

In Preparation for Self-Governance: Filipinos' Response to Different Health Measures of the American Colonizer

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Abstract— The Americans had a vision for the Philippines; they wanted to inculcate in Filipinos a capacity for self-governance. In order for this to be actualized, the colonizers stressed the importance of education, written by Americans, and, initially, taught by Americans as well.

However, upon the arrival of the American colonizers in the Philippines, they were welcomed into a disease-stricken country. An underdeveloped public health system and three centuries of resentment towards colonialism made it difficult for the Americans to find a solution to completely impede the mortality rate among the people, and to achieve their dream for the Philippines. Cholera was one of the main causes of the high death rate in the Philippines, and would terrorize the archipelago thrice (1902, 1904 – 1905, 1918) during the American period. The Board of Health's initial response to cholera was inevitably one of the sources of resistance among the Filipino people. It was only when cholera prevention and treatment was introduced into the curriculum that Filipinos became more receptive to American colonial rule.

Using statistical data, government reports, educational primers, and memorandums, this paper aims to look at how the development and accessibility of education among Filipinos became an effective means of lowering the mortality rate due to cholera—more so than other programs instituted by the government. It will discuss how Filipinos reacted to the different measures deployed by the Americans such as quarantine, vaccination, and development of a sewage and waterway system, in contrast to the hygiene and sanitation education schema in place in the curriculum.

Keywords—American Colonization, Cholera, Hygiene and Sanitation, Philippines

I. INTRODUCTION

A TRUSTING personal relationship is important between the patient and the doctor so as to be successful in defeating any health impairment. Such medical practice could have been used by the American colonial government upon seeing a cholera stricken colony. The condition of Philippine public health resulted to several developments of the country, such as sanitation, health care and even the system of education of the society. These changes resulted to varied reactions from the Filipino patients towards their colonizers.

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II. DISCUSSION

A. Public Health and Governance

When the Americans came to colonize the Philippines, it was not only necessary to get the trust of the people who experienced sufferings from the former colonizer, to teach them how to govern themselves, or to educate the society, but to also lead the Filipino people to leave their old ways in order for them to be alleviated from diseases that takes away many lives. “The health of the people was the vital question. To transform the Filipinos from the weak and feeble race they were into the strong, healthy and enduring people that they might become was to lay the foundation for the future on a sound basis”^[1]. The American government believes that they needed much force in order to control the country, but if disease is widespread in the country, such vision for the colony might not be achieved.

B. Status of Public Health in the Philippines after Spanish Colonization

“Cholera is an infection of the intestines caused by food and water containing cholera vibrio.”^[2] Such disease is not airborne or a sickness that can be acquired when a person came into contact with a person who is infected with the cholera virus. Filth, pollution, and no systematic way of managing garbage and excreta is a good breeding ground for the virus. This can be acquired through poor hygiene most especially before eating, unclean environment which in effect makes the source of water contaminated that affects food preparation as well. Thus, the spread of disease is through a germ or virus, which if taken in through one's mouth will to the person being infected by cholera virus.

At the time that the first phase of the Philippine revolution has come to its end, and when the American forces were slowly invading the islands in the 1900's, what they saw is a disease stricken country, whose water system is underdeveloped, public health system non progressive and even its surroundings is unclean. The Americans believed that this might be brought by the previous colonizer [Spaniards] whom they think did not focused on the development of the health of the Philippine society during their colonization of the country. Based from the census spearheaded by the new colonizers [Americans], many Filipinos during the 19th century or during the years of Spanish colonization of the country. “The average death rate was 39.7, but omitting the years 1879,

1889, 1890, when the islands suffered from epidemics of cholera, death rate was abnormally large...^[3]

Aside from the neglect of the Spaniards in the development of public health of the Philippines, the Americans also looked at the geographic characteristics of Manila as a factor that made the Filipinos more susceptible to such disease and will also be the source of the bacteria that will be transported to other provinces. "The site of the city [Manila] is very low and flat, affording but little opportunity for drainage. The River Pasig flows through the middle of it, and on both sides are *esteros* traversing the city and opening to the river... The Walled City [Intramuros], on the south bank of the Pasig at its mouth, is surrounded by a moat, which is also flushed by the tide. The water supply of the city is obtained from the Mariquina River"^[4]. Such environmental characteristics are factors that the American Colonial government cannot control but they need to create ways for them to be able to prevent the rapid spread of the cholera virus.

