

THE SUMATRAN ORIGINS OF THE PHILIPPINE SCRIPT

Philippine Palaeography. By Juan R. Francisco. Linguistic Society of the Philippines, Quezon City, 1973, XVI. Pp. 135.

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In the past, the study of the ancient Philippine syllabary has been advocated for a variety of reasons. Some authors have seen in the script the most effective tool against the illiteracy of the common *tao*; others have looked at it as the index of the high cultural development of pre-Hispanic Filipinos; others have treated it as the God-given, most adequate writing system for native tongues; others have used it as a sort of phonetic alphabet to symbolize certain features of local languages. Of late, interest in the syllabary has centered around its historical significance.

Dr. Juan R. Francisco is the one scholar in the Philippines who has dedicated the longest time and greatest effort to elucidate the cultural aspects and historical connections of the Philippine script. His essays written from 1961 to 1971 are centered on the cultural relations between the Philippines and India, and so they deal not incidentally with the remote origin of the syllabary as well as on its more immediate ancestry, geographical spread, and date of penetration into the Islands. In fact, these are also the themes treated in *Philippine Palaeography*, the latest book of Dr. Francisco.

In this last work he organizes his previously utilized contributions, expands points he has already touched upon, justifies the positions he has taken, and finally unveils his own theory on the affinities of the script with extra-Philippine systems of writing. For a proper understanding and evaluation of Francisco's position we must keep in mind the papers he wrote prior to *Philippine Palaeography*.

From the start Francisco sets the principle that since Indian cultural elements did not reach the Philippines directly but through the regions lying between the Philippines and India, it is safe to date the influx of all types of Indian influence in the Philippines in the context of the Indian cultural movement in the intervening regions. Included in the cultural movement is the knowledge of writing, which is unquestionably of Indian origin. This implies, of course, the view that there were no direct political relations nor immediate cultural ties between India and the Philippines, and it also implies a rejection of the theory that some Indian savants migrated to these islands in order to spread their religion and civilization.

Datable archaeological artifacts showing an Indian Buddhist influence so far discovered — two small statues, one pendant and one medallion — have been dated by specialists as belonging to the period between the early thirteenth and late fourteenth centuries A.D. Similarly, existing Sanskrit words in the Philippine languages are estimated to have arrived between the years 900 and 1100 A.D. This period, then, between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries is assumed by Francisco as the time when the use of writing reached the Philippines.¹

There has been another archaeological finding of importance for the study of the Philippine syllabary: a clay pot with a one-line inscription around its shoulder. It was discovered in a Calatagan Cemetery full of Chinese and Siamese porcelain ware belonging

¹ Juan R. Francisco, *The Philippines and India* (Manila: National Book Store, 1971), p. 69. See also p. 88.

to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. The characters in the inscription look similar to Mangyan and Tagbanua writings of today and the pot itself has been declared to be of local origin, but lately considering that there have been attempts to fake artifacts allegedly dug from the sites and the fact that this pot, the only one known so far, was acquired through pot hunters and that palaeographical experts have been unable to decipher its inscription, has created doubts about its archaeological relevance, its authenticity and its antiquity.² If it is found to be authentic and its inscription really related to other Philippine scripts, we would possess the earliest testimony of a system of writing which has remained unchanged and undeveloped from its beginnings, and a further indication that the knowledge of writing is a relatively late introduction to Philippine cultural life, although we must still keep in mind that such knowledge may well have been introduced far earlier than the date of manufacture of the pot.

Collating all the data available – the Calatagan pot, the appearance of archaeological artifacts and the introduction of Sanskrit words – Francisco concludes that the use of writing reached the Philippines almost simultaneously with other aspects of Indian culture, and more precisely, no earlier than the twelfth century.³

Moving on to the consideration of the geographical point of origin, Francisco states that the South Indian beginnings of Southeast Asian scripts is no longer debatable, although the immediate ancestry of the Philippine script is still an open question. He recalls six opinions regarding this last point. The first, proposed by Isaac Taylor in 1883, maintains that Philippine writing came from the coast of Bengal in what is now Andhra Pradesh. The second, held by Pardo de Tavera (1884) and Fletcher Gardner (1943), derives it from the Asoka alphabets. The third view was advanced by David Diringer (1948), who argues that the script is the same alphabet used in some inscriptions of Western Java but that it reached the Philippines through the mediation of Buginese writing and after undergoing some modifications. A fourth opinion is attributed to Constantino Lendoyro (1902), who is supposed to have believed that the Philippine system of writing was a local and indigenous invention. A fifth, spoused by V. A. Makarenko (1964), defends the position that the script has been derived from Dravidian-Pallava, Chera and Kadamba. Francisco himself advocates a sixth theory which rejects any Bugi provenance of the Philippine script and instead finds a closer affinity with Sumatran syllabaries such as the Redjang, Batak and Lampong. He says that the reason advanced for a Bugi mediation is that both the Philippine and Bugi scripts transcribe open-ended syllables only; he himself finds not only this similarity with the Sumatran syllabaries, but basic form-strokes resemblances as well. Out of seventeen characters that the Philippine syllabary has, fourteen are said to possess established affinities with Sumatran scripts.⁴

Of course from the basic identity between the Philippine and Sumatran scripts we may infer either that the Sumatran writing is the immediate ancestor of the Philippine syllabary, or vice versa. And we may advance a third possibility: both may have had a common and immediate progenitor with no way of telling which of its two off-springs was born first.⁵

With regard to the extra-Sumatran kinship of the Philippine script, Francisco holds that we must assign the ancestry of these scripts to the South Indian Pallava-Grantha

²*Ibid.* pp. 73–74. William Henry Scott, *A Critical Study of the Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1968), p. 60, n. 29.

³*Ibid.* p. 69.

⁴*Ibid.* pp. 71–73.

