

The Philippine Script at the Arrival of the Spaniards

When on May 19, 1571, the Adelantado Miguel López de Legaspi and his party of 200 odd Spaniards set foot on the left Bank of the Pasig River mouth, in order to establish the site of the colonial government there, they were aware that the linguistic landscape of the islands was a veritable mosaic of dialects.

In the five-year span from February 13, 1565, when Legaspi cast anchor in Philippine waters for the first time, off the coast of Samar, the Spaniards had touched land in Leyte, Bohol, and Mindanao, and had sent reconnaissance parties all over the Visayas, and left settlements in Cebu and Capiz. They had thus experienced the linguistic diversity of the archipelago.

On this point, Father Pedro Chirino, S.J.,¹ wrote:

Languages [in the Philippines] do not vary according to variety of the islands, for there are some islands where many languages are spoken, like Manila and even Panay which is smaller by more than four hundred leagues. And there are languages that run through many islands. In the island of Manila alone there are six different languages; in Panay, two; in others only one.

¹ Pedro Chirino, *Relación de las islas Filipinas i de lo que en ellas an trabajado los padres de la Compañía de Jesús* (Rome: Estevan Paulino, 1604), p. 35. Fr. Chirino arrived in the Philippines in 1590, and was assigned to a variety of mission posts.

And writing in 1598,² Dr. Morga distinguishes several languages: Bisaya, Ibanag, Iloko, Sambal, Pampangan, Bikol; Tagalog; this last one with several dialects.³

From a list of *encomiendas*, compiled a few years earlier in 1591, which included the name of the *encomenderos*, number of tributes, and people living in each *encomienda* with their Friar Pastor, we can deduce the different linguistic groups of people reduced at the time. In the list mentioned there appear Tagalog, Iloko, Ibanag, Pampangan, Bikol, Cebuano, Panay; and Samar.⁴

Today the same dialects mentioned above, with the exception of Ibanag, remain the major linguistic groups.⁵ If Ibanag figured among the nine major dialects perhaps it was only because other linguistic groups principally in Mindanao had not been colonized at the time.

It would seem, therefore, that keeping in mind the natural increase of the number of speakers, the linguistic map of the Philippines has not changed significantly in the last four centuries. Moreover, the Spanish colonizers became aware of the linguistic diversity of the Archipelago very early.

The problems posed by the language diversity were felt more acutely by the missionaries, the men who took upon themselves the christianization of the natives and, who in the process of doing so, effected the most transcendental transfusion of western culture into the mores of the natives.

The first batches of missionaries sent over to the Philippines by the religious orders always had some veteran Padres from the missions of North and South America, thus setting their enter-

² Fr. Juan Francisco de San Antonio, *Crónicas de la Apostólica Provincia de San Gregorio de Religiosos Decalzos de N.S.P. San Francisco en las Islas Philipinas* (3 vols.; Sampaloc: Fr. Juan Sotillo, 1733-1744), First Part, p. 149.

³ Dr. Antonio de Morga, *Sucesos de la Islas Philipinas* (México: Gerónimo Balli, 1609), pp. 139-40.

⁴ "Relación de las Encomiendas existentes en Filipinas el día 31 de Mayo de 1591 años," in W. E. Retana, *Archivo del Bibliófilo Filipino* (5 vols.; Madrid: n.p., 1895-1905), IV, 110. The first catalogue of *encomiendas* was made in 1576, just eleven years after the arrival of Legaspi in the Philippines, but it is not available to us.

⁵ Emy M. Pascasio, "The Language Situation in the Philippines from the Spanish Era to the Present," *Brown Heritage*, ed. by Antonio G. Ma-nuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), pp. 226 and 228.

prise on the foundation of a vast missionary experience, an experience which was to shape their attitude and policies regarding the language for the evangelization.

First to arrive were the Agustinians, of whom there were five in Legaspi's convoy. All of them had already labored several years in Mexico. The same is true of the groups that followed in the years, 1569, 1670, and others.⁶

The first Franciscans arrived in Manila on June 24, 1577. They were fifteen; six among them had extensive experience in Mexico. In September 1581 the second batch of eight friars arrived; five of them had worked previously in Mexico, and all had stayed there for at least one year.⁷ The Jesuits, too, had as their pioneers in the Philippines men hardened in their missions in Florida and Mexico. The first group came in 1581. Subsequently, in 1584, 1590, and 1595 others arrived, most of whom with mission experience.⁸

About the first Dominicans we could say very much the same. In July 25, 1587, fifteen of them arrived in Manila. The following year they received a reinforcement of five more. Of the original twenty, seven had had missionary experience either in Guatemala or in Mexico.⁹

Those were the men who set the pattern of missionary practices.

