Histories of leprosy and colonial hygiene

A one-day colloquium - Tuesday March 10th 2015

Organized by KU Leuven, UGent & VUB
Supported by GRIP & Doctoral School Humanities KU Leuven

Program

10h30-11h: Welcome and receipt of participants
11-11h15: Introduction & Projection “Le lèpre” van Gérard de Boe (1938, 9’24)
11h15-12: Leprosy & anthropology – Dr. Stephen Snelders & reply: Jane Buckingham
12-13: Lunch break – participants will be offered sandwiches
13h-13h45: Colonial hygiene - Dra Lisa van Diem & reply: Sokhieng Au
13h45-14h30: Leprosy & education - Dra Evelyne Verhaegen & reply: Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde
14h30-15h: Coffee break
15h-15h15: Presentation Damiaanactie
15h15-16h: Leprosy & music – Ruben Boon & reply: Paul van Trigt
16h-16h20: Concluding remarks by Prof. Jane Buckingham
16h30-17h: Visit to the Damian Crypt

Abstracts & bio:

1. **Stephen Snelders**: Leprosy and the heritage of slavery in Dutch colonial Suriname

Politics of compulsory segregation of leprosy sufferers were executed in a number of Western colonies in Asia, the Americas and Africa. Though the historiography on leprosy so far has concentrated on developments in the late 19th and the 20th century, and the introduction of compulsory segregation in the age of imperialism, in colonial Dutch Suriname compulsory segregation was already public health policy since the second half of the 18th century. It remained so until the end of direct colonial rule in 1950. This paper investigates dealing with leprosy within contexts of social, political, religious and racial contestations and cultural clashes in Suriname. The paper explores the development of compulsory segregation policies within the Surinamese slave society, and especially the framing of leprosy as an African disease threatening white dominance
underlying these policies, and discusses the transformations and so-called ‘medicalization’ of segregation in the modern colonial state after the abolition of slavery in 1863. Though extant colonial sources are foremost those produced by the colonial power, the paper explores strategies to read these sources from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective in order to reconstruct the agency of the non-white population in dealing with leprosy, its own framings of leprosy and its responses to colonial leprosy politics.

Stephen Snelders is a Dutch historian currently working as a researcher on the project ‘Leprosy and Empire’ - a comparative history project investigating dealings with leprosy in Dutch colonies in the East and West Indies (present-day Indonesia and Suriname) - at the University Medical Centre in Utrecht, The Netherlands, and at the Descartes Center for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities at Utrecht University. He has published numerous books and articles in the fields of medical history, the history of drugs and addiction, and on piracy. His most recent book is Vrijbuiters van de heilkunde. Op zoek naar medische kennis in de tropen 1600-1800 (‘Freebooters of Medicine: In Search of Medical Knowledge in the Tropics, 1600-1800’). (Amsterdam: Atlas-Contact, 2012). Forthcoming is his Leprosy and Colonialism: Suriname under Dutch Rule, 1750-1950 (London: Pickering & Chatto).

2. Lisa Van Diem: Discussing colonial hygiene: transnational networks on colonial hygiene between the 1880s and 1914 in a Dutch and Belgian context

My project is on the negotiation of colonial hygiene by 'expert' actors in (transnational) networks with a focus on the Belgian and Dutch context between the 1880s and the start of the First World War. Colonial hygiene was a contested field wherein actors from different professional backgrounds aimed at improving public health in the colonies, as a part of the exertion of colonial rule. The ideas and practices that belonged to the
field of colonial hygiene were subject to change over time and included both medical and social measures. It was fed by a dynamic knowledge exchange between actors in local, national and transnational networks. This field, with its discussions, contributed to the legitimisation and reinforcement of colonial rule in various ways and domains. In my project I focus on the involvement of Dutch and Belgian actors in networks on colonial hygiene. I want to research how and why these actors were involved in networks in the field of colonial hygiene and how their involvement contributed to the legitimisation and stabilisation of colonial rule.

Lisa van Diem is Master in Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology and currently works as a doctoral student at the University of Maastricht (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of History). She is also affiliated to the research Unit Social History since 1750 of the University of Gent.

