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Fernández Rodríguez, R.

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Early writing and printing in the Philippines

Posted on [10 July 2013](#) by [rebecafr](#) — [7 Comments](#)

Rebeca Fernández Rodríguez

Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro

Printing and publishing began in the Philippines with the arrival of the Spanish in 1565. Encountering an enormous number of native languages, the Spaniards felt a pressing need to describe the languages most commonly spoken in the archipelago in order to communicate with the Filipinos. With the establishment of Spanish sovereignty over the Philippines, the Spanish Crown issued several contradictory laws regarding language. The missionaries were urged to learn the vernacular languages but were subsequently required to teach Spanish. For this reason, missionaries learnt the Philippine languages by writing vocabularies, grammars, and catechisms.

Philippine linguistic writing – grammars and vocabularies – is extensive and exhaustive. There was a pre-Hispanic writing system in the Philippines, *baybayin*, but it was used for personal communication and not for recording literature or history. For this reason missionaries had to start from the beginning. By describing the languages they contributed to their survival. In the last decades scholars have studied manuscripts and early editions of Tagalog, Bisaya and Ilocano texts and have been re-editing them. This is the case for *Arte y reglas de la lengua tagala* (1610) by Francisco Blancas de San José (1560–1614) edited by Quilis in 1997; *Bocabulario de la lengua bisaya, hiligueyna y Haraya de la isla de Panay y Sugbu y para las demas islas* (1632) by

Follow

de Métrida (1559–1637) edited by García–Medall in 2004; and *Arte de la lengua japona* (1732), *Tagalysmo elucidado* (1742) and “*Arte chinico*” (1742) by Melchor Oyanguren de Santa Inés (1688–1747), edited by Zwartjes (2010). There is also an unpublished PhD dissertation about the *Calepino ylocano* (ca. 1797) of Pedro Vivar (1730–1771) and Andrés Carro (?–1806) by Fernández Rodríguez (2012).

Sueiro (2003:171) compared the number of vocabularies and grammars. From 1580 to 1610 seven dictionaries and nine grammars were written but all are lost. We have only heard about them through biographers and chroniclers or through authors of future versions who claim to have worked on them. From the 17th century, we still have three vocabularies and nine grammars but five vocabularies and twelve grammars are lost.

In the 18th century, eight dictionaries were written, two of which were reprints and eleven more are supposed to be lost; four new grammars and ten reprints are still extant while ten grammars are lost. In the 19th century sixty-seven vocabularies, fifteen of which were reprints were written and seven are lost. Forty-four new grammars were written, twenty reprinted and only six lost. Despite their importance, many vocabularies and grammars remain unpublished or survive in a handful of copies generally found only in specialized research libraries or in private collections – sometimes not even catalogued properly.

Printing was very expensive and the benefits very few but in the Philippines it was a basic necessity. In 1593, just twenty-eight years after the arrival of the Spaniards, Father Domingo de Nieva (ca. 1570–?) built the first printing press in the Philippines with the help of the Chinese printer Keng Yong (?–?). It was a simple xylographic press (the wood was carved, inked and transferred onto paper) but it meant the first step to the publication of a hundred of books in the Philippines.

In 1606 movable type printing in lead made its appearance in the islands (Revel 2001:260). By 1610 the press was no longer in Chinese hands and the religious orders sold it from one Order to the other because they could not afford it: first to the Dominicans, then to the Franciscans, in 1618 to the Augustinians, and then back to the Dominicans in 1622. Any printed work had to include some basic information: the front page had to show the title, the author, the dedication and an illustration; and at the bottom the name of city, the printer and the year. It had to contain all the licences and taxes (Carreño 2004).

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Ad dandam



Cant. Zach.
Impreso en el Convéto de S. Pablo de Ma-
nila. Por Antonio Damba, i Miguel Seixo.
Año de 1621.

Front page, López's Doctrina Christiana (source: [Christus Rex](#))

Most of the texts were not meant for Filipinos but some simple prayer books, rosaries and a

summarized *Doctrina Christiana* were published for their evangelization. Books usually travelled by hand from one missionary to the other. They were copied and copied again and additions were made. It was very common that missionaries corrected and added information on the margins since missionaries had the obligation of correcting and completing former missionaries' works.