They had learned the necessity of preaching the Gospel to the natives in their own tongues. Only thus could the message of Christianity reach the Indians' hearts. The natives were to be asked to repudiate their pagan cults but not their mother tongues.¹⁰

⁶ Fr. Elviro J. Pérez, *Catálogo Bio-Bibliográfico de los Religiosos Agustinos de la Provincia del Santísimo Nombre de Jesús de las Islas Filipinas* (Manila: Establecimiento tipográfico del Colegio de Santo Tomás, 1901), pp. 1-10.

⁷ Fr. Eusebio Gómez Platero, *Catálogo Biográfico de los Religiosos Franciscanos de la Provincia de San Gregorio Magno de Filipinas* (Manila: Imprenta del Real Colegio de Santo Tomás, 1880), pp. 13-35.

⁸ Horacio de la Costa, *The Jesuits in the Philippines: 1581-1768* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 5-8, 64-65, 120, 134.

⁹ [Fr. Hilario Ma. Ocio y Viana], *Compendio de la Reseña Biográfica de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas* (Manila: Establecimiento tipográfico del Real Colegio de Sto. Tomás, 1895), pp. 5-22.

¹⁰ John Leddy Phelan, "Philippine Linguistics and Spanish Missionaries: 1565-1700," *Mid-American*, XXXVII, No. 3 (July, 1965), p. 153.

Experienced though these men were, they must have been quite surprised when they noticed that the art of writing was not unknown to a good portion of the natives. On the widespread knowledge of writing, Fr. Chirino wrote:

These islanders are so fond of writing and reading that there is hardly any man, and much less a woman unable to read and write in characters proper of the Manila Island.¹¹

And again in his manuscript "Historia de la provincia de Philipinas," he adds:

There is scarcely any man and much less a woman that does not possess one or more books in their language and characters, and in their own handwritings, on the sermons they hear or on the sacred histories, lives of the saints, prayers and pious poems composed by them. This is something unheard of any other people so recently christianized. And I can bear witness of this because I was charged with the examen of those books in this year of sixteen hundred and nine by order of the Treasurer, Procurator and Vicar General of the Metropolitan See of Manila, who had them all inspected in order to correct the errors.¹²

Still on the same point Dr. Morga said:

Almost all the natives, men as well as women, write in this language [in their own characters] and there are very few women who do not write it very well and with correctness.¹³

But some years earlier the unknown author of the Boxer manuscript¹⁴ had written of the *Moros* of Manila:

¹¹ Chirino, *Relación*, p. 39.

¹² Pedro Chirino, "Primera Parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Philipinas de la Compañía de Jesús," quoted in Francisco Colín, *Labor Evangélica*, ed. by Pablo Pastells (3 vols.; Barcelona: Henrich y Compañía, 1900-1902), I, Intr. p. 223.

A similar statement is made about the natives of Camarines by the Franciscan Fr. Marcelo de Ribadeneira in 1601 in his printed *Historia de las Islas del Archipiélago Filipino y Reinos de la Gran China, Tartaria, Cochinchina, Malaca, Siam, Cambodge y Japón*, ed. by Juan R. de Legisima (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, 1947), p. 61.

¹³ Morga, *Sucesos*, p. 140.

¹⁴ This manuscript was made known in 1950 by Prof. C. R. Boxer of the University of London, who had bought it three years earlier. It had surfaced as a result of the bombing of Lord Ilchester's house during the World War II, and auctioned off with the rest of his collection in 1947. Probably it found its way to London after the sack of Manila by Draper in 1762.

They have certain characters that serve them as letters with which they write whatever they wish. They are of a making very different from any other that we know up to now. It is women who usually know how to write with them.

When they write they do it on the coat of certain little slats of canes found in those islands. In using such slat, which is of a width of four fingers, they do not write with ink, but with picks with which they cut the face and coat of the cane to draw the letters.