⁵*Ibid.* pp. 72–73.

script through the intervention of the writing used in the Purnavarman inscriptions. He cites the studies of Louis Charles Damais as his main authority to support this position.⁶

Among the several variations of the same script existing within the Philippine Islands, Francisco would assign the primacy of antiquity to a type recently brought to notice and coming from an ethnic group with its habitat in the central regions of Oriental Mindoro, just north of the Buhid tribe. Although it certainly belongs to the same system of writing to which the other varieties of better known Philippine scripts belong, and it even partakes of the same lineo-angular and curvilinear traits that they have, the newly found type of script is said to be of a more cursive appearance, and this is the reason for Francisco to assign to it the greatest antiquity among the Philippine varieties of the script. The Central Mindoro ethnic group would be the earliest recipient of the art of writing.⁷

In *Philippine Palaeography*, his latest book on the subject of the Philippine script, Francisco sets himself a triple explicit purpose: to review the more important works on the Philippine script, with particular emphasis on those dealing with its origin; to analyze the basic form-strokes of the characters in order to discover likely affinities with other Southeast Asian writings; and to trace the development of the Philippine script after it was introduced in these islands.

Besides the Spanish records published in Blair and Robertson, he has new materials for consideration, such as the documents attributed to Povedano and Pavon, the manuscript of Fr. Alcina, data from his own field work among the Mangyans and Tagbanwas during the years 1963–66, other field data sent to him by Fr. Postma about a newly reported minority in Mindoro, and the inscription of the Calatagan clay pot.

Taking up first the review of the theories on the affinities and origin of the Philippine script, he expands and analyzes the view of Fletcher Gardner and of David Diringer with particular attention, undoubtedly because he feels that these two theories are more acceptable than the others.

Gardner proposed a direct derivation of the Philippine script from the Asoka system of writing. Against such view Francisco points out that there are no records of any direct migration waves which this theory presupposes, nor is there any vestige of Brahmanism in the Philippines. Besides, the Philippine system of writing is too imperfect to have been introduced by Indian priests at that time so well versed in advanced writing systems. On top of this, the theory creates a number of problems left unanswered: why, for instance, is it that Indian writing goes either from right to left or from left to right, while the Philippine writing goes from bottom up? Why is there no archaeological proof of the existence of the script in these Islands? Why do we not have any sign of early literary works among Mangyans and Tagbanwas who have preserved this way of writing up to the present day.⁸

There are other objections raised by Francisco against Gardner's views, but they seem to point out imprecise words rather than substantial difficulties with regard to Gardner's theory.

Diringer favored the Buginese as the immediate ancestor of the Philippine way of writing. He depended heavily on Lendoyro and was joined by such modern scholars as

⁶*Ibid.* pp. 73 and 100.

⁶*Ibid.* pp. 73 and 100.

⁷*Ibid.* pp. 74 and 97.

⁸Francisco, *Philippine Palaeography*, pp. 11–13.

Harold C. Conklin and Robert B. Fox. Opposing the ideas of these men, Francisco says that Lendoyro based his comparisons between the Buginese and Tagalog scripts on fortuitous, not systematic, resemblances of the characters. His sources would, besides, appear unreliable. Finally, he also objects to Lendoyro's believing that Javanese and Buginese writing systems seem to have been invented for, or fitted to, these two languages. Statements of this nature earn him the charge that he did not distinguish properly between language and script.⁹

Conklin and Fox called attention once more to the inability of both the Buginese and the Philippine system to write final consonants. But for Francisco, this is not a decisive point because it is the only trait that the Buginese and the Philippine systems have in common. On top of this, he adds, there is no evidence that the Bugi people traded with the Tagbanwas or Mangyans, or that they introduced their writing in Mindanao or in Borneo, which are closer to Celebes and which are obligatory stops on their way to Palawan or Mindoro.¹⁰ Nevertheless, attempting to give an explanation of the inability of the Philippine writing system to indicate final consonants, Francisco concedes that the system must have been introduced relatively late and not by Indians but by Hinduised Malays, Javanese or Sumatrans not too well versed in the art of writing.¹¹

Passing on to the consideration of the writing materials used, Francisco points out that the Tagbanwas and Mangyans of today use Bamboo canes and a small knife called *pisaw* or *sigaw*. The Calatagan pot remains the only sample known so far of a native inscription on clay. Such are also the materials used by the Sumatrans in their writings; these were likewise used by early Filipinos. It is this material that seems to have conditioned the direction of the writing process and even the axis of the script of both Sumatrans and Filipinos.¹²

Direction of writing and axis of script are well distinguished by Francisco. On the first point he repeats the usual survey of opinions of early chroniclers and writers with but one distinguishing detail: he reads Alcina as saying that Bisayans of the mid-seventeenth century wrote in *boustrophedon* fashion, from bottom to top and top to bottom in alternation.¹³ It is also interesting to note that one of Francisco's informants wrote on the bamboo from bottom to top but placed the succeeding columns right to left.¹⁴

Within the Philippines, Francisco ties up the point of geographical diffusion with the temporal priority of origin and argues that assuming Sumatra to be the extra-Philippine point of origin of the script, Palawan and Mindoro would be the first islands to receive the knowledge of writing, whence it must have expanded to Manila, Batangas, Cavite, Ilocos, Negros and the rest of the Bisayas.¹⁵

In spite of this geographical spread of the writing, it has remained basically the same, all variations found being explained as the result of the idiosyncrasies of the individual writers or of differences of time. Talking about several Philippine syllabaries is seen by Francisco as a bastard scheme to create multiple cultural complexes.

⁹*Ibid.* p. 7.

¹⁰*Ibid.* pp. 7-8.

¹¹*Ibid.* pp. 8-9 and 49-50.

¹²*Ibid.* p. 18.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.* p. 17.

¹⁵*Ibid.* p. 19.

