a constellation of skin afflictions that had appeared in indigenous nosologies eventually came together under the medicalized Spanish term *lepra*. In a context where no clinical therapy was yet present, these different skin ailments elicited traditional herbal compounds and healing techniques. The advent of Spanish colonialism marked the increasing prominence of Catholic relief work, which offered palliative care to those afflicted with these diseases and sought to convert them to Christianity. Part 2 examines the American colonial period, during which leprosy became a biosocial concern visible to an invasive colonial state. During this period, control measures comprised mostly of medico-carceral approaches, primarily the rounding up and detention of leprosy sufferers, who were then ferried off to the island of Culion, Palawan. Part 3 traces the evolution of leprosy control from the medico-carceral approach to a rehabilitative approach at a time when effective clinical therapies were emerging and global practice was veering away from methods of seclusion and isolation. This shift took place roughly from the late American colonial period through the postcolonial/republican period. In the book's last part, the authors deliberately abandon the use of "leprosy" to employ the less derisive and more politically correct "Hansen's disease." The book closes with two ethnographic studies based on recent secondary materials and oral interviews among residents of what was then the Culion Leper Colony.

A number of gems make some chapter essays a delight to read. In Lorelei de Viana's chapter, a Spanish missionary's description of a Visayan treatment practice—whereby the afflicted was made to sit inside a hole covered with dry leaves and moist earth—resembled the Javanese mystical practice called *tapa pendem*, thus linking Visayan healing systems to other places in precolonial Southeast Asia (29). In Francis Gealogo and Antonio Galang's chapter, Jesuit accounts of a series of events in 1930s Culion show a most interesting case of active patient agency when gangs of male inmates broke into the women's dormitory, took away their girlfriends, and burned the place down (172–73). This chapter also tells of a humorous yet tragic case of baby-switching probably committed by Victor Heiser, who was aboard a ship en route to Manila sometime during the early years of the Culion colony, in tow with healthy newly born babies who were to be admitted to an orphanage. Rough waters during a storm caused the babies' nametags to fall off, after which Heiser had to recall by memory the names of each baby and replace their nametags upon arrival in Manila (175).

Aside from these gems and a few chapters that stand out, Diokno's introductory chapter is admirable for raising issues that disease history scholars need to keep in mind. As per Diokno, the book takes a position to affirm the humanity of people stricken with a medical condition, thus the careful usage of the derisive "lepers" and the deliberate shift to "Hansenites" and "Hansen's disease" in the book's latter part. Such a critical gesture invites the readers' attention to issues like problematic meanings, language issues, and a tendency to adopt the medical archives' prejudices. Through the introductory chapter, the book hints at the historiographic necessity to historicize the subjectivities of the persons afflicted with the disease.

However, for all the book's deliberate effort to problematize the usage of terms, its chapter essays have little to say about the historicity of the word *ketong*, the current Filipino-Tagalog word for leprosy. There are also some cringe-worthy instances when the book, despite Diokno's call to historicize the subjectivities of the afflicted, forgets to historicize the affliction. For instance, De Viana's chapter haphazardly takes indigenous names of various skin afflictions from Francisco de San Antonio's 1624 dictionary to be suggestive of leprosy's existence in the precolonial Philippines (24). She fails to mention that words such as *bukol/bocol*, *butlig*, *buni*, *katil/cati*, *an-an*, *alipunga/aliponga* are still in use at present and generally not interpreted as clinical symptoms of leprosy. She also misses the opportunity to comment on the politics of equating the Visayan disease names *pamatas* and *cascado* with the Spanish *lepra*, in light of the process of medicalization that forcibly brought various indigenous nosologies under the Spanish medical system. Celestina Boncan's chapter takes uncritically the *medicos titulares*' reference to elephantiasis as suggestive of leprosy, but does not comment on the fact that at present the term refers to a different medical condition, lymphatic filariasis (73).

Aside from missed opportunities, dissonance is also glaring in some areas. Rene Escalante's chapter arrives at a seemingly tone-deaf conclusion that frames US-sponsored leprosy control solely on a success-or-failure basis, backsliding to the notion that public health, as education, affirms US colonialism's blessings because it "does not always unilaterally favor the colonial power" and that the "colonized benefit[ed] as well" (105). Ma. Eloisa de Castro's chapter provides a timely correction to a misconception that medico-carceral measures only started during the advent of US colonialism.

She shows that pre-Culion techniques of seclusion and isolation were already in practice at the Hospital de San Lazaro in Mayhaligue in present-day Manila long before the arrival of the Americans. However, she fails to pursue the inquiry as to why both the Spanish and the Americans came to prefer the carceral approach despite differing in the ways they framed their publics. Whereas Spanish missionaries viewed Filipino Hansenites as recipients of Catholic charity and relief work, American sanitarians saw them as colonial citizens entitled to certain rights but deprived of others. De Castro's chapter could have concluded by bringing the readers' attention to the lack of therapy and leprosy's biological threat and repulsive manifestations as late-nineteenth-century conditions that favored banishment and isolation as control regimes for both Spaniards and Americans. Instead, she throws off her reader by saying that the Spanish should be credited for being the first to implement leprosy control measures that are usually credited to the Americans, harking back to a trite complaint that Filipino scholars remain estranged from the Spanish language, continue to rely on English translations, and harbor an "extreme anti-Spanish stance" (58).

*Hidden Lives, Concealed Narratives: A History of Leprosy in the Philippines* reimagines the Philippine past from the perspective of the history of a disease and should pique the interest of scholars and nonscholars alike. The book is evidence of the continuing growth of the history of medicine and public health in the Philippines as a field of study. Although uneven in balance, the chapter essays are still welcome additions to the literature and the book should be followed through by similar projects, perhaps a history of leprosy in Southeast Asia. But if there is a book by the NHCP on another disease history in the offing, it is certainly worth looking forward to.

**Aaron Rom O. Moralina**

Department of History, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa  
<arom@hawaii.edu>

JAMES F. EDER AND OSCAR L. EVANGELISTA, EDS.

## **Palawan and Its Global Connections**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014. 392 pages.

*Palawan and Its Global Connections*, edited by James F. Eder and Oscar L. Evangelista, describes Palawan as the "land of the promise" blessed with