They have neither books nor histories, nor do they write any thing of consequence; only letters and notes to one another. Only for this purpose they make use of the characters.

The characters are only seventeen. Each of them is a syllable, and by means of some dots that they place either at one side or the other of the characters, or on or below it, they make words, and say whatever they want. It [writing] is very easy to learn it, and any person who wishes to do so can master it in little over two months.

When it comes to writing they are not very nimble because they do so very slowly. And the same thing goes for their reading, which is like when children spell out in school.¹⁵

Already in 1587, Fr. Alonso Sánchez writing also about the Tagalogs in Manila makes an identical judgment:

Almost all of them read and write in the language they have of their own.¹⁶

After these early testimonies there should not be any need to keep on quoting subsequent authors, were it not for the fact

The volume lacks the title page and so its author and date of composition can only be deduced from internal evidence. The guess of Prof. Boxer is that originally it was ordered compiled by Governor Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas, the sections dealing with the Philippines being prepared or dictated by his son Luis Pérez Dasmariñas. Carlos Quirino who has edited the section of the manuscript that concerns the Philippines, suggests that other likely authors of the anonymous relation are Juan de Cuéllar, secretary to Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas, and Antonio de Padua de la Llave, who later on became a Franciscan and wrote an unpublished chronicle of his order in the Philippines. Quirino's arguments in favor of De la Llave's authorship are not very cogent. See Carlos Quirino and Mauro García, "The Manners, Customs and Beliefs of the Philippine Inhabitants of Long Ago," *The Philippine Journal of Science*, LXXXVI (December, 1958), 326-41.

¹⁵ Quirino and García, "The Manners," p. 371.

¹⁶ Alonso Sánchez, "Relación de la calidad y estado de estas islas en en general," quoted in Colín-Pastells, *Labor Evangélica*, I, pp. 368-69.

that Fr. Francisco de Santa Inés, a Franciscan who wrote in 1676 explains a few details of the statements of Dr. Morga and Fr. Chirino. Fr. Santa Inés says:

They are all very fond of their own way of reading and writing; but women even more so, because as they do not have any other way to while the time, for it is not customary for little girls to go to school as boys do, they make better use of their characters than men, and they use them in things of devotion, and in other things that are not of devotion.¹⁷

In the same place, a few lines below, Santa Inés calls the devotional books composed, written, and bound by the natives as *libritos*, little books.

It is also Fr. Chirino who in his *Relación* of 1604 implies a similar high degree of literacy among the people of Ormoc (Leyte):

Most of them, as good students, not only write their (catechism) lessons in their own characters using an internode of bamboo reed as a slate or writing pad, and an iron point as a pen; but they always carry with them materials and whenever they stop their work, whether at home or in the field, by way of rest they take the slate and spend some time in study.¹⁸

¹⁷ Fr. Francisco de Santa Inés, *Crónica de la Provincia de San Gregorio Magno de Religiosos descalzos de San Francisco en las Filipinas . . . Escrita en 1676* (2 vols.; Manila: Tipo-Litografía de Chofre y comp., 1892), I, pp. 41-42.

¹⁸ Chirino, *Relación*, p. 127.

Strange enough, Fr. Chirino, who testifies to this widespread knowledge of writing among the people of Southern Leyte, also says, that "the Visayan . . . formerly did not have writing characters, for they borrowed them from the Tagalogs not many years ago" (Chirino, *Relación*, p. 39). And Miguel de Loarca, encomendero in Oton, twenty years earlier and writing as councilor of Arevalo says that "since these natives (the *Pintados*) lack writing characters, they preserve their ancient lore through the songs the very gracefully sing ordinarily while plying their oars, as they are island dwellers. And at their revelries too, they have singers with good voices who sing the exploits of olden times; thus they always possess a knowledge of ancient events" (Miguel de Loarca, "Relación de las Islas Filipinas," *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898*, trans. and ed. by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 55 vols.; Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1903-1909, V. 120). And more positively he adds that "these *moros* (natives of the vicinity of Manila) have writing characters, which all other natives of these islands lack" (Loarca, *Relación*, p. 174). Also Antonio Pigafetta in the entry of his diary corresponding to March the 29th, Good Friday of 1521, related that while he was a guest of the chieftain of Limasawa island, he asked him for the name of many objects in their language, and the people around were amazed when they saw him putting them into writing and reading them, as watching a novelty