He likewise castigates early writers for allegedly failing to mention the function of the script in society. The first statement regarding this matter, according to him, was made by De Mas already in the mid-eighteen hundreds. And even in the twentieth century, Harold C. Conklin was incomplete in this matter, for he said the most common function of the writing is to record *ambahan*, although occasionally it is also used to write messages, but in general the ancient writing is rarely used, preserved only as a tradition or relic of former times. Francisco adds that the script is also used in religious rituals. Tagbanwas read the names of the gods being invoked from bamboo strips, and Mangyans likewise write the prayers used in their worship of the spirit of the chicken.¹⁶

Francisco also reports that in the course of his field trips he has picked up two legends on the origin of the script where the names given to the characters are mentioned. Actually both legends seem to be mnemonic or pedagogical devices used by elders in the teaching of the syllabary. The order or arrangement in which the characters are named appears to carry no other significance than reinforcing the pedagogical message of the legend itself.

He then undertakes the epigraphic description of the script, something not provided in earlier reports, but actually only those specimens collected by himself are described because in his judgement all specimens collected during the Spanish period do not appear to have been faithfully recorded. Mangyan is thus said to have a tendency to be lineo-angular and cursive, meaning to say that each character is incised without lifting the stylus, while Tagbanwa has the tendency to be curvilinear and non-cursive. The cursiveness of the Mangyan implies that the *corlit* (*kulit* in Mangyan and *ulitan* in Tagbanwa) is generally appended to the character as a projection of the single stroke, which in turn is responsible for the apparent change of appearance of the characters when compared with equivalent Tagbanwa symbols. The *corlit* in Mangyan is a serif or half-serif, but in Tagbanwa it is an overturned Roman *v*. Both Tagbanwa and Mangyan make use at times of the dot (.) known to them as *tulsuk* or *tulbuk* with the same function as the *corlit*. Besides these main features the Tabanwa script has tail flourishes and half-looped hooked tails, which the Mangyan does not have.

The Tagalog script, he adds, and other developments of the script are of the curvilinear type and partake of the secondary traits of the Tagbanwa. The Calatagan pot inscription possesses features of both the Tagbanwa and the Mangyan scripts. It reveals a combination of curvilinear and lineo-angular forms but has no tendency to use flourishes, tails, loops or hooks, and the serifs of some of the symbols seem to be essential parts of the palaeographs.¹⁷

In this connection, Francisco attempts to establish the starting point of the Calatagan inscription and the orientation of the letters as necessary steps towards the identification of the characters of the inscription, but still he finds himself unable to provide a sure identification of the symbols and, naturally, he cannot decipher it either.

The third chapter of the book is taken up by some remarks on the relation of the sounds of the language to their symbolization in the script, or more precisely, by some problems encountered by early missionaries as well as by Filipinos in the representation of the language sounds with the set of symbols made available in the script.

According to Francisco, the anonymous writers of the *Doctrina Christiana*, the men responsible for changing the axis of the native characters, did not perceive basic nuances of the language nor of the script, and thus, untrained, they were unable to represent

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁷*Ibid.* pp. 30–31.

consonantal and semi-vowel endings. Since Francisco assumes that the Tagalog script is a development of the Tagbanwa, and today at least some semi-vowel endings are represented in this last script, he charges the friars with ignorance, although he also knows that in Mangyan no consonantal nor semi-vowel ending is represented at all. For the same reason he blames the friars for representing *r* with the character for *d*, instead of with the characters for *l*, as the early script is supposed to have done.¹⁸ Today Tagbanwas represent the final sound of the endings *aw* and *uy* with the characters for *u* and *i* respectively, but do not represent the finals of *ay* and *iw*. Mangyan and Tagalog script, on the other hand, do not represent these final sounds at all.

Of course Francisco is aware that although at first the friars did not attempt to correct the difficulties implied by the inability to represent syllable ending consonants, later on Fr. Lopez introduced a basic symbol to remedy the inability. Likewise he is aware of the further attempts made by Norberto Romualdez already within this century.

The next chapter compares the Philippine script with Southeast Asian syllabaries in order to discover the origin and development of the Philippine syllabary. And so Francisco goes through each character of the syllabary, analyzing its individual traits and features and finding the similarities of each one with one or other equivalent character of the Southeast Asian alphabets, but most particularly with Sumatran syllabaries.

These syllabaries, like all systems of writing of Indian origin, always have an inherent *a* present with the consonant unless a vowel mark is placed on top or below the basic character to indicate a change of vowel. In the Buginese and Sumatran syllabaries, this vowel mark is a dot. Philippine scripts have the vowel mark on the left or right of the characters when they are inscribed and read vertically. However, when the bamboo pieces are turned to the right, putting them in a horizontal position for reading, as is also done, then the inscription is read left to right and the vowel mark appears over or under the character.

Among the distinguishing features of the Philippine script, we must count the lack of a device to represent syllable ending consonants. Arabic alphabets and syllabaries of Indian origin have the *sukun* or *virama* to indicate that the inherent *a* sound of the characters is to be suppressed, thereby leaving the consonantal counterpart of the character alone, and thus enabling the system to use syllabic symbols as alphabetic letters to represent consonantal endings. Such a device is not needed in Buginese, which does not have syllables ending in a consonant. Sumatran languages on the other hand do have such types of syllables, and their writing systems possess the device to represent them.

No mark is used to indicate lengthened vowels, which are always associated with accentuation. The vertical lines, single or double, are used as punctuation marks, and may be compared with the Indian system to indicate the end of a line or of a verse.

Francisco comes now to the study of the *Maragtas* and the Povedano, Paxon and Romualdez documents as sources of information about the Philippine script and arrives at the conclusion that the antiquity of the *Maragtas* record is highly doubtful and that the existence of its older syllabic version is questionable. Regarding the other documents, apart from additional questions he raises, he notices that the pieces of script in them appear written in vertical columns, but the axis of the characters is horizontal as in other syllabic writing of the Spanish period. He is also aware that the characters are used as letters, and so he concludes that these scripts and documents are of doubtful authenticity and certainly have no claim to antiquity.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 73.