Such a site became a challenge for the new colonizer that, "The Board of Health has therefore been unable to turn previously existing methods and conditions to sanitary advantage; and has found it necessary not only to develop entirely new plans of improvement but at the same time to combat the result of conditions inherited from the Spanish administration."^[5]

C. American Propaganda towards Cholera Epidemic

Looking for solutions and methods in order to stop or just to regulate the growing casualties of cholera among the people in the Philippines was complicated for the American Colonial government. For them, several factors, which led for the rapid spread and infection of this disease from person to another, are things that they cannot control.

One of the factors for the development of cholera virus in the Philippines is the Philippines' geographic features that made it vulnerable to such disease and will eventually be a breeding ground for the bacteria as well. First is its climate, "It [humidity] favors the multiplication of germs and by lowering the vitality of individuals, predisposes them to various ailments."^[6] Next is the general characteristics of the physical surroundings most especially in Manila. Such environmental characteristics are aspects that the colonial government cannot control but require their attention so as for them to create methods to prevent the rapid spread of the cholera virus.

Another factor that the Americans looked at is man's interaction to his environment. "The Filipinos are essentially an agricultural society, and their town sites [was changed due to their industry and] as a rule selected with a view to transporting their products most conveniently to market places... the majority of towns are built upon the banks... the only water supply of the town. They also serve as an open natural sewer... Stables... built on the bank...Municipal waste...are dumped directly into the stream, and dead animals and fowls are frequently seen floating... Along the banks, women do their daily washing, while here and there bathers are seen [even Carabaos]... fishing apparatus may be seen in operation."^[7] Filipinos were seen to lack a distinction of public places to their own homes. They try to make their surroundings efficient for their economic needs as well.

In consideration with these environmental features of the country and man's ways of living to the given environment, the Bureau of Health have seen this as the primary reason for the spread of the disease. So "as soon as the existence of Asiatic cholera in Manila was confirmed, the Board of Health [created] measures to prevent its increase and, if possible to exterminate the disease before it could spread..."^[8] "Concentration camps... Compulsory hospitalization... The whole city was quarantined and no one might trespass its limits without a personal pass. House to house inspection was made... certain food stuff confiscated and destroyed. Light material houses in the infected foci were [burned]... Block disinfection or infected portions of the city..."^[9] But, it was only a month in which the disease spread all throughout the archipelago (except for those provinces which their island are isolated or too far geographically from the main island. e.g. Palawan).

"... I'd give them a touch of the mailed fist. I believe they should be ruled with an iron hand, whether they like it or not."^[10] These counter measures were mostly deployed during the 1902 cholera epidemic. Thus, it should be considered that it was also during the time wherein the Philippines was under a military government and the revolution against the American colonizers may be dwindling but still present most especially in the provinces. This period of time, the main objective of the Americans was for the country's pacification, and as a reflection of it even its health measures seems to be rigid and strict. In spite of its harshness among the Filipinos it still did not impede the spread of the disease among them.

On the second epidemic year (1905 – 1906) Dr. Heiser initiated a new way to save the souls of these Filipinos from the wrath of the disease. These measures can be described as silent, peaceful, and was executed slowly but surely. They focus more on attacking those who are stricken by the disease and educating those who are still healthy and safe from the virus. One of which is that the bureau tried to establish more hospitals that will be accessible to most of the people, and create a feature wherein the patient's family will see how they were being treated. Another one was the use of disinfectant as a way of first aid to those who will be suspected to have been carrying the virus.