And Fr. Juan José Delgado writing around 1751, affirms the same thing about the Bisayans in general:

Almost everybody in the Bisayan Islands can write in their own characters.¹⁹

And he added:

After the arrival of the Spaniards at these islands, even though they (the natives) preserved their alphabet — mainly the Bisayans — to write among themselves, yet the men devoted themselves to the use of our writing.²⁰

With these characters they could communicate pretty well, and even now they still communicate in many places and they note down their things not to forget them, and their poems to sing.²¹

Such a widespread knowledge of writing among the early Filipinos is certainly surprising and one is tempted to believe that the statements quoted above must not be taken literally. Indeed even so notable a Filipino historian as Fr. De la Costa would seem disinclined to take such affirmation at face value, for he says:

Sánchez probably got this impression of a high degree of literacy among the Tagalogs because of the proximity of Malate. In the days before the coming of the Spaniards, Malate was where the *maharlika* of Maynila had their country seats, their orchards and their pleasantries. When Maynila was taken away from them, it was here that they removed.²²

This seems to accept a high percentage of literacy only among the well-born, ruling class or *maharlika*. Miguel de Loarca, a soldier and "conquistador," shares this same view in his *Relación* of 1582.²³

We would wish that a dispassionate study of the spread of knowledge and abilities of the pre-Spanish Filipinos be done, dis-

they had never seen before (Antonio Pigafetta, "Primo Viaggio Intorno al Mondo," *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*, trans. and ed. by E. H. Blair and J. A. Robertson, XXX, 118).

¹⁹ Fr. Juan José Delgado, *Historia General Sacro-profana, Política y natural de las Islas del Poniente llamadas Filipinas* (Manila: Imprenta de El Eco de Filipinas, 1892), p. 331.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 331-32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 332-33.

²² De la Costa, *The Jesuits*, p. 14.

²³ Miguel de Loarca, "Relación de las Islas Filipinas," *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898*, trans. and ed. by E. H. Blair and J. A. Robertson (55 vols.; Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1903-1909), V, p. 174.

tinguishing what was proper of the Mohamedans from Borneo, immigrants themselves of a late hour, from what was already possessed by the natives from much earlier migrations. The *datus* and *maharlikas* around Manila and other harbors when the Spaniards arrived, seem to have been very recent colonizers from Borneo with a tint of Muslim culture and perhaps with some knowledge of the Arabic script.²⁴

But it is not our intention to pursue any further this point, which is outside the scope of this paper. We must say, though, that we see no justification to limit the widespread of literacy of this period to the *maharlika* of Malate, for Fr. Sánchez's experience was not limited to the vicinity of Ermita and Malate. When he wrote his *Relación*, he had already stayed in the Philippines for six years and if nothing else, upon his arrival had walked from Sorsogon up to Manila, through a sizable portion of Tagalog speaking regions.²⁵

Father Chirino's judgment, too, is well backed up by his contacts with the native population. He had been assigned to Balayan in Batangas, Taytay in Rizal, Tigbawan in Panay, Carigara in Leyte, Silang in Cavite; and in addition had several long stints around Manila.²⁶

Dr. Morga, as Counselor, lieutenant General and Senior Judge Advocate of the High Court of Justice of the colony, was certainly in a position to inform on a non-technical matter like the ability to read and write.²⁷

On the basis of this multiple testimony we must conclude that the knowledge of writing among pre-Spanish Filipinos was fairly common. But even without such numerous testimonies we could have assumed that such was the state of affairs from

²⁴ W. E. Retana alludes several times to the relations between the ruling classes of Manila and other points of the archipelago with their relatives in Borneo. He quotes extensively on this point Fr. Jaime Rebullosa (1610), with Fr. Juan de Grijalva (1624), Victor M. Concas (1889), and F. Blumentritt (1886); see, e.g., Dr. Antonio de Morga, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, ed. by W. E. Retana (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1909), pp. 361-62, 378-81. Elsewhere Retana suggests that we should distinguish at least four degrees of civilization found among the islanders at the time of the conquest: Negrito, Igorot, Malay and Muslim. Only the last two knew the art of writing. See W. E. Retana, *El Teatro en Filipinas* (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1909), pp. 9-10.