To these doubts, he adds a number of queries on the possible authors of these documents and on the possibility of their having been translated from older syllabic records. At the end, however, after raising so many doubts and questions, he surprisingly concludes that since there are no answers to them, the documents are to be used as sources of palaeographic writing pending proof of their authenticity.²⁰

The sixth and final chapter of Francisco's book is the complement of chapter one, where the other five theories on the origin of the Philippine script are discussed. A sixth theory, which is Francisco's own, is here explained thus:

In the process of quantifying fundamental similarities of basic form-strokes of a large percentage if not all of the symbols for each letter, I have discovered that the Sumatran scripts – extant as they still are – appear to be basically the same as the Philippine scripts, particularly the extant writings of the Palawan Tagbanua and the Mindoro Mangyan. The inference that may be drawn from such a discovery is that either the Sumatran scripts were the origin of the Philippine scripts or vice-versa, considering that there have been movements of culture in the region from one point to another and in reverse. Or both may have been later contemporaneous developments of an earlier system of writing which may have been their common ancestor and which may be one of the many systems around the area.²¹

Similarities are quantified by finding what he calls the basic form-stroke of each character in the Sumatran as well as in the Philippine script. Once such basic form-stroke is found, it is used as a criterion or measuring rod to pronounce the pair of characters that possess it as affine.

Actually Francisco has seen three such basic form-strokes. The first is an acute angle with the vertex down (∇), and it is found in ten pairs of corresponding Sumatran and Philippine characters: *pa, ma, sa, ra-la, a, ya, nga, ha, ta, wa*. The second basic form-stroke (\wedge) is seen in *da* and perhaps in *na* also. The third basic form-stroke, an angle with the vertex up (\wedge), is seen in *ba, ka* and possibly also in *ga*. All in all, then, Francisco counts fourteen correspondences out of a total seventeen that are possible. Only three Philippine characters, therefore, cannot be assigned to any of the basic form-strokes: *e-i, o-u*, and *na*.

In view of such an abundant number of similarities found between the Philippine and Sumatran scripts, the Conklin-Fox theory seeking to connect the Philippine script with the Buginese is declared tenuous, all the more so since no connection is found between the Bornean and the Philippine writing system, and what is even more, there are no traces of the knowledge of syllabic writing in Mindanao, both places found on the way between Celebes and the Philippines.²²

The Sumatran affinity of the Philippine script is further confirmed by the opinion of M. A. Jaspan, who adds that there are samples of Rejang and other Sumatran scripts not representing final consonants.²³

Therefore, Francisco concludes, it is with Sumatran writings that the Philippine script is connected. Sumatran seafarers must have brought this cultural tool over to the Philippines, and in this supposition, the earliest groups of people in the Islands who could have received them are the Tagbanwas of Palawan and the Mangyans of Mindoro.

As a corollary of the entire essay, Francisco points out that the cultural homogeneity of all ethnic groups in the Islands, already made evident by the basic unity of all languages spoken, and by the uniformity of beliefs, customs, manners, dwellings, social

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 78 and X.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 80.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 80–83.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 84.

organization and kinship system, is still further supported by the fact that the several variations of the script which have been used by various groups in the Islands belong to one palaeographic tradition.

The cultural importance of the script is further extolled by Francisco, who claims that the writings gave meaning to the early Filipinos' values and beliefs and granted "personality" to the languages that utilized the script. Furthermore, trade and script became significant partners.²⁴

The book has an appendix containing the tables of model syllabaries taken from Fox and from Pardo de Tavera. It also provides a picture of the inscription in the Calatagan pot, the syllabary found in Alcina's manuscript, three pages with several syllabaries from South East Asia, and a number of model syllabaries drawn from the writings of individual Tagbanwa and Mangyan informants.

Philippine Palaeography is a major contribution to the cultural history of the Philippines. Francisco is perfectly right when he claims that the literature about the script is voluminous but for the most part repetitious. His is the first serious attempt to trace the origin and development of the syllabary. The master lines of his thought seem to run like this:

There is a basic fact: the Mangyan script from Mindoro is more cursive than all other varieties of the Philippine script. Therefore this is the oldest among all the variations, which naturally proceed from it. Now, among the dozen or so types of syllabic writing from South East Asia, the most similar to the Mangyan variety in terms of basic form strokes are the Sumatran scripts. Therefore it is from the Island of Sumatra that this cultural tool came into the Philippines. The theory proposing Celebes as the place of origin of the Philippine system of writing is very tenuous because although the Buginese writing from that island has an inner structure similar to the Philippine script, in particular the lack of a device to write syllables ending in a consonant, these two systems are not alike in basic form strokes. Besides, between Celebes and Mindoro there lies the island of Mindanaw where no evidence of ancient syllabic writing has been found. Furthermore, the similarities in inner structure found between the Buginese and the Philippine script are also found between this last script and some cases of Redjang, Kenintji, Pasemah and Sarawi scripts of open-ended words, i.e., words in which there is no consonantal closure.

Clearly the intent of all this discourse is to show that the Philippine scripts proceed from a Sumatran original locus. Such is the main objective of Francisco's book, the title of which may be somewhat misleading.

Granting the initial deduction about the Mangyan script being the oldest variety of Philippine script, evidently the validity of the proof above depends mainly on the actual form similarity between the two sets of symbols. Here, precisely, Francisco has laid emphasis, and here also, I surmise, students of Philippine palaeography may fail to see the high degree of similarity that he has seen.

Francisco's monograph, fine as it is, seems to have a basic flaw, namely, a too light dismissal of documents and records in the syllabic writings of the Spanish period; so much so that many a reader will wonder how Francisco can justify the title of his book as palaeography, which is the study of ancient written records, if all the ancient records he deals with are a single line, undeciphered, an inscription on a clay pot of doubtful authenticity. No piece of script is mentioned in his book dating from the seventeenth century, although there are such records, not in abundance, to be sure, but enough to

²⁴*Ibid.* p. 89.

merit a scholar's attention. The statement that all these records do not seem to have been faithfully recorded needs justification.