A bilingual Spanish–Tagalog catechism *Doctrina Christiana* by Franciscan Juan de Plasencia (1520–1590), corrected by Dominicans (Fernández 1979:358), and a *Doctrina Cristiana* in Chinese were published in 1593. These were the first books to be published in the Philippines. Plasencia's text had been approved in the Synod of Manila in 1582 and it was the official text for many years (Bernad 1972:255). It was written in Romanized Tagalog and Spanish.



Front page of the first printed book in the Philippines: *Doctrina Christiana* (1593)
(source: [Project Gutenberg](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20180/20180-h/20180-h.htm))

Missionaries at an early stage recorded everything they knew about culture and language.

Contrary to what it is commonly believed, missionaries preserved the *baybayin*, the pre-Hispanic writing system, by copying it and explaining it in their books. Augustinian Francisco López (?–1627) with the help of Pedro Bukaneg (1592–1630), who is considered the father of Ilocano literature, translated Roberto Bellarmino's (1542–1621) *Doctrina Christiana* into Ilocano in 1621. Its peculiarity is that it is written in Roman characters and *baybayin*.

Baybayin has seventeen symbols: three vowels (<a>, <i/e>, <o/u>) and fourteen consonants. Each symbol was pronounced with vowel <a> and Filipinos used to know – although missionaries were unaware of – how to pronounce it with the other two vowels. This system seemed extremely difficult for the missionaries to read. For this reason they wrote the sounds as they heard them in the Roman script.

10

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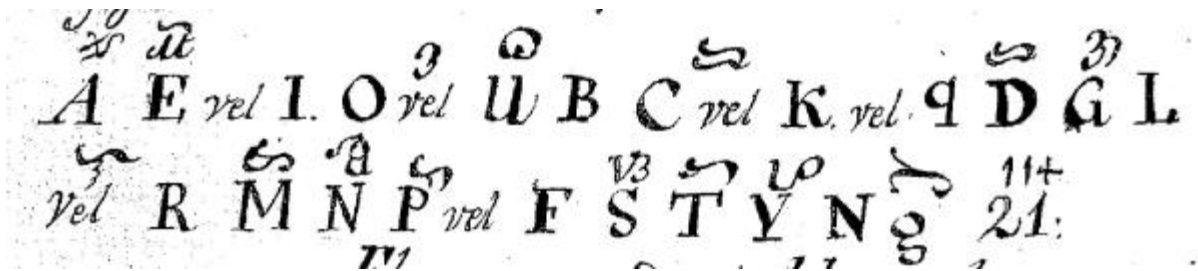
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 6 𑄆𑄇𑄃𑄅 𑄆𑄆 𑄆𑄇𑄃𑄅 ॥

Page from López's Doctrina Christiana (1620)
(source: [Christus Rex](#))

López decided to introduce a cross named *kudlit*, a diacritic placed above or below the basic symbol to indicate its pronunciation. If the cross was above the symbol, it was pronounced with /i/ and if the cross was below the symbol, the syllable was pronounced with /u/. Spelling had changed and *kudlit* was introduced. It was a controversial modification and not everybody liked it.

Missionaries preserved the *baybayin* because it was very useful in the early years to evangelize since the Filipinos could learn the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary in a script they could recognize. Nevertheless, it was very difficult to translate from Spanish into *baybayin*. Considering the usual difficulty in translation between two languages that share the same script and most of the time the same etymology, imagine the problems of translating into a language of which they were still no experts and which lacked many necessary religious terms. However, as the years passed, it was much easier for them to Romanize the languages, written as the missionaries heard them.

Baybayin was explained in vocabularies even when it was no longer useful. A monolingual Ilocano vocabulary from the late 18th century, the *Calepino ylocano* (ca. 1797), contains an explanation of the pronunciation and shows the symbols taken from López's writings. However, this is not Ilocano *baybayin* but Tagalog because these were the fonts available in the printing.



Calepino ylocano (Fernández Rodríguez 2012)

In spite of copying and explaining the *baybayin* in vocabularies and grammars, the truth is that Filipinos stopped using it in favour of the Roman script, which was easier to learn and was taught in schools.