Another way to combat the disease is to reassess the lifestyle of the natives. "The mixed character of the inhabitants, with their prejudices, superstitions, and largely primitive habits of life has also been a constant obstacle of sanitary work;..."^[11] To answer this obstacle they asked the cooperation of the Bureau of Education in teaching the kids good hygiene such as washing the hands before eating, usage of the fork and knife, drinking boiled water in their curriculum. Most of these things are being taught in the primary level. "The aims of the primary curriculum were to enable the pupil... to give him... and to provide him with general information although limited in on the subjects of geography, sanitation and hygiene, government and standards of right conduct."^[12] Through the development of primary education curriculum to answer the sound of the time, even the people at work in the field of education developed also in terms of its role. "The work of the American teachers served as sanitation

helper.”^[13] They did not only prepare for their lesson plans but also were the health inspector in their schools or in the barangays where their schools are situated. Other areas of education such as the Church was also asked by the Bureau of Health to promulgate such directives of sanitation for they know how religion is a big part of the beliefs and way of life of the Filipinos.

True enough basing from statistics a more peaceful means of alleviating the disease stricken colony was deemed effective thus lowering the impact of cholera among the Filipinos. From the first wave of epidemic that happened from 1902 which has “the total number of deaths from cholera... 137,505,000... In 1903 this disease had much abated, the total number of deaths being but 62,843,000 or less than half the number in 1902.”^[14] In 1905, with the reorganization of the Bureau of Health, upon the placement of Dr. Victor George Heiser as the Chief Quarantine Officer, and Principal Health Officer, several changes in public health propagandas were also implemented. Several considerations were thought of that made health measures more effective than those that were deployed on the first wave but still its existence was never put to rest by the colonizers. Thus leading to further decrease of casualties among Filipinos.

These changes in terms of controlling the disease made the people more trusting of the government that by 1918, which is the third wave of the epidemic, “Asiatic cholera caused... a total mortality of 7,509 or 1.94 percent of the total number of deaths.”^[15] Which is actually lower compared to the previous epidemic years wherein the virus was evident in the society. Due to the fact that the American Colonial government is more ready and created several innovations and other measures in controlling the disease such as the invention of a vaccine that will stop the development of the virus in the body, during the epidemic of 1921 – 1922, it helped lessen number of casualties.

D. Reaction of the Filipinos Towards these American Health Measures

In looking at the reaction of the Filipinos during the first two waves of epidemic years, the Filipinos had two distinct reactions to each wave and the corresponding propagandas deployed by the colonizers.

It is to be considered that the first cholera epidemic year (1902) happened at the time that Filipinos were still holding resistance against the Americans. The revolution might have ended already but it does not mean that there are no small-scale uprisings that were happening in Manila and maybe in other provinces. And because of the presence of hostilities, the American government resorted to putting the Philippines under a military government. As mentioned by the Governor General Funston in an article posted in Manila Times, “He [Filipinos] ought to be spanked and spanked hard”.^[16] And because of the need of the colonizers to pacify the islands as easy and as soon as possible most of the government directives are described to be strict and harsh.

The native saw this as very restricting and makes them question why these foreigners are doing these things. “It was true that, in the effort to stop the spread of infection, the Americans sometimes may have overridden the private rights

of individuals.”^[17] Filipinos do not follow all the procedure that the Americans were telling them to do such as quarantine, which eventually pushed people to go out of the line in order to go to different provinces. Non usage of light materials such as *nipa* for building their houses that eventually led the Americans in burning some communities making the natives fearful and resentful of them. When they got the bodies of their sick relatives and not making them see these anymore, it resulted to rumors that they are being maltreated in the hospitals, and many others that only made the situation worse.

He thinks that the government measures deployed in the country was not that valuable in stopping the spread of the disease. Aside from that, making the military people execute the government’s direction in managing the spread of the disease created a different notion to most of the Filipinos that resulted more to the rapid and easier way for the cholera virus to spread in different provinces. “In the state of resentment over what seemed the dictation and ruthlessness of a military occupation, the Filipinos could not comprehend the theory of paternalism... Eluding the futile cordon at night, or shipping across the fields by day, people already sickening of the disease escaped to start a new foci of infection.”^[18] At some point, there was really a reason for the Filipinos to question such actions of the government. Some military men, out of investigation were really found guilty of deploying force and even abuse of power to those natives who does not want to follow their directives.

