

THE WORLD'S WRITING SYSTEMS

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Insular Southeast Asian Scripts

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In 1593, two writing systems were united on the pages of the first book published in the Philippines, a *Doctrina Christiana*, which represented Spanish with a Roman (specifically Gothic Rotunda) script and Tagalog with an Indic script (Conklin 1991). About 2,500 years before, the two scripts had separated from their West Semitic ancestor and started to make their way around the world: one, Phoenician, headed west, took on new forms in Greece and Rome, spread throughout Europe, and continued to the Americas; the other, Aramaic, headed east, took on new forms in India, and spread, with continuing new forms, through most of mainland Southeast Asia (minus Vietnam) and the full extent of Indonesia before reaching the Philippines as late as 1300 C.E., probably by way of Sulawesi (Celebes). After circling the world in opposite directions, the two scripts were reunited when Spanish ships crossed the Pacific from Acapulco to Manila only years before the publication of the *Doctrina*.

The Insular Southeast Asian portion of the script circle developed over a millennium as the South Indian scripts of the Pallava dynasty joined commerce and religion in crossing the 3000 miles from the Straits of Malacca to the Philippines (de Casparis 1975, Noorduyt 1991, Scott 1984). Longstanding textual traditions have been attested by writings on stone and copper plates (Java and Bali, 9th century), bark books (Sumatra: Batak and Rejang, 18th century), latterday copies of earlier lontar leaf manuscripts (Sulawesi: Buginese and Makasarese, 14th century), and firsthand reports by travelers and missionaries (Philippines, 16th century). Some traditions of writing were extensive; missionary reports from the Philippines, for example, claim universal literacy for the sixteenth century (Reid 1988). Under Western colonial influence, the Indic script traditions of Insular Southeast Asia have been in all cases made marginal to Roman and sometimes Arabic scripts, but survive in traditional contexts under local circumstances and in schools for children in Java, Bali, Sulawesi, and the Philippines (Kaseng 1978, Postma 1989).

Structure and historical continuity: The Holle charts

In 1877, K. F. Holle gathered 198 exemplars of scripts from India and much of Southeast Asia and displayed them in 52 pages of charts to show conclusively that they

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Volgorde der Letters	E. [SUMATRA]						F. [CELEBES]				G. [BIMA]			H. BORNEO I. PHILIPPINE J. NEOLINER		
	127	128	129	130	131	132	133	134	135	136	137	138	139		140	141
	Pasé-mali	Rejang Ourne-landen Kroeng Kroeng	Mu-deling	Ang-kola	Toba	Daem	Makassar	Bogob	Onil. Makass. Alph. volgeus	Matties	Raffles	Oud in onbruik	geraakt Alph. volgeus	Raffles	Alph. volgeus	Alph. volgeus
D _H																
N																
P																
P _H																
B																
B _H																
M																
I _J																
-J																
R																
-R																
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H																
-H																

FIGURE 56. Page 20 from Holle (1877), showing a continuity in sixteen scripts, listed west to east from Sumatra through Sulawesi to the Philippines.

comprised a single group of scripts. The charts were constructed by listing the names of Sanskrit letters in the left-hand column and lining the rows with the scripts in order from west to east; thus, columns 1–15 show scripts from India, column 20 gives us Tibet, 28 Khmer, 55–64 Old Javanese, 111 Bali, 132 Toba Batak, and 142 a few graphs from the Philippines. FIGURE 56 displays one chart showing both the similarities and the variations in graphic systems from Sumatra, Sulawesi, and the Philippines. Aside from the peculiarly florid Bima script columns, the other rows all exhibit easy-to-imagine continuities. Where the Rejang (129) give a diamond shape to the *ra* syllable, the Toba Batak (132) flatten it out, and the Buginese (135) elevate the middle. Such patterned variation provides internal coherence to individual systems of graphs, as well as systematic contrast between them. In a small volume explicating the charts, Holle (1882) advises that the differences among the scripts can be seen to “have taken place in gradual fashion,” and, if the intermediary forms are included, “the sequence of changes and the relationship become clear.”