Let's look at linguistic texts in the Philippines. It is believed that Plasencia also wrote an *Arte* – grammar – and a vocabulary in Tagalog but they were never published. However, the first printed Tagalog grammar was *Arte de la lengua tagala* by Dominican Francisco Blancas de San José in 1610, printed by Tomás Pinpin (1580–?; Bernad 1972:255-256). Pinpin, of Chinese origins, was also the author of the only Spanish grammar written in Tagalog in those years: *Librong Pagaaralan nang mangca Tagalog nang uicang Castila* (1610). The first printed Tagalog vocabulary was *Vocabulario de lengua tagala* (1613) by Franciscan Pedro de San Buenaventura.

Missionaries in the Philippines used Elio Antonio de Nebrija's (1441–1522) grammars, *Introductiones latinae* (1481) and *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (1492), as a guide to explain all the new languages they encountered as well as previous grammars from America or the Philippines. López explains in the prologue of his grammar that he has used Nebrija's as a guide and an old Tagalog grammar (Fernández Rodríguez 2012:14-15).

Grammars used to include linguistic varieties, phonology, morphology and syntax. They were full of examples and translations and missionaries were encouraged to speak with the natives. Pronunciation was not easy so the best way to learn was to communicate. It is evident that describing these agglutinative languages according to a Latin system was not the best but they were really clever and ingenious in searching for an adequate way to establish the structure of these languages. Most of them were aware of the inadequacy of the Latin system.

As for vocabularies, they also followed Nebrija's *Diccionario latino-español* (1492) and *Vocabulario español-latino* (1485?) and Alonso de Molina's (1514?–1585) *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana* (1555) and *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y castellana* (1571). As for the lexicographical styles I follow Smith–Stark (2009).

Philippine vocabularies are bilingual, extensive and present their entries in alphabetical order. Their entries are brief with simple equivalents and sometimes with discursive texts. There are distinct entries for different senses and there are derived forms following the basic form for a particular sense. Cross-references are quite common and there is sporadic specification of grammatical information.

There is one exception that follows Ambrogio Caleppio's (1440–1510) lexicographical style: the monolingual *Calepino ylocano*. It has entries with discursive texts. There are different senses in a single entry. There are many examples of use and references are made to authorities. The vocabulary elaborates a general meaning.

These linguistic works have contributed to the preservation of the Philippine languages and their pre-Hispanic writing – *baybayin* – and made significant contributions to Spanish lexicography.

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7 comments on “Early writing and printing in the Philippines”



James McElvenny says:

10 July 2013 at 2:14 pm

Thanks for a really interesting post!

Could you say a little more about *baybayin*? I'd be interested to know where it came from, i.e.

whether it was adapted from a script from outside the Philippines or whether it's largely an indigenous development. And why was it only ever used for 'personal communication' and never for writing down literature?

You say that the Roman alphabet is easier to learn than *baybayin*. Is this simply because the Roman alphabet was taught formally by the missionaries or is there something inherently and irreparably difficult about the *baybayin* script, as you seem to suggest?

[Reply](#)



rebeccaf says:

11 July 2013 at 1:39 am

Thanks for your comments!

Baybayin means 'alphabet' or 'spell' and it existed before the arrival of the Spaniards. However, no one knows for sure its origin. Most people believe that it is related to Old Javanese, to an ancient Kawi script, due to its similarities –no syllable final consonants, symbols and pronunciation with the vowel <a>. However, baybayin was only used in the developed parts of the islands –centre of Luzon and east Mindanao did not know it (Revel 2001:255).

Before 1565, Philippine people wrote on bamboo tablets and loose leaves but they only used to write down their properties and finances or some notes to send from one village to the other (Mallat 1983[1846]:354). There is no evidence of burning or destroying books or documents by missionaries in the Philippines. Missionaries often recorded that Philippine people loved singing so maybe their history and stories were transmitted orally. In addition, writing was for more practical things. The oldest document written in baybayin is a copper plate that contains a cancellation of a debt from 900 a. C. found in Manila bay.