Because of the disobedience of the Filipinos, the Board of Health tried to find other ways to solve the problem of cholera epidemic in the Philippines. This is how the Americans perceived it to be that “The Filipinos doesn’t love us [the Americans]. He doesn’t know what gratitude is against military rule”.^[19] But for the natives their disobedience is not because of being ungrateful, of being stubborn and of being ignorant, but for them this is just a repeat of what had happened three hundred thirty years ago under the European occupants. These acts of the Filipinos are upon their selfish desires and not for the benefit of the country. “Now in this state of mind, it is easily understood that the methods of the Health Board detention of suspects, quarantine of homes, fumigation of effects, burning down of entire districts – should be to them tyranny. And it is equally easy to understand why they should resist that imagined tyranny in the way taught them by centuries of despotism – through dissimulation.”^[20]

Another reason for this resentment of the Filipinos towards the American propagandas against cholera is their medieval beliefs that such epidemic is a scourge coming from God. The Americans during the first wave of epidemic failed to see how the Catholic Church and religious beliefs is influential to his ways. That man accepts such punishment for it is the only way to God’s glory. For the Americans it seemed ridiculous how Filipinos spent time asking for God’s grace during this trying time, but for their patient it was the only way. “Nightly there is a great parade of women and children about the various towns praying that the disease may be abated by the Almighty. By fair computation it may be shown that if one tenth the cost of candles burned in these procession was laid out for soap in the work of cleaning their bodies, homes and clothes of the

wretched paraders the cholera germs would have to counter a foe stronger than here to fore brought against them”.^[21] That the say of the Church or their parish priest will be the final verdict and would influence how they see things.

But then the Board of Health in the epidemic year 1905 had a different take on the matter. They saw how relevant it is to deploy a more peaceful means that “[the] quiet, effective measures and preserving kindness were far more potent than martial law and armed forces.”^[22] With this consciousness the death rate during the second wave was lesser during the first epidemic year. The Board of Health during this time, made use of education that was not readily available for everyone during the Spanish period, which the natives were fighting for. It was deemed necessary to always consider the relationship of the patient to his doctor.

In the end of the second epidemic year the Board of Health saw such changes as “... encouraging and that with the assistance of the natives and the school teachers throughout the city and the provinces there was hopes of stopping out the scourge...”^[23] For the Filipinos, they listened well and became obedient to the teachers who made health care a voluntary work which was deemed by the natives as very heroic. The Parish priests involved themselves in not only spreading the word of God but also disseminating the bulletins created by the board. And for them, any word that came from their priest is a directive from God. People who are keeping their dead loved ones at home became confident to the Board of Health in revealing their situation. They began following the guidelines in terms of using boiled water and the proper washing of the hands.

Cholera epidemic may still be present but the Filipinos resistance towards these propagandas lessened. In the end at the time of the Commonwealth, the government led by Filipinos is already fit to fight such phenomenon in their state.

III. CONCLUSION

Looking at the existence of diseases in a community is a reflection of its people’s way of life and beliefs, which is part of man’s history. With this endeavor one may see how the Filipinos cultural ways became a factor for the development of the disease and colonial institutions in the Philippines specifically public health and education. It is not ignorance of the Filipinos but the demand for considering his lifestyle in creating health measures is what was deemed necessary to be successful.

Filipinos beliefs, cultural practices, and even previous experience became an obstacle for the colonizers vision of end the spread of the disease. The natives’ ways of eating and hygienic practices made them susceptible to the disease or be a carrier of the virus. The importance of the river Pasig as trading tool and the river of Mariquina, which gives the people back then water supply became detrimental to the easy spread of disease. Their experience of 333 years of colonization that made them fearful of control led the people to be disobedient to the colonizers ways of conquering the disease. Such factors are tough to overcome because the colonizers were not only fighting against a disease but also long developed traditions,

culture and history which cannot be easily denied over night among the natives.

But these cultural practices and beliefs and experiences paved the way for the development of public health and education in the country, which in the end made the American dream of preparing us for self-governance achievable as well. Due to the natives’ “ignorance” and hunger for freedom, giving education as a way to pacify that made the natives dutiful was indeed more successful in fighting Cholera.

In the end, authorities should always be mindful of the culture and beliefs of a community when it comes to pacification. When one does not respect man’s way of life nor have time of understanding their ways before deploying a policy will in the end fail to his endeavour. But if authority would study what will make people obey, what is indeed their need as a society and make use of this, one will be successful and introducing change within a country.

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