Indeed Francisco calls attention to the fact that the early friars changed the direction of the script from vertical columns to horizontal lines. One even suspects that this is the main reason of his refusal to accept pieces of script written horizontally as worthy objects of study, even if they were written by native people, but is this change so significant? Does it affect the shape of the characters at all, particularly when we know that the relative position of the *corlit* is not altered? After the contact with Spaniards, the direction of the writing did change but not the axis of the characters. On the other hand, the pieces of script attributed to Povedano, Pavon, and the rest turned up by Mr. Jose E. Marco return to the vertical writing in columns but with the *corlit* on the top or bottom of the characters instead of the left or right of them, as it should be. This is no longer equivalent to turning the written piece ninety degrees to the right for reading, but a serious alteration of the script, which is not present in what the friars did in their books on the syllabary. And yet Francisco utilizes these records in preference to other genuine documents. A good proof that the modification introduced after the coming of the Spaniards was not considered fundamental by the natives, if indeed they themselves did not read their writing horizontally even before the Spanish era, is that it was accepted generally and without any resistance, as the documents from the seventeenth century show, while other reforms proposed by Fr. Lopez and by N. Romualdez were not accepted.

Limiting ourselves to the Mangyan script which Francisco describes as typically lineo-angular and cursive, and on this basis he proclaims it as closest to the Sumatran script and the oldest script within the Philippines, are we not using here a category applicable only to European alphabetic writing done with pen and ink? Has Mangyan always been as clearly lineo-angular as Francisco would have us believe? Can Francisco's statements be upheld if we compare his sample Mangyan writings with those collected by Paterno, Pardo de Tavera, Meyer-Schadenberg, Gardner and Conklin? Does this quality differentiate it so much from other Philippine scripts recorded by previous workers in the field as to justify the proposition that the Mangyans have been the first users of the script who have preserved it unmodified from the start? Why can we not suppose that had the syllabic writing continued in other regions, say Tagalog or Bisaya, it would have become more cursive? These are questions that Francisco's book does not attempt to answer.

The repeated assumption that the script has not undergone any development in its structure or any change at all in the degree of cursiveness of its characters in over four hundred years would seem to need some documentary evidence, which we cannot get if we disregard the historical records that we may have at our disposal. And if there has been any development or change in the shape of the characters in the last four centuries, could we still validly compare the last such shape at hand with the shape of other scripts which may have developed or changed in another, different direction? Should we prescind from intermediate stages? If we do so, what meaning will there be, then, in searching for common, basic form-strokes between Sumatran and Philippine scripts? And what confidence can we place in the basic form-strokes found, if no attention was given to the surprising variety of shapes of the characters evident in the hand writing of native Filipinos of old, such as are shown in the publications of Fr. Santamaria, for instance?

This is not to say that the entire idea of trying to find a single basic stroke from which all the others may derive by means of smaller additional strokes or small modifications is to be rejected. As a matter of fact, this idea has had its advocates before, although for purposes different from those of Francisco. Thus Paterno broaches the idea for his cabalistic lucubrations, and Pahati and Canseco do something similar in order to facilitate

the learning of the calligraphy of the characters for beginners.²⁵ But the scheme, pre-supposing as it does an overdependence on the shape of letters in order to establish mutual relationships between two systems of writing, does not enjoy the favor of all modern palaeography scholars. Thus, about twenty years ago a group of such scholars began a new approach:

Their chief idea was that, in the study of various systems of writing, formal comparison of signs was given undue importance at the expense of inner structural characteristics.²⁶

Although theoretically there are no limits to the number of linear forms which could be used for signs, in practice simple forms of straight lines, triangles, squares and circles are usually chosen, since these can be easily learned and remembered by the users of the system. The number of such geometric forms is rather limited.²⁷

And the obvious consequence is that resemblances in shape between two writing systems, at times, can be due to nothing but accident.

Even M. A. Jaspan, whose opinion is quoted by Francisco in support of his theory of basic form strokes, says that instances of Sumatran scripts that do not write the consonantal closure of syllables are more significant in order to establish a common relationship between the two scripts than form similarities.²⁸

It is not difficult to notice a common feature in the theories about the origin of the Philippine syllabary: an almost exclusive dependence on the appearance and shape of the characters. Now, visual similarity is difficult to measure and this is why theories of ancestry of the syllabary based on external appearance have multiplied. Evidently a trait which is seen as a similarity by a student is not seen as such by another, or at least not to the same degree. This very lack of agreement is an indication that the grounds on which these theories are based are not quite solid and convincing. Perhaps it will be necessary to find some other kind of evidence before an agreement can be reached.

Thus it may be worth seeking an explanation for some contrasts existing between the Philippine syllabary on one hand and Sumatran and Celebes syllabaries on the other, even though such contrasts have not merited Francisco's consideration.

As in all Indic scripts, the Philippine, Celebes, and Sumatran syllabic characters have an *a* inherent in them. Buginese represents vowel sounds in isolation by means of the basic character for *a* plus a dot above or below it or a stroke before or after. Similar devices exist in the languages from Sumatra. The Philippine scripts, on the other hand, use a dot, stroke or small angle for that same function, but this diacritical mark is applied only to consonantal characters. It seems that only the Philippine script possesses three separate characters, one for *a*, another for *e-i* and a third for *o-u*. Now, this would be a big jump in the process of evolution from a syllabic system of writing to an alphabetic one, if these three symbols are indeed letters for the sounds *a*, *i* and *u*, and do not stand, rather, for the syllables ²*a*, ²*i*, ²*u*, as Harold C. Conklin suggested.²⁹ Or are we to think

²⁵Pedro Alejandro Paterno, *La Antigua Civilizacion Tagalog* (Madrid: M. G. Hernandez, 1887), pp. 360-61. Eustaquio Pahati, *Abakadang Pilipino: Ang nagmalasakit sa Abakadang Pilipino upang maipakilala sa bayan ang sariling titik* (Manila: By the Author, 1932), pp. 16-20. Mariano D. Canseco, *Ang Dating mga Titik sa Filipinas: Philippine Orthography* (Maynila: By the Author, 1942), pp. 16-18.

