

The Surat Scripts in Historical Perspective

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This paper will discuss the indigenous scripts of Sumatra and their possible relationships with other Indic scripts of Southeast Asia and especially the scripts of Sulawesi and the Philippines. Until today, the relationship between the "peripheral" Southeast Asian scripts either with each other or with the "central" SEA scripts has been on a "case to case" basis where certain similarities between two scripts were seen as signs of evidence of a genetic relationship. This paper will show that such an approach is not satisfactory especially if it is based on the comparison of two particular scripts only. Even a broader comparison involving more than a couple of scripts can be heavily flawed if it does not take into consideration the internal dynamics of some of the peripheral scripts and the challenges they faced adapting to an environment that was not only physically and intellectually removed from the scriptorial tradition of the centre, but which was also phonetically different.

This paper argues that future researches on the history of the relationship of SEA scripts are only likely to be successful if they take into consideration factors such as spacial, phonetical and intellectual distance from centre to periphery, and are open to accept possible non-evolutionary processes that may have affected the development of some of the peripheral SEA scripts.