

Reviving the Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyan Syllabic Scripts

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ABSTRACT

When the Spaniards arrived in the Philippines in the 16th century, they discovered that the natives had their own writing system, and that even women could read and write. By the 1600s the Spaniards documented over a dozen syllabic scripts called *baybayin*. Related to the writing modes of nearly all Southeast Asian countries, these scripts originated from the Brahmi script of India. Unfortunately, by the 19th century, most Filipinos had already replaced their syllabic scripts with the Roman alphabet introduced by the Spaniards.

Out of all the regions and the 110 indigenous peoples (IPs) groups in the Philippines, only the Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyans of Mindoro Island, together with the Tagbanwa of Palawan Island, have retained their original syllabic scripts. These three syllabic scripts have been National Cultural Treasures since 1997 and have been inscribed in the Memory of the World Registers of UNESCO since 1998.

The Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyans have kept alive their indigenous way of writing due to their relative mountain isolation. The syllabic scripts also survived because these IPs engraved their traditional poems (*ambahan*) on bamboo plants, slats and containers, using a knife.

Most studies on the Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyan syllabic scripts were conducted from the last quarter of the 19th century up to the end of the 20th century. Best known among these studies are The Mangyan Scripts of Mindoro by German researchers A.B. Meyer, A. Schadenberg, and W. Foy (1895), Philippine Indic Studies by American Major Fletcher Gardner (1943), and various scholarly papers written by Dutch Anthropologist and Linguist Antoon Postma from the 1960s to late 1990s. Postma, who has been living with the Mangyans for over 50 years, studied the relationship of the contemporary Philippine scripts with other Southeast Asian scripts. He also deciphered the Laguna Copperplate Inscription which is considered the oldest written document found in the Philippines, dating approximately 900AD.



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Postma also worked on the propagation of the syllabic scripts by producing a Primer on the Mangyan Script in the 1980s. This was used by volunteer Mangyan teachers in teaching the script in selected Hanunuo Mangyan schools.

To date, the Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyan syllabic scripts are in danger of vanishing. The younger generation is no longer interested in their indigenous way of writing. Only the elders know how to write in their original scripts.



To revive the Buhid and the Hanunuo Mangyan syllabic scripts, various projects and activities are being implemented by the Mangyan Heritage Center, Inc., (MHC) a non-profit, non-stock, private organization based in Calapan City, province of Oriental Mindoro. The MHC maintains a research library housing a comprehensive collection of documents on the Mangyans - the common name for Mindoro Island's eight indigenous peoples groups with their distinct cultures and languages. Established in 2000, the MHC is actively engaged in the development, promotion and safeguarding of the Mangyan cultural heritage - most especially the Mangyan scripts and *ambahans* - which are in danger of being forgotten by the younger generation.

