



A88 Forensic Anthropology and the Philippines

Matthew C. Go, MA*, Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, C, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI 96853

Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to qualitatively appraise the state of forensic anthropology in the Philippines in terms of its academic, legal, and practical capacity.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the unique challenges and possible solutions faced when working in developing countries with limited local forensic capacity yet high endemic caseloads.

Forensic anthropology, despite its relatively recent maturation as a discipline and obscurity among the lay public, has grown to serve a global need within the medicolegal sphere. However, the availabilities of qualified experts, opportunities for education, research, and training, and material necessities such as facilities, equipment, and funding are not equitably distributed across the world. Moreover, countries that often encounter the heaviest forensic anthropological caseloads also have the least amount of operational resources. This presentation is part of an invited symposium entitled “International Forensic Anthropology,” which features the different manners in which forensic anthropology is developed and practiced around the world. Here, the development and application of forensic anthropology in the Philippines in both the academic and applied domains is reviewed.

The Philippine context, as well as the Asia-Pacific region more generally, provides a prime case for the need for forensic anthropology. In the past decade, the Asia-Pacific region experienced 40% of the world’s natural disasters and 80% of the world’s disaster-affected populations.¹ The Philippines, ranking third for most disaster-prone country, regularly falls victim to typhoons, earthquakes, landslides, and floods, in addition to man-made disasters, such as transportation, industrial, and fire accidents.² The country has also experienced and continues to struggle with episodes of armed conflict, terrorism, and human rights abuses. These factors, coupled with a large endemic population size, widespread diaspora, high poverty rate, and tropical environment, result in a substantial volume of forensic caseloads that could benefit from anthropological input.³

Within the academe, there are currently no programs that are well equipped to train biological, let alone forensic, anthropologists. This has been in large part due to a lack of specialized faculty and, until recently, adequate reference material. The past three decades have seen less than ten papers on Philippine forensic anthropology published, with most of these only resulting from the recent amassment of a modern Filipino skeletal reference collection.⁴ Undergraduate programs in forensic science are rapidly gaining popularity, with forensic anthropology remaining as an undermanned elective.

Within legislative bodies, several proposed bills have implications for both the academic and practical progress of forensic anthropology. Many of these bills move to improve death investigation guidelines in the Philippines and establish a national institute for the forensic sciences. However, these proposals have seen little progress through the legislative process, while implementation, once passed, sees its own set of challenges. Moreover, no regulatory body provides quality assurances in the investigation process nor in the qualifications of individual analysts.

Within applied settings, licensed physicians sworn in as police officers manage the ambit of medicolegal investigations. For daily casework, there are no anthropologists employed full-time or as consultants in any of the responsible governmental bodies, namely the Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigation, Commission on Human Rights, or the public attorney’s office. International humanitarian assistance and anthropological training have been offered for high-profile mass casualty contexts such as Typhoon Haiyan, the Marawi Conflict, and cases of the disappeared from the Marcos regime, but sustainable approaches to integrating anthropology have been lacking. Cases of state-sanctioned violence also present major conflicts of interest when almost all death investigations are overseen by police officers.

While the Philippines stands to gain much from developed academic programs that produce both able anthropologists and well-researched population standards and best practices, the country must also provide the appropriate medicolegal framework in which anthropologists may operate. This work takes stock of the scale, infrastructure, and political will of the Philippine context in that it may provide Philippine forensic anthropology its due appraisal.⁵

Reference(s):

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2. Garschagen M., Hagenlocher M., Comes M., Dubbert M., Sabelfeld R., Lee Y.J., et al. *World Risk Report 2016*. Berlin, Germany: Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and UNU-EHS, 2016.
3. Go M.C. Appraising Forensic Anthropology in the Philippines: Current Status and Future Directions. *Forensic Sci Int*. 2018;288:329.e1–9.
4. Go M.C., Lee A.B., Santos J.A.D., Vesagas N.M.C., Crozier R. A Newly Assembled Human Skeletal Reference Collection of Modern and Identified Filipinos. *Forensic Sci Int*. 2018;271:128.e1–5.
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