Missionaries found hard to learn the baybayin. They not only had to learn the pronunciation, they also had to learn the writing. A double task they had to accomplish in a very short time before starting evangelization. They had to translate Spanish words and concepts into baybayin. But, as they saw it, baybayin did not fit well into Spanish pronunciation. Baybayin was mainly pronounced with vowel <a> and the method to pronounce it with a different vowel was not very clear, at least for the missionaries. Of course, here we could argue willingness to Romanize or keep the language. It all depended on the missionary. But don't forget they were urged to teach Spanish and romanizing the baybayin would help in doing it.

[Reply](#)

Piers Kelly says:

12 July 2013 at 2:07 pm



Hi Rebeca,
Great article!

As you say, baybayin is a relatively modern phenomenon in most of the Philippines – it didn't diffuse into Visayas for example until after Spanish contact. Christopher Miller in an unpublished paper, has convincingly traced babybayin to Gujarat in western India.

By the way, I had no idea how many artes and diccionarios had been lost, nor that edited volumes of Mentrída and de San Jose had been reissued.

What interests me about the dictionaries is that they are not just linguistic resources but ethnographic ones too. William Henry Scott looked at early Tagalog dictionaries to try to reconstruct Tagalog society in the era of early contact. Malcolm Mintz is doing the same sort of thing with early Bikolano dictionaries. I even find John Wolff's massive two volume dictionary of Cebuano-Visayan from 1972 to be filled with insights into Martial Law-era history and society (lots of veiled political example sentences). One memorable entry is for *batirul* "tall pot made of clay or metal for cooking chocolate". I assume this is a Mexican style of hot chocolate preparation that mostly went out of vogue with the advent of instant hotdrinks in sachets.

[Reply](#)



rebecafr says:

14 July 2013 at 1:31 am

Thanks for your comment!

I'd love to read Miller's paper. I've read Pardo de Tavera's work on Sanskrit in Tagalog (1887). Pardo thought that Sanskrit words in Tagalog arrived when some Indians established in the Phillipines before the Spaniards.

Unfortunately many grammars and vocabularies are lost. However, I think (or I hope) some of them are still to be found as happened with some Amerindian dictionaries discovered not so many years ago. Maybe they are in private hands or in uncatalogued libraries.

For the last decade the interest on Philippine grammars and vocabularies has increased in Spain/Europe. Conferences on Missionary Linguistics have been organized all over the world from Europe to America to Asia and new papers are presented every year.

I have been working on old Ilocano vocabularies and grammars for more than six years and I also find dictionaries much more interesting. In dictionaries you can find almost everything: history, ethnography, antropology, translations theories, etc... A whole society described in one book. A book that is sometimes hand written or commented in the margins when things/concepts changed.

[Reply](#)



jairenec says:

14 December 2013 at 7:17 pm

This portion is wrong:

López decided to introduce a cross named kudlit, a diacritic placed above or below the basic symbol to indicate its pronunciation. If the cross was above the symbol, it was pronounced with /i/ and if the cross was below the symbol, the syllable was pronounced with /u/. Spelling had changed and kudlit was introduced. It was a controversial modification and not everybody liked it.

The cross always appear at the bottom. It means, “just the consonant”, since all babayin letters are said with an “a” (ex. ba, ka, da, etc.). This was added by the Spaniards, yes.

The kudlit (the dot or slight line), on the other hand, may appear on top or bottom. On top, /i/ or /e/, at the bottom, /u/ or /o/. These are inherent in baybayin and have not been introduced by Lopez.

Your sources also mention this. You might have been confused. Please edit that portion so people won't be confused. But all in all, this is a good post.

[Reply](#)



rebecafr says:

14 January 2014 at 3:08 am

Thank you for your comment.

My sources were early descriptions of baybayin from different books written by Spaniards (Chirino, Vivar, etc). As far as I know, the kudlit could be a cross, a dot or a hyphen. I understood that if there was no kudlit at all the symbol was pronounced with /a/ but I might be wrong. Yes, you are right when you said that it could be said /i/ or /e/ and /u/ or /o/ . But what I tried to explained was that López introduced the kudlit so that missionaries could read the text more easily and incidentally learn the pronunciation and intonation of the language.

[Reply](#)



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says:

3 September 2014 at 7:01 am

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