

# Book Review

**Aaron Abel Mallari**

Planta, Ma. Mercedes G. *Traditional Medicine in the Colonial Philippines, 16th to the 19th Century*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2017. Pp. XXX + 249. Endnotes, Plates, Appendices, Bibliography, Index.

The history of science, technology, and medicine (HSTM) as a subfield of history is continuously gaining ground in Philippine academia. In this line of historical inquiry, the historian could explore several facets of life in the past—the politics of health and medicine, scientific and medical knowledge production, social histories of illnesses and epidemics, to name a few. Such research endeavors would compel the historian to harness an interdisciplinary approach that draws from a range of fields. In a way, HSTM as a subfield is also a confluence of perspectives, an interstice where the historian is tasked to build bridges.

We see the importance of Ma. Mercedes G. Planta's book, *Traditional Medicine in the Colonial Philippines*, when situated within the afore-mentioned view of HSTM. In this important work, Planta confronts the challenge of writing a history of traditional medicine in the colonial context. Woven in the book is a narrative spanning the whole period of Spanish domination in the Philippines, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, up to the American colonial period covering the first decades of the 20th century. With eight parts including the introduction and conclusion, *Traditional Medicine in the Colonial Philippines* aims to "examine Filipino ideas and practices of health through traditional medicine, emphasizing the use of therapeutic local plants and herbs, and explores how traditional medicine laid one of the fundamental bases for the beginnings of public

---

health in the Philippines” (p. xix). With this goal, Planta charts the history of traditional medicine across the colonial context, maintaining the view that “traditional medicine in the Philippines developed through a process of accretion or the augmentation in the knowledge of traditional medical practitioners as well as researchers and health professionals” (p. xxii).

Utilizing a range of primary sources from friar accounts, vocabularies, colonial government records, and some fieldwork, Planta assembles her materials to write the narrative in a thematic and chronological manner. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the 16th to 17th centuries, highlighting the existing Filipino medical systems at the time of colonial contact, thus laying the ground from where to gauge the impact of colonialism. Chapter 2 also gives homage to the Jesuit friar Franciso Alcina, recognizing his work in documenting medicinal plants in the Visayas during the 17th century. Chapter 3 transitions the discussion to the period of the Spanish Enlightenment in the 18th to 19th centuries, highlighting how political, economic, and sociocultural developments in Spain and Europe inevitably rippled to the colonies and how these had an impact on knowledge about traditional medicine in the Philippines. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the 19th century and hints on the gradual processes of professionalization of medicine during the latter periods of Spanish colonialism. Chapter 6 shifts the focus to the 20th century and shows how the American project of benevolent assimilation attempted to ‘modernize’ medicine and how this ultimately aided in the consolidation of the American regime and public health in the Philippines. Locating traditional medicine within shifting social, cultural, and political contexts, Planta forwards the idea that traditional medicine survived the impact of colonialism and coexisted with the Western system that the Spaniards and Americans introduced and adhered to. Ultimately, as much as political and cultural changes were seen and the traditional place of the native healers were down casted, political expedience and historical exigencies limited the colonizers’ impact in terms of having the colonized people fully subscribe to the Western medical system.

*Traditional Medicine in the Colonial Philippines* breaks ground, inspiring questions for further inquiry and discussion. The book’s narrative takes an institutional approach, highlighting

how the colonial state, the church (and the Friars as part of this institution), and the empire in general, with the policies they enacted, had an impact on traditional medicine in the Philippines. With this approach, the difficulty of recuperating subaltern voices and local agency is apparent. While Planta argues that it was the relative neglect of the colonial government in sustaining research and attention to traditional medicine that had contributed to opening the space for traditional medicine to persist, future research could also underscore how local healers grappled and contested with the colonial regime's intervention with the health of the natives. Other lines of research, for example on religious conversion (e.g. Brewer's *Holy Confrontations* [2001]), had already revealed that such encounters between the colonizer and the native figured to be violent in both literal and discursive senses. Research on traditional medicine could also be expanded by noting the plurality of traditions in the Philippine archipelago. The experience of Muslims in Mindanao or the people of the Cordilleras, which were not tackled in the current work, could alert us about convergences and divergences in the narratives about the history of traditional medicine in the Philippines.

A commendable aspect of the book lies in Appendix 2 where Planta compiled a compendium of known medicinal plants and herbs aggregated from the available materials from the earliest accounts to the 20th century. As this compendium brings together these plants, they are categorized according to their curative properties and the illness they alleviate. Outlined and organized with scientific names, sources where they were cataloged, and ways of preparation for medicinal purposes, this listing will be beneficial not only to researches of history but botanists and other interested scholars as well. This appendix is a testament to the commitment laid out in the book to inscribe and account for traditional Filipino medical knowledge. Overall, the book has exemplified the richness of the field of history of medicine; and would be relevant to researchers engaged in this field as well as those interested in the history of colonialism(s), empire, cultural history, and even the natural sciences.