²⁶Igance J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 138.



²⁷*Ibid.* p. 144.

²⁸M. A. Jaspan, personal letter to Juan R. Francisco quoted by Francisco, *Philippine Palaeography*, p. 84.

²⁹Harold C. Conklin, *Hanunoo-English Vocabulary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p. 5.

that in this point the system has been influenced by the Arabic alphabet as applied to Malay, where there are also three vowel characters: One for *a*, another for *e-i*, and a third for *o-u*, all other intermediate vowel sounds being indicated by diacritical marks?³⁰ Underscoring the importance of the existence of separate symbols for syllable initial vowels in the Philippine script, E. S. Jacquet saw in this peculiarity a good reason to propose a direct descent of this script from some Devanagari model, where such type of vowel symbols also exist.³¹

Buginese and Sumatran scripts have special characters for some double consonants in mid-word, but the Philippine and Makassarese systems do not have such special symbols, although Philippine languages possess a fairly large number of such possible consonantal combinations.

Sumatran systems of writing have a device to elide the inherent *a* carried by every consonantal character, thus enabling the system to represent syllable final consonants. The Buginese and Philippine systems on the other hand lack such a contrivance. This is not a too serious handicap for Buginese because in that language the only consonants that can appear in syllable final position are nasals and the glottal stop, but for the Philippine language it is very much otherwise. In order to show how serious this deficiency is for Ilocano, Father Francisco Lopez, writing in 1621, gave this example:  can be read as *bantáy*, *baltáo*, *básta*, *bántang*, *bantác*, *batác*, *bangtál*, *bartáy*, *batáy*, *bátac*, *batád*, all of them fixed words of the language, not accidental combinations. And Father San Agustin gave another classical example in 1703:  can be *lílíc*, *lílím*, *lílín*, *lílíp*, *lílís*, *limlím*, *liclíc*, *liglig*, *lislís*, again all perfectly native Tagalog words. Naturally these are extreme cases. Still they are enough to show the amount of guessing that the system, deprived of a means to remedy this deficiency, requires. It was precisely in this context that Constantino Lendoyro wrote:

Lacking these and other substantial elements, the alphabet was practically a useless design, . . . It is not possible to conceive how such a pitiable system of writing as this could ever have been adapted to a language of such a complex phonetic character as that of Tagalog and have been made available for the conveying and recording of thought. In all probability, it was never made use of for any practical purpose, being rather in the way of a toy than in that of a useful tool.³²

Evidently Lendoyro overstates his case here, for after all, we know that the system of writing was made use of for some practical purposes. His judgment was drawn from extreme cases like those mentioned above. But apart from his exaggeration, the system of writing really makes the Philippine script look less developed, more primitive and less fit for the requirements of the Philippine languages than the other Indic syllabaries of South East Asia with respect to the languages they are supposed to record. If the Philippine syllabary is a direct borrowing from Sumatran systems of writing that possess means to express syllable ending consonants, we should try to explain why this substantial element was not included together with the other features. It is true that M. A. Jaspán mentions that there are cases of Sumatran scripts of open-ended words, where there is no consonantal closure. Still we do not know whether this refers to the present situation or to a remote past when the art of writing first reached the Philippines.

The third objective of Francisco's monograph is to trace the geographical expansion of the script within the Philippine Islands, after its introduction from Sumatra. The point

³⁰Constantino Lendoyro, *The Tagalog Language* (2nd. ed.; Manila: Printed by Juan Fajardo, 1909), p. 3.

³¹[Eugene Stanislas] Jacquet, "Considerations sur les Alphabets des Philippines," *Extrait du Nouveau Journal Asiatique* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1831), p. 12.

³²Lendoyro, *Tagalog Language*, pp. 5-6.

does not receive much attention in the book. Apparently Francisco feels that once it is shown that the syllabary came from Sumatra, of necessity, the people in Mindoro must have been the first to benefit from the art of writing, and that they, in turn, must have been the agents of its further expansion among the Islands.

I am not sure whether this geographic tie-up between Sumatra and Mindoro-Palawan in particular, must necessarily exist. But even if such connection is granted, do we also have to assume that the Sumatran sea traders who brought the knowledge of writing stopped in Mindoro and did not proceed further to Batangas and Manila Bay in particular? Must we also suppose that Mangyans, who up to now do not write symbols for numerals, a prerequisite for an active participation in any traffic of goods, were the active intermediaries of the knowledge of writing through trade with other Filipino groups?

When Lendoyro wrote that the script must have been just a toy rather than a useful tool, perhaps he was not doing justice to the system. Likewise when Conklin affirmed that the script was rarely used among the Mangyans and Tagbanwas except for recording love songs, perhaps he had not resided among these people long enough. On the other hand, when Francisco reconstructs the cultural role played by the script in former times, affirming that with the use of the syllabary, trade and script became significant partners and that writing gave meaning to the early Filipinos' values and beliefs, he is possibly overstating the case.

We should likewise add that the fourth theory has been attributed to Constantino Lendoyro wrongly. At least in the second edition of his book, he positively excluded such a view and was inclined to postulate a Celebes or Sumatran origin of the Philippine script. Here are his words in one of the several places where he discussed this question: Besides these (resemblances), there are other similarities of a more substantial nature between the Tagalog system on one side and that of the Batak and all other Sumatran systems on the other, and even greater ones between Tagalog and Bugis, all of which practically precludes the possibility of the system being purely a local creation without relation to any foreign source; for no such analogies as these seem to happen as the result of chance or accident, nor as that of any common tendency inherent in the human mind.³³

The view attributed to Lendoyro was actually first proposed by John Crawford, whom Lendoyro quoted, analyzed and rejected.

