

# Isla Providencia



**Venezuela Leper Colony Currency**

**Miguel Chirinos**

# ***Isla Providencia, Venezuela: Leprosy Colony Currency***

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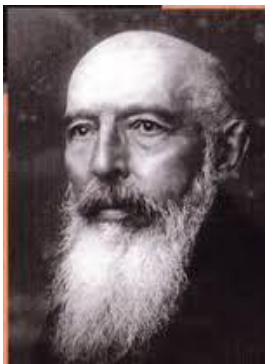
## **Brief History**

Leprosy has tormented humans throughout recorded history. The earliest possible account of a disease that many scholars believe is leprosy appears in a Egyptian Papyrus document written around 1550 B.C. Around 600 B.C. Indian writings describe a disease that resembles leprosy. In Europe, leprosy first appeared in the records of the ancient Greece after the army of Alexander the Great came back from India and then in Rome in 62 B.C. coinciding with the return of Pompeii's troops from Asia Minor.



In the bible the term leprosy was used to cover a number of skin diseases. A bacteria or bacillus called *Mycobacterium Leprae* cause Leprosy. It is an infection that affects the skin and inflammation of the nerves of the hands and feet and can also cause problems in the eyes and nose. Leprosy is contagious, but the danger of catching it has been greatly exaggerated.

In 1873, Dr. Gerhard A. Hansen (1841-1914) of Norway was the first to see the leprosy bacillus under a microscope and then isolated. Hansen's discovery was revolutionary because was the clear evidence that it was not hereditary, a curse, or from sin. After this, leprosy is also called 'Hansen's Disease'. Dr. Hansen never had appeared on paper money in Norway.



Worldwide, from two to three million people are estimated to be permanently disabled because of Leprosy. India has the greatest number of cases, with Brazil second and Burma third. In 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) listed 91 countries in which Hansen's disease is endemic. New cases have been detected in Africa (Tanzania, Madagascar and Mozambique) and South East Asia (Southern India, Nepal and Burma or Myanmar).

In the past, some countries required the isolation of lepers for treatment in a leprosarium (hospital) or 'Leper Colonies'. People in these colonies eat, sleep, live like we do, make purchases, and get payment for their work. This requires coinage and sometimes even some currency.



Here is the following 'Leprosy Colonies' and the name of the countries that have issued coins and some currency: Colonia Santa Teresa (Brazil); Colonias Lazaretto (Colombia); Nagashima-Aisei (Japan); Sunei Buloh Settlement (Malaysia); Colonia Palo Seco (Panama Canal Zone); Culion Leper Colony (Philippines) and Isla de Providencia, Maracaibo and Cabo Blanco Leper Colonies (Venezuela).

In Venezuela, in the late 1600s the *Hospital de Lazarios* was built in La Hoyada, outside of Caracas, for the care and the confinement of those suffering from leprosy. In the 1820s, Simón Bolívar had an idea to create a place where patients are given, and save us from the destitution and suffering rejection. In 1828 he promulgated the decree, which ordered to build a place then known as *Isla del Burro* ('Donkey Island').



At that time, patients rarely had contact with the outside world. For that reason a currency was created to conduct their business transactions. Initially was based on peso of 8 *reales*, and then was based on the Bolivar of 100 *céntimos*.

For several decades this place lived in exclusion. Later, it was renamed to *Isla de la Providencia* ('Providence Island'), however it still was portrayed not only in isolation from humans, but in a monetary system devised by the paranoid belief that evil is spread by the exchange of currencies between the healthy and the sick leper.

The system of special colony money was established between 1901 and around 1955. Leprosy colony money was special money which circulated only in leprosariums due to the fear that the leprosy bacteria would infect other people. Leprosy, however, is in fact not easily transmitted by casual contact, and such transmission as there is only happens through long term, constant and intimate contact with leprosy sufferers and not contact with everyday objects used by sufferers.