Indic scripts are fairly thorough in representing consonant–vowel syllables (CV) or, more precisely, consonants which, when unmarked, end with an inherent *a* sound. Most systems also contain graphs for independent vowels, diacritics for altering the vowel sounds accompanying the initial consonants, and a few graphs for special purposes. From the scripts listed in FIGURE 56, for example, Rejang consists of 23 consonantal characters, plus 13 diacritics for changing or eliminating the inherent *a* (Jaspan 1964); Toba Batak consists of 16 consonantal characters, 3 vocalic characters, 4 named diacritics that change or delete the inherent *a*, another diacritic that gives a syllable a final velar nasal *ŋ*, and long curved punctuation marks indicating paragraph boundaries and textual structures (Tuuk 1867). In South Sulawesi, the Indic script includes three dots to mark off sentence boundaries and the use of red ink to mark the first graph of a personal name (Hilgers-Hesse 1967).

Writers working in languages with many closed syllables (CVC as a minimum form) have developed an interesting range of responses to the open-syllable graphs of the Indic scripts. The Sumatran scripts developed a special mark to eliminate the vowel of the previous syllable, thereby leaving a consonant in a syllable-final position. Old Javanese (Kawi) retains the Indic device of writing consonant clusters by putting one consonant symbol below another (see the sample of Javanese on page 479). The Sulawesi and Philippine scripts stand at the opposite extreme and leave their final consonants with no representation. This is not surprising in the first case, for the open-syllable languages of Sulawesi had little need to add syllable-final consonants; but the Philippine languages, rich in closed syllables, could have used such representation, but did not develop it. Together the two cases are taken as an argument for the Philippine scripts developing from the Sulawesi scripts: if Philippine writers had received a script with conventions for representing closed syllables, they would have kept them (Conklin 1949A, Scott 1984).

Cultural uses of the writing systems of Insular Southeast Asia

For graphic form, the Holle charts display both a continuity across time and space and a diversity under local conditions. Study of the cultural use of the scripts can show the same, although weaker pattern. At first glance, the continuities are overwhelming. In most examples—Kawi almanacs, Batak love magic, Rejang maxims, and South Sulawesi medical lore—a people use literacy to document their entreaties to the spirit world, to state the goals and rules governing social behavior, and to enjoy songs and other aesthetic pleasures. Record-keeping, taxation, and science—the usually acclaimed uses and consequences of literacy—are subordinate or absent (as in ancient India). There is diversity as well. Despite continuities in use across the cultures of Insular Southeast Asia, ethnographic accounts reveal the importance of local contexts.

Sumatra: Batak

Among the Batak, the *pustaha* ‘tree bark manuscripts’ are written in syllabary from left to right, and sometimes vertically. Used by *datu* ‘priests’ to write the Malay, Toba, Dairi, Asahan, Mandailing, and Angkola languages, the Batak script is devoted largely to recording magical formulae and calendrical information. Writing is said to be a predominantly male activity.

Sumatra: Rejang

The script used by the Rejang is often called *ka-ga-nga* for its first three syllables, listed in the usual Indic order. The Rejang use the script to represent love songs (in a literary language), spells, incantations, maxims, clan histories, and some closely guarded epics by inscribing them on materials such as bark cloth, bamboo, rattan, buffalo horn, and (now lost) copper plates. Jaspan (1964) found only a few hundred literates among 180,000 Rejang speakers.

Java and Bali

Kawi (literally ‘poetry’) refers to both a special register of Old (and sometimes Middle) Javanese and the script (*aksara jawa*) by which it is represented. In contemporary Java, the *kawi* speech register is used regularly only in *wayang* shadow puppet dramas when the puppeteer stops the action of the play to sing *kawi* verses called *suluk*. The audiences and even the performers rarely understand the words. Most *kawi* genres are literary and aesthetic: fables, epics, chronicles, but the script is used for almanacs as well. In Bali, *kawi* is a more productive literary medium; it is still the language of traditional ritual and in law courts.

- 1.
2. bakal hana bebedune dhewedhewe.
3. ba'kal ḥ'na bəbədū'ne d̥ewəd̥e'we
4. result will burden oneself

'Do not only be happy when holding power, or unhappy when you do not have power, for these attitudes have their own punishment.' —Socharto 1987: 188.