Crawford's greatest error was that of the Tagalog alphabet being a local invention, a belief which, as far as our knowledge goes, no other writer shares with him.³⁴

What Lendoyro held is the primacy of the Tagalog *language* and its not being a descendant from any of the so-called Malay languages.

He also holds that the capabilities of the Philippine writing system fall short of the phonetic needs of the local language and would fit other Malay languages far better.

It seems only pertinent to mention that if alphabets are invented to meet the requirements of the languages to which they are to be applied, and that if due consideration is had of the phonetic characters of Tagalog on one side, and of Malay and Javanese on the other, such an alphabet as the Tagalog could have been invented only for one of the latter two languages.³⁵

Lendoyro is not claiming here that the Javanese and other Indonesian syllabaries were invented or developed without any foreign influence, as Francisco makes him say. In fact Lendoyro wrote:

It is only to be noted that its (the Javanese alphabet) present complex and highly elaborate arrange-

³³ *Ibid.* p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. XCVII.

³⁵ *Ibid.* See also pp. LXII, XCVI and 5.

ment in which, although not disposed in the metrical order of the Dewanagari, still the influence of Sanskrit is manifest, seems to be the continuation or perfection of an ancient, simpler writing character, in which probably not only the Javanese, but also the Malay were written. This ancient Javanese alphabet, there is some reason to believe, was the same as, or very similar to, the ancient Tagalog one.³⁶

The originator of these views was not Lendoyro. Long before him, W. Humboldt, E. S. Jacquet and P. Favre had already sponsored these ideas. This theory may be unacceptable today. Still we should try to explain how from a fairly developed system of writing as the Sumatran was, only a few features were borrowed for application to the Philippine languages, leaving out some essential devices sorely needed for recording native languages. Could it be that the Filipinos of centuries ago simply borrowed the idea of writing, but not a fully complete set of symbols in an already existing system of forms and structure? Perhaps we should also consider the apparent ease with which the people of Java and Sumatra could device a set of new symbols to record a language in writing. T. S. Raffles said:

It is not unusual for the Javans, in carrying on any secret or political correspondence, to adopt a mystical language, known only to the parties themselves.³⁷

And W. Marsden had already written:

It would indeed be extraordinary, and perhaps singular in the history of human improvement, that divisions of people in the same island, with equal claims to originality, in stages of civilization nearly equal, and speaking languages derived from the same source, should employ characters different from each other, as well as from the rest of the world. It will be found, however, that the alphabet used in the neighboring island of Java (given by Corneille Le Brun), that used by the Tagala people of the Philippines (given by Thevenot), and by the Bugis people of Celebes (given by Capt. Forrest), vary at least as much from these and from each other, as the Rejang from the Batta.³⁸

But if this is so, the search for basic form strokes between two such systems of writing may not prove sufficiently fruitful.

It is said that Lendoyro failed to distinguish between language and script. But, apart from our embracing or rejecting his theories on the origin of the script, this accusation does not seem correct. We have just mentioned his views about the influence of Sanskrit on Javanese writing, and of Buginese on the Philippine script. He also accepted the migration of the Malay people from the Asiatic mainland.³⁹ Nevertheless, even if hesitatingly, he proposed a South African origin for both Malagasy and Tagalog languages, which he recognized as structurally closely linked.⁴⁰

Regarding the origin of the knowledge of writing among the Mangyans, Glicerio Ordoñez made some remarks that may prove to be another lead worthwhile pursuing. He wrote in 1906:

I have given my best efforts to discover the origin of these Mangyans, but it is very strange that in their language are found Tagalog, Visayan and Iloko words, so that I suspect that the ancestors of these people have been people of Batangas, Zambales and Panay, fugitive from the Moro pirates.⁴¹

³⁶*Ibid.* p. LXII. See also p. XCVI.

³⁷Thomas Stanford Raffles, *The History of Java* (Ed. Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints – 1817–; 2 vols. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965), Vol. I, p. 370.

³⁸William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (Ed. Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints: Reprint of the Third Edition – 1811–; Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 201.

³⁹Lendoyro, p. XXV. See also p. IX.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* p. CXIV.

⁴¹Glicerio Ordoñez, Manuscript notes on the Mindoro Mangyans, Bulalacao, 1906, quoted by Fletcher Gardner and Ildefonso Maliwanag, *Indic Writing of the Mindoro-Palawan Axis* (3 vols.; San Antonio, Texas: Witte Memorial Museum, 1939–41), 59.

Francisco charges the friar editors of the *Doctrina Christiana* with ignorance for representing the sound *r* with the character for *d* instead of with the symbol for *l*. He also blames them for their failure to represent the final sound of the ending *aw* and *uy* with the corresponding character as Tagbanwa writing does today. He cites the words *panau*, *aldau*, *urnui* being written in syllabics with three characters each: *pa na u*, *a da u*, *u nu i*. Perhaps Francisco has disregarded the fact that in the early sixteen hundreds, native people themselves signed the names *Maria*, *Francisco*, as *ma di a*, and *pa da si ku* or *pa la si ku*. Regarding the few instances of Tagbanwa words where both the on-glide and off-glide of the vowel cluster seem to be recorded in writing, one would like to be sure whether such word endings are true diphthongs in Tagbanwa, for if these words cited are trisyllabic with the third syllable beginning with the glottal stop, and therefore the endings being not truly diphthongs, we would have here a perfect agreement with the procedure used in early native documents and followed by the early friars. On the other hand, if these endings are truly diphthongs we would have an instance in which a syllabic character is used specifically as an alphabetic letter, a recent and truly important step in the evolution from a syllabic system of writing to an alphabetic one. In neither event could we accuse the friars of ignorance or misinformation.