The original idea of leprosy colony money was the prevention of leprosy in healthy persons. In 1938, Dr. Gordon Alexander Ryrie in Malaysia proved that the paper money was not contaminated with leprosy bacteria and all the banknotes were burned in that country. For instance, patients in the U.S. leprosariums (including Palo Seco Colony in the Panama Canal Zone) use regular U.S. coins and currency but the nuns who cared for the residents washed all money that circulated in and out of the Colony to remove any possible infection.

In 1939, the National Lazareto of Maracaibo was renamed to the “*Leproserías Nacionales Isla de Providencia*” (‘National Leprosarium of Providence Island’), which forced them to change currencies.



Initially, tokens were put into circulation with the denominations, such as: 0.125, 0.25, 0.50

céntimos, 1, 2, 5 and 10 Bolívares. The following year, *Ministerio de Sanidad y Asistencia Social* or S.A.S. (Minister of Public Health and Social Assistance) decided to replace the tokens by paper money with following denominations: 0.25 and 0.50 centimos, which were reported but not confirmed and 1, 2 and 5 Bolívares (S361-S370) in orange, purple and blue respectively.

In 1945, a Venezuelan doctor, Jacinto Convit was sent by the Ministry of Health to Brazil to see leprosy services in that country, where leprosy is still a major health problem. There he found 35,000 leprosy patients, hospitalized in large leprosariums, which had multiple problems. On his return, he was appointed medical director of the national leprosy, a post he held until 1946. In addition, from January to July 1946, he was appointed medical director Convit Services National leprosy, and since July 1946 as Chief Physician, Division of Leprosy, thus accounting for the entire network organizing national leprosy, replacing Dr. L. Garcia Maldonado, which his signature appears on these notes.



In regards of the design, all the denominations have a sailboat with an island in background at center on face and back. The notes issued in 1940 bear the legend “*Estados Unidos de Venezuela Isla de Providencia-Administración del Lazareto*” (‘United States of Venezuela Providence Island Leper Colony Administration’) or

*“E.E.U.U. de Venezuela Ministerio de Sanidad y Asistencia Social,”* (‘United States of Venezuela- National Health Department’) and some with hand stamp in purple. The serial number is at left in red or black and Minister’s signature at right. Another legend appears below *“Para Circular Unicamente en las Leprosarias”* (‘To Circulate Only in the Leprosariums’).

These notes, domestically produced, were of exceedingly poor quality, both in their printing and in overall design. All these notes have the same size (135 x 55 mm) and circulated in three different leprosariums in Venezuela. Initially, these notes printed by *Litografía y Tipografía del Comercio* and then by *Editorial Bellas Artes*. Both printing companies are located in Caracas. In 1958, the Venezuelan government recovered as many notes as possible and they were burned. Today some of them still survive.

### **Conclusion:**

Today, Providence Island in Venezuela is considered a paradise island, which is located opposite to the City of Maracaibo and is uninhabited. Many of the Maracaibo citizens are unaware that what is left the ruins of what was a hospital for leprosy patients, who were confined there for not having contact with other people. They had their own currency and many of the inmates did not return to the city.

Dr. Convit is a specialist in parasitic diseases, who has dedicated his whole life to developing different lines of research into the prevention and treatment of leprosy, leishmaniasis, oncocerosis and mycosis, among other illnesses of a similar kind. His studies cover various aspects of clinical practice, immunopathology, epidemiology, control and therapeutic treatment of these diseases. In particular, his special dedication in recent years to the pathology of leprosy has led to the preparation of preventive vaccination against the disease. For that reason he was nominated for Nobel Medicine Prize in 1988. He retired in 1996 and became senior advisor for the Ministry of Health. Dr. Convit died in Caracas on May 12, 2014 at the age of 100.

In 2005, a movie called *“Motorcycle Diaries”* made a reference of this disease in Latin America. San Pablo was the location of a leper colony in Peru, located near Iquitos. In 1952, Ernesto ‘Ché’ Guevara (on Cuban notes) and his friend Alberto Granados, as medicine students of tropical diseases, visited this place. There is no evidence that paper money was issued in this Peruvian colony. Also, Ché met Dr. Convit in Cabo Blanco Leper Colony in Caracas in 1952.



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