South Sulawesi: Buginese and Makasarese

Writing is often called *lontara'*, after the palm leaves on which it is often inscribed. A wide range of genres is written by a *palontara'* 'writing specialist' on special occasions such as marriage. At one time both the Buginese and Makasarese extended reading and writing to contracts, trade laws, treaties, and maps to cover extensive commercial and maritime activities (Schwartzberg 1994).

The Buginese script comprises 18 consonant letters and one vowel letter (each with inherent -a; TABLE 45.5), as well as diacritics for five vowels (TABLE 45.6). Syllable-final consonants are unexpressed. There is one punctuation mark.

SAMPLE OF BUGINESE

1. Buginese:
2. Transliteration: eka' eka' garé. eka' séuwa wetu.
3. Transcription: əŋka əŋka gare? əŋka seuwa wəttu
4. Gloss: was was story was one time

- 1.
2. eka' séuwa aru makunrai ri luwu.
3. əŋka seuwa aruŋ makunrai ri luwu
4. was one princess woman in Luwu

- 1.
2. masala uli.
3. masala uli
4. problem skin

TABLE 45.5: Buginese Letters

	ka	[ka]		ga	[ga]		nga	[ŋa]		[ŋka]
	pa	[pa]		ba	[ba]		ma	[ma]		[mpa]
	ta	[ta]		da	[da]		na	[na]		[nra]
	ya	[ja]		ra	[ra]		la	[la]		[wa]
	sa	[sa]		a	[a]		ha	[ha]		

TABLE 45.6: Buginese Vowels

	é	[e]		e	[ə]		ó	[o]		i	[i]		u	[u]
--	---	-----	--	---	-----	--	---	-----	--	---	-----	--	---	-----

'Once there was a story, once upon a time, about a princess in Luwu with leprosy.'

—After Damais 1948: 379.

An arresting case: The Hanunóo of Mindoro, Philippines

With the arrival of the Spanish in the Philippines over four hundred years ago, the Indic scripts fell into disuse in all but the least accessible places. In 1947, Conklin (1949B) found the scripts still in use among three cultural groups, two in the mountains of Mindoro (Hanunóo, Buhid) and one on the island of Palawan (Tagbanua). The Hanunóo still use a distinctive Indic script to read, write, memorize, and exchange messages on a wide range of topics. They use the point of a knife to incise graphs onto bamboo—and, to a lesser extent, trees, house beams, and whatever else comes to hand. The main genre of writing, accounting for up to 85% of written communications, is love songs (Conklin 1949A, 1955, 1960; Postma 1989). The other major function of the script is correspondence. About 70% of the six thousand Hanunóo are literate enough to be full participants in the rounds of courtship and poetry that dominate Hanunóo leisure. Every family has a minimum of one person who can read and write.

Literacy has a central place in Hanunóo culture, and most adolescents achieve it quickly. Not learning carries no penalty, although it is apparently more fun to read, write, and court than just to court (Conklin 1959). In Conklin's (1960) account, a young girl, Maling, at the start of adolescent courtship took an interest in transcribing and memorizing love songs. Within a few months, not long after her original practice texts had likely been devoured by weevils, Maling could write down her own songs. The Hanunóo do not have a conventional order for memorizing their letters, and Maling worked first with the letters of her own name and gradually added new ones. If she had been left-handed, she could have worked in a mirror image, for the Hanunóo read with equal skill in all directions.

Words in Hanunóo are primarily disyllabic, and syllables can be closed by a final consonant in a CVC shape. The Hanunóo script, shown in TABLE 45.7, represents only vowel-final syllables.

Three graphs represent the vowels alone; fifteen graphs represent syllables consisting of a consonant–vowel pair; in addition, each of the fifteen CV syllables can have its final vowel changed by the addition of a *kulit*, a small diacritic on the left or

TABLE 45.7: The Hanunóo Syllabary (after Conklin 1971)^a

	q-	h-	p-	k-	s-	l-	r-	t-	n-	b-	m-	g-	d-	y-	ñ-	w-
-a- ^b																
-u-																
-i-																

a. Listed in the 16th-century Tagalog sequence, with the addition of r-; no Hanunóo order is known today.
 b. The symbol ~ represents any consonant or no consonant.