Francisco interprets Father Alcina's remarks on the process of writing among the Waray people as saying that the direction of the script was *boustrophedon*, that is, it went from bottom to top and top to bottom in alternation. For my part, I fear that such is not the correct interpretation of Father Alcina's words, which admittedly are not too precisely redacted. He says:

In ancient times these natives, like the Chinese and Japanese, wrote vertically starting in reverse from the right hand and going towards the top, and then their columns were drawn from the bottom upwards, coming to an end at the left hand where we start the writing.⁴²

He comes to say, in other words, that the columns were drawn from bottom to top, succeeding one another from right to left.

Several times in his book, Francisco mentions that there are no historical references to the existence of the script in Panay and Cebu. On another occasion, he says that the script in the *Doctrina Christiana*, just like the J. E. Marco 'documents', was inscribed fairly late in the Spanish period. These and other similarly inadvertent remarks seem to indicate that Francisco did not avail himself sufficiently of bibliography on the topic from the Spanish era. For, besides Father Delgado, who mentioned the Bisayans in general as possessing the art of writing, we have the testimony and model syllabary given by Father Mentrída in his *Arte de la Lengua Bisaya Hiliguayna de la Isla de Panay*, first edited in the sixteen thirties. We know about the script of Cebu from Father Francisco Encina. Likewise we know that writing existed among the Bicolanos by the testimonies of Fathers Marcelo de Ribadeneira and Marcos de Lisboa. We may also add that we still possess specimens of syllabic writing done in Panay by people from Bantayan Island. Furthermore, it is very probable that the *Doctrina Christiana* edited by Father Cristobal Jimenez, S.J. and printed in Manila in 1610 was also in Bisayan script.

Most of these testimonies and samples do not date from late in the Spanish era, but from the early years of the seventeenth century, within fifty years after Legaspi first set foot on the left bank of the Pasig river.

⁴² "Antiguamente escribian estos Yndios como los Chinas y Japones de arriba abajo comenzando al rebes desde la mano derecha hacia lo alto, y luego sus lineas de abajo arriba hasta acabar en la mano izquierda por donde nosotros comenzamos," . . . Francisco Ignacio de Alcina, "The Muñoz Text of Alcina's History of the Bisayan Islands" -1668-. A translation from a microfilm of the Spanish text in the Biblioteca de Palacio, Madrid, by Victor Baltazar 4 vols.; [University of Chicago], III, 37.

As it was hinted above, the evidence brought to bear in defense of a total lack of development of the Mangyan and Tagbanwa writing systems from the time other Philippine scripts were extinct up to the present time is too meager to warrant so broad a conclusion.

A similarly broad statement claiming that old chroniclers did not bother to say what social function the script had among the Filipinos is simply not correct, for they do specify what such usage was.

Francisco finds the Philippine syllabic writing system grossly deficient because of its inability to record diphthongs and the *pěpět* vowel.⁴³ This is a surprising statement if we keep in mind that such a system of writing was designed to represent orthographically the sounds of Philippine native languages, not any other phonetically unrelated language; and it is well known that it is quite possible to analyze a number of Philippine languages. Tagalog among them, phonologically without recourse to the notion of diphthong.

Although he recognizes these deficiencies in the Philippine system of writing, still Francisco proclaims that the difficulties experienced by Spanish missionaries to write books down in the ancient script betray their own basic deficiencies in understanding the nuances of both language and script. This prompts him to dismiss the *Doctrina Christiana* and the *Belarmino* as not being Tagalog documents in the real sense.⁴⁴

Perhaps Francisco overlooks the fact that the catechisms, such as those mentioned above, were meant to be books of easy access to the people and written in as simple a language as possible. We must presume, therefore, that they were written and edited with considerable care. Besides, being among the first materials printed in the native language and only a few years after their arrival, it would be unrealistic to think that the missionaries wrote them without the help of native speakers and writers. If actual errors appeared in the books, we must consider whether these were the fault of the writer, the printer or engraver or the editor, not forgetting the difficulties entailed in printing a book in the circumstances surrounding the missionaries at that time. In the case of errors found in the *Belarmino* of Fr. Lopez, we should keep in mind that he was actually testing a new system of writing he himself devised.

We should also consider that at that time, spelling was not yet fixed, and as a matter of fact we find not a few departures from normality even in documents certainly composed by native writers, as can be seen in contracts preserved in the archives of Santo Tomas. But the internal structure of the writing system was perfectly grasped by the missionaries, and in point of fact, their books show such structure as identical not only with other contemporary samples of native writings but also with samples of script written by Mangyans and Tagbanwas of today. And what has been said about the internal structure of the syllabary we may also restate about the characters, although here we must admit that not all model syllabaries seen in grammars through the last four centuries of Philippine history have the shape of the characters correctly reproduced in all details, but this deficiency does not extend to the *Doctrina* and the *Belarmino*. If missionaries repeatedly complained that the native writing system was easy to write but difficult to read, such judgment is as valid today as when they first made it and does not imply a lack of knowledge of the system of writing. Finally we must add that although the missionaries were not professional linguists, still the phonetic analysis of Philippine language that they made, and on which their alphabetic transcriptions were based, was fairly good, since the orthographic norms they followed were the same as those we use today with but a few

⁴³ Francisco, *The Philippines and India*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 87.

corrections. They are not ideal, of course, but they are quite viable as far as alphabetic writing of most peoples go even today.

The points raised about some statements made and procedures used in Francisco's *Philippine Palaeography* should not becloud the fact that this is the best book thus far published on the subject. His views deserve serious consideration, and, we feel sure, no future statement on the matter can be made which would disregard his monograph. *Philippine Palaeography* is really an important contribution to the cultural history of the Philippines.