²⁵ De la Costa, *The Jesuits*, pp. 9-10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37, 143, 146, 203.

²⁷ Mora-Retana "Estudio Preliminar," in *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, pp. 45*, 65*.

the very fact that the first catechisms and other devotional books were printed in the ancient characters. Certainly missionaries would not have wasted their time and efforts to publish books in these orthographies if hardly anyone could read them.

On the other hand, the admission of the widespread knowledge of writing presents other problems, for it is generally held by anthropologists that writing does not appear in a society until a real need for it is created; with the result that without it the full civilization could not function properly. Let it suffice to quote from one modern expert on the history and development of ancient writing.

Everywhere in the ancient world writing appears first at a time which is characterized by a simultaneous growth of all these various elements which together make for what we usually call civilization. Whenever writing appears it is accompanied by a remarkable development of government, art, commerce, industry, metallurgy; extensive means of transportation, full agriculture and domestication of animals.²⁸

In other words, as the common dictum goes, "Writing exists only in a civilization and civilization cannot exist without writing."

Now, it does not appear that at the arrival of the Spaniards, cultural conditions in the Philippines were such as to demand a widespread knowledge of writing so much so that otherwise society itself could not function properly.

Once again we have to decry the lack of a reliable and realistic description of cultural conditions prevailing in pre-Christian Philippines. And again, this being a marginal question to this paper, we will simply refer those interested in this question to the letters and reports of the early missionaries, soldiers, and colonial officials. Some of these reports can be found in sources already cited.²⁹

²⁸ Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Rev. ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 221.

²⁹ More explicit on this point is W. E. Retana in Morga's *Sucesos*, notes on pp. 375, 278, 384, 388, 406, 418, 428, 471, where original sources are quoted copiously. It seems to the writer that neither Rizal in his notes to Morga's *Sucesos* nor the essays written in answer to Rizal have said the last word on these questions. One cannot escape the impression that we must not talk about the pre-Spanish Philippine civilization as one whole neither to exalt nor to belittle it. A few distinctions along Retana's suggested outlines seem to be better justified.

For our part we believe that the axiom quoted above on the necessary presence of a fully developed culture wherever writing is known should be taken with some reservation; for even today, the Tagbanwas of Palawan and the Mangyans of Mindoro still practise the art of writing, even if their state of civilization is not too different from that of other islanders at the time of the Spanish conquest. Yet it is the Tagbanwas and the Mangyans who have preserved the ancient way of writing of the Filipinos. They still use the same materials, the same instruments and the same signs, with very little modifications, that were known throughout the archipelago four hundred years ago.³⁰

It was perhaps this difficulty of reconciling the state of the culture of the early Filipinos with their general possession of the art of writing, besides the appreciation of the intrinsic weaknesses of the writing system and the lack of any pre-Spanish specimen, that prompted C. Lendoyro to write:

The alphabet was practically a useless design. . . . In all probability, it was never made use of for any practical purposes, being rather in the way of a toy than in that of a useful tool; as it could never have been so early eradicated and superseded by the Spanish one, had it even acquired any appreciable hold on the native mind. History, thus far, seems to lend support to the belief that it was not a real alphabet, for, as far as our knowledge goes, not a single inscription, not a genuine specimen written with its characters has ever been produced.³¹

There are a couple of too far reaching statements in this paragraph which we shall examine presently. We must add, though, that Lendoyro was not the first to question even the existence of a real alphabet. Already in 1859 Sir John Bowring had written:

De Mas supposes that the Indians employed alphabetical writing anterior to the arrival of the Spanish, and gives five alphabets as used in different provinces, but having resemblances to one another. I doubt alike the antiquity and authenticity of the records; but gives a

³⁰ The Tagbanwa and Mangyan syllabaries will be dealt more at length later in this study.

³¹ Constantino Lendoyro, *The Tagalog Language* (2nd ed.: Manila: Juan Fajardo, 1909), pp. 5-6; also Introduction, pp. LXXXII and LXXXVII.

specimen which he says is a contract upon Chinese paper for a sale of land in Bulacan, dated 1652.³²

Against facts, all speculative arguments avail nothing; and it is a fact that there was a system of writing known in the Philippines before the Spaniards came here. We do not believe there is anyone today who doubts its existence.