3. Evelyne Verhaegen: Health education and the construction of difference: Towards an educational history of leprosy in Belgian-Congo, 1908-1960

The last two decades the history of leprosy increasingly has gained the interest of historians, predominantly belonging to the field of medical and social history. There, however, also exist studies that combine both research interests and have come up with challenging views that breach with a disciplinary account of leprosy's history. Nevertheless, there are still some fields to be found that have been neglected, most notably education. It seems that up till now historians of education largely have disregarded the important role played by viruses and bacteria in the history of education. We for the first time will sketch out, by means of the case study of Iyonda (an important leprosarium in the Mbandaka region located in the North-West of Belgian-Congo), how the educational space surrounding leprosy in the Belgian-Congo operated. The analysis of numerous Belgian archives and interviews with missionaries, doctors and
nurses who worked for a period in this asylum for Congolese lepers, will lead us to a better understanding of the production of colonial citizens and the role played by health-issues in this process. The healthy colonial citizen for sure inhabited the Iyonda leprosarium, but also could be found in the homeland as their images circulated around the world and were used in order to sustain the difference between the white man and the black man. Precisely by looking at the role played by leprosy in the colony itself and its function in the homeland we will show the importance of a bacteriological approach for historians of education interested in colonial issues.

Evelyne Verhaegen obtained a master’s degree in Educational Sciences in 2012 (KU Leuven). Since October 2014 she is working as a doctoral student at the Centre for the History of Education at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the KU Leuven.

4. Ruben Boon: Father Damien of Molokai and the (re)discovery of a remarkable music manuscript

In a chest in the Damien Centre in Leuven, which had been locked for more than 30 years we found an old manuscript. This manuscript contains some 15 large sheets with the texts of the Latin Holy Mass and with music staves. The tunes on the staves are of Hawaiian Catholic songs. It is highly likely that the manuscript has been used as a choir book during mass and also functioned as a didactic tool to teach the Hawaiian people Latin and Hawaiian religious songs. The old age of the manuscript, the origin and materials used to produce the manuscript made us resolve that Father Damien could have made it and could have used it to sing together with his people at Molokai. After all, music played an important role in Damien’s work in the leper settlement of Molokai. By focusing on music, Damien followed in the footsteps of his predecessors from the Congregation of the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts who have been working on the islands since 1827. They realized that the Hawaiian people had a
great musical talent, and consequently, music played an important role in their activities. As will be discussed in this presentation, this music manuscript is a unique object, not only due to the remarkable materials of the manuscript, but also because it embodies the importance and popularity of music in nineteenth-century Hawaiian missions of the Fathers of Sacred Hearts, and in particular, in Father Damien’s leprosy settlement of Molokai.

Ruben Boon is an historian. His research focuses on the history of Belgian Congo and on Father Damien and the Catholic Mission on the Hawaiian Islands. Currently, his research addresses the role of music in the missionary activities of the Fathers of Sacred Hearts on the Hawaiian Islands. He is a staff member of the Damien Centre in Louvain, Belgium.

5. Jane Buckingham is Senior Lecturer in History at University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. She is a specialist in Indian and Pacific History and has published on Indian colonial and post-colonial medicine and law and on ancient Indian models of business ethics. Her medical history research has focused on the history of leprosy in both India and the South Pacific and, more recently, the history of disability, particularly among poor and marginalised people. On Monday March 9th prof. Buckingham will provide a public lecture entitled A disabling disease. More information can be found at www.disabilityhistorylectureseries.wordpress.com

Practical information:

The colloquium is free but registration is obligatory. If you want to attend the colloquium please do send an e-mail to evelyne.verhaegen@ppw.kuleuven.be and this no later than March 1st 2015. The capacity of the room is 40 persons.
Venue:

The colloquium will take place in De Refter of the Hollands college in the city center of Leuven (Belgium) – a fifteen minutes' walk from the train station.

Hollands College
Pater Damiaanplein 9
3000 Leuven

Information:

Any additional information can be asked by sending an e-mail to: Pieter.verstraete@ppw.kuleuven.be or kaat.wils@arts.kuleuven.be