

# Heritage Preserved

New museum is a rich repository of Culion's past as world's largest leprosy colony

A hundred years ago, when the American colonial authorities decided that segregation was the only answer to the Philippines's leprosy problem, the island of Culion was designated as a leprosy colony. In May 1906, the first arrivals were brought ashore.

Today, their story and the stories of the many that followed are preserved in the Culion Museum & Archives, a fascinating repository of leprosy history newly opened during Culion's centennial celebrations last month.

The two-story museum, located in what was the first laboratory for leprosy research in the Far East, houses a wealth of photographs, documents and clinical records relating to the days when Culion was the world's largest leprosy colony.

It also showcases many instruments and artifacts, ranging from the syringes with which patients were injected with chaulmoogra oil to the special currency used on Culion to prevent (it was believed) the disease being transmitted elsewhere.

Despite its reputation as an "island of the living dead," the museum shows how colony residents had a life of their own, holding elections and forming their own council. It also records the pioneering research work that was carried out on Culion by, among others, Dr. Windsor Wade, the founding editor of the *International Journal of Leprosy*.

"The museum will help the people of Culion to know themselves and their past," says Dr. Arturo Cunanan, in charge of the island's leprosy control and rehabilitation program. "It will help them to fill the gaps in their lives."

It also makes a wider contribution — to the history of leprosy, of medicine, of American colonial rule. "It's a rich collection, and our job is to provide access to scholars. There are materials here that can further their research," says Alexandra Botelho, an expert in paper and photo conservation.

Organizing the collection has been the work of Ricardo Punzalan, assistant professor of archival studies at the University of the Philippines. The professionalism he has brought to the project is apparent at every turn, from the decisions on what items to display to how they are presented. "The majority of the time was spent on thinking about what we wanted to communicate, not on installation," he says.

Both Punzalan and Botelho have volunteered their services and are happy to do so. "It's not just a job of work. It's a significant part of our heritage, and I believe internationally as well," says Punzalan. "Our goal is to have the museum listed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This should definitely be part of human memory." ■



Ricardo Punzalan: volunteered his services as curator

#### Reference

Culion Museum & Archives  
 Opening Hours:  
 9:00-12:00, 1:00-4:00  
 Closed Saturdays,  
 Sundays, & Holidays  
 Email inquiries:  
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With its valuable collection of records and artifacts, including special currency (right, bottom), the new museum will be a boon to scholars.