As for the practical purposes that writing was used in pre-Spanish time, we have Chirino's categorical statements. They have never used their characters except for writing letters.³³

We also know the statement of Father Delgado quoted above that they could communicate . . . they wrote down their things so as not to forget them and their poems so as to sing them.

Fathers Buzeta and Bravo in the introduction to their *Diccionario* specify that the ancient Filipinos wrote to take note of the carabaos they owned and other details of personal and domestic interest.³⁴

And if, in matters pertaining to writing practices we are allowed to relate the pre-Spanish Filipinos with pagan tribes of Palawan and Mindoro of our days, we should mention here that correspondence of some sort was not unknown to them. Here is how a Mangyan named "Yamoan" from Kawakat, Bulalacao, Mindoro, describes their postal service:

It is possible to send a bamboo writing and for it to be carried to a distance without knowing the messenger. A bamboo writing is placed in a split stick which is set upright on the road. If a Mangyan should pass that way who knows how to write and read, if he sees that the writing should go in his direction, he carries the letter until he sees another to carry it or arrives at the destination to which it is sent. Thus and thus, it goes until it arrives at its owner.³⁵

³² Sir John Bowring, *A Visit to the Philippine Islands* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1859), pp. 118-19.

³³ Chirino, *Relación*, p. 52.

³⁴ Frs. Manuel Buzeta and Felipe Bravo, *Diccionario Geográfico, Estadístico, Histórico de las Islas Filipinas* (2 vols.; Madrid: Jose C. de la Peña, 1851), I, 64.

³⁵ Fletcher Gardner and Ildefonso Maliwanag, *Indic Writing of the Mindoro Palawan Axis* (Bulletin No. 1, 2 vols.; San Antonio, Texas: Witte Memorial Museum, 1939 & 1940), II, 6.

It is hard to imagine how a love letter for instance could reach its destination with the system of mail distribution above, yet Gardner reproduces such a Tagbanua love letter,³⁶ whose original — a bamboo cylinder — is now in the Newberry Library, although nothing suggests that the letter was delivered following their peculiar mail service. More important from our point of view is that this letter was not written at the prompting of any investigator or data gatherer.

Another interesting detail we get from "Luyon, wife of Yagao" a Mangyan woman who wrote some seventy-five essays at the urgings of Ildefonso Maliwanag, is the way they learn to write. Here is what she says on this point:

It [our writing] never changes as it is taught to the children. We profit by our alphabet. It is easy to be learned. In half a year you can learn to write.³⁷

The Mangyans have no time to learn writing, why? Because they have no teacher like the Christians and because to learn to write is valued like any other learning.³⁸

There is one last point alluded to by Lendoyro which must be dealt with here. It is the lack of old specimens written in the ancient characters. The question is important enough not only because it may cast some light on the degree of literacy of the people before the Spaniards came, but mainly because it may stop or direct the steps of the search for ancient documents. After all if documents were systematically destroyed, for example, it should be quite useless to keep on looking for more specimens. This is precisely the charge leveled against the Spanish missionaries.

It cannot be said that such writings did not exist, since the early Filipinos were even more literate than the Mexicans; they used syllabaries of Indian origin. One Spanish priest in Southern Luzon boasted of having destroyed more than three hundred scrolls written in the native characters.³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 80.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 31.

³⁹ H. Otley Beyer, "The Philippines before Magellan: I, The Hindus in Malaysia," *Asia*, XXI (October, 1921), 861.

Gardner sees the habits of thought created by the Inquisition as responsible for the disappearance of the old records. The tolerant aloofness of some and the undistinguished contempt of other Spanish priests were the reasons why all the records written in highly perishable material were lost within a few years.⁴⁰

The charge is taken up by Paul R. Verzosa, student of Philippine writing, in these terms:

The Spaniards who partially destroyed our native traditions, literature, and practically blot out from reality the precious connecting link of our past grandeur — the Philippine National Writing.⁴¹

These charges which have in fact become commonplace, seem to have had their first mouthpiece in Dr. T. H. Pardo de Tavera in 1884, already on the wake of the Propaganda movement. Accusing the friars of showing too little interest in ethnographic and paleographic questions, which explains the lack of books and monuments with ancient inscriptions, he makes his own the complaint of M. E. Jacquet, who deplores the omission of Philippine alphabets in most grammars of the Philippine languages he had seen.⁴²

Without mincing words Don Pedro Paterno blames the lack of written monuments on "the destructive spirit of fanaticism that has blown through the Islands." From the zeal of the friars which impelled them to demolish tumuli, fell trees and burn idols, he deduces:

It is difficult to believe that those idols, those trees, those tumuli did not have inscriptions which have always kept invaluable revelations, as it has been found in all peoples of the world.⁴³

⁴⁰ Fletcher Gardner, *Philippine Indic Studies* (San Antonio, Texas: Witte Memorial Museum, 1943), p. 1.

⁴¹ Paul Rodriguez Verzosa, "The Resurrection of Our National Writing," *Hiligaynon*, Extra Number, September, 1939, and *Bisaya*, August 1938. The writer has used the English translation done by the author himself, now deposited in the Philippine National Library, p. 1, and also in *Philippine National Writing, Pambansang Titik nang Pilipinas* (Manila: n. p., 1939), p. 18.

⁴² T. H. de Tavera, *Contribución para el Estudio de los Antiguos Alfabetos Filipinos* (Losana: Jaunin Hermanos, 1884), pp. 5-6.

⁴³ Pedro Alejandro Molo Agustin Paterno y de Vera Ignacio, *La Antigua Civilización Tagálog* (Madrid: Tipografía de Manuel C. Hernandez, 1887), p. 41.

The deduction seems at first glance reasonable enough, but on closer study it is found too oversimplified, and certainly not the only reason to explain the scarcity of the old records. As we have said above, we must admit a widespread knowledge of writing among the inhabitants of the low lands but this does not necessarily imply that ancient historical and literature records ever existed. On this point all testimonies before the Propaganda era are unanimous.

Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong, who visited the Philippines in 1858-59, apparently made some research about this matter. He wrote:

My own inquiries led to no discoveries of old records, or written traditions, or inscriptions of remote times, associated with Indian History.⁴⁴

And so, he goes to the extreme of denying the antiquity and authenticity of the specimens given by De Mas, and with it casts doubts even upon the existence of the knowledge of writing anterior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

A few years earlier Fathers Buzeta and Bravo stated in their dictionary:

Very few fragments of writings in these languages remain. The reason is that they, being only signs drawn on pieces of banana leaves with a sharpened splinter of bamboo cane, it has not been possible to preserve the little that they might have written. These writings were only loose leaves.⁴⁵

In 1846 J. Mallat anticipated the same ideas almost to the letter. He also claimed to have searched the libraries of the friars around Manila.⁴⁶

A little earlier, Dr. Sinibaldo de Mas had also explored the archives and libraries of the friars. After affirming that the Filipinos had their own writing, he adds:

⁴⁴ Bowring, *A Visit*, p. 119.

⁴⁵ Buzeta y Bravo, *Diccionario*, I, 64.

⁴⁶ J. Mallat, *Les Philippines, Histoire, Geographie, Moeurs, Agriculture, Industrie et Commerce des Colonies Espagnoles dans L'Oceanie* (Tome Premier & Deuxieme; Paris: Arthur Bertrand, 1846), Tome Deuxieme, p. 163.

Nevertheless, no book of any kind of literature was found, except some love verses written in a highly hyperbolic style and very hard to understand. It seems that their letters too had a good share of this oriental redundancy.⁴⁷

Father Martínez de Zúñiga, in his *Estadismo*, written between 1802 and 1806, where he frequently volunteers his opinions on the theater and poetry of the natives, says that he has read poems written by several of them, but he adds: "I have not seen any poetic work from their pre-Christian times, written by them."⁴⁸

These words, of course, refer only to the existence of poetry in writing. But in his *Historia*, Fr. Zúñiga adds: "Although they know how to write, they did not have written laws and ruled themselves by their traditions."⁴⁹

Some years earlier, the clergyman Pedro Andrés de Castro wrote a short treatise for the exclusive purpose of teaching students how to write and read Tagalog in the ancient characters. His manuscript was reproduced and edited only in 1930. In the prologue of his book he exhorts other priests to make some efforts to learn the ancient writing for several reasons:

Try to study and understand its characters well enough, as far as you can; for even if it is a small matter it will help you to understand the language, as Fr. San Joseph, quoted above, says: and also to comprehend its mysteries and profound concepts, to read the old wills which are buried with great quantities of gold dust in some large Chinese earthen jars, to read tomb inscriptions, planks, and old bells, as it has happened to me, and for many other things which curious antique dealers know. I myself have seen many writings in these characters in the archives of Lipa and Batangas.⁵⁰

What is most striking in this list of advantages that the knowledge of the old writing provides, which is also a list of

⁴⁷ [D. Sinibaldo de Mas], *Informe sobre el Estado de las Islas Filipinas en 1842* (3 vols.; Madrid: n.p., 1843), I, 513.

⁴⁸ Fr. Joaquín Martínez de Zúñiga, *Estadismo de las Islas Filipinas, o mis Viajes por este País*, ed. by W. E. Retana (2 vol.; Madrid: Vda. M. Minuesa de los Ríos, 1893), I, 513.

⁴⁹ Fr. Joaquín Martínez de Zúñiga, *Historia de las Islas Filipinas* (Sampaloc: Fr. Pedro Arguelles de la Concepción, 1803), p. 31.

⁵⁰ D. Pedro Andrés de Castro, *Ortografía y Reglas de la Lengua Tagalog Acomodadas a sus Propios Caracteres*, ed. by Antonio Graiño (Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1930), p. 18.

objects where the ancient characters could be seen, is the silence about pre-christian literature. If Castro knew of any such document, that was where he could have mentioned it. Yet he did not. The archives of Lipa which he had visited, and the inscriptions on tombs, heavy boards and bells where he had put his knowledge of the old ancient system of writing to the test, all betray the influence of European culture and it is highly doubtful that any such document seen by him could have dated from the pre-Spanish times. As for the wills buried with much gold in Chinese jars which, incidentally he did not claim to have seen, may very well be only a fanciful detail to excite the imagination of his students. We must confess that we do not know of any pre-christian custom to bury wills and testaments in gold dust and in China wares.

Father Delgado lovingly notes down the literary achievements of the natives and writes specifically of what they had preserved up to his own days. He mentions how even in his time they still note down their things so as not to forget them, and their verses, so as to sing them. Yet he has nothing to say of pre-Spanish records.⁵¹

The Franciscan F. de Sana Inés, too, says nothing of the existence of ancient writings, while F. de San Antonio more positively adds:

Up to now no piece of writing whatsoever about religion, or rites or old political government has been found. Only by tradition and old songs that have been kept, passing them from parents to children, and from other practices still in use has it been possible to track down something of the ancient past by some concerned priests.⁵²

More specific on this point we find the words of Fr. Gaspar de San Agustín, who in his *Conquistas* writes:

They have their own letters and characters . . . but it was never found any ancient writing among them, nor any light regarding their own origin and arrival in these islands, having kept their customs and rites through tradi-

⁵¹ Delgado, *Historia*, p. 333.

⁵² Fr. Juan Francisco de San Antonio, *Crónicas de la Apostólica Provincia de S. Gregorio de Religiosos Descalzos de N.S.P.S. Francisco en las Islas Philipinas, China, Japón, etc.*, Primera Parte (Sampaloc: Convento de Ntra. Señora de Loreto, por Fr. Juan del Sotillo, 1738), p. 149.

tion from parents to children, without any other information.⁵³

Father Colin's silence on this point, some decades earlier, is also eloquent in itself, while Father Chirino is explicit beyond all other writers. He deserves to be quoted at length, for besides being one of the earliest and best qualified witnesses, having lived as a missionary among the Visayans and Tagalogs for twelve years, prior to writing his *Relación*, he does not deny the natives their due praises on anything of interest which he saw and learned from them. He wrote:

Then I shall write first about the false belief they have of the divinity of their idols. Secondly, about their priests and priestesses. Thirdly, and last, about their sacrifices and superstitions. They did not avail themselves of their writings for any of these things, nor for the things pertaining to government and order — about which later on, I will say something, of the little that there is to be said — for they have never used their characters except to write letters among themselves, as we said above. All their government and religion is based on tradition, and in the customs introduced by the devil himself who speaks to them through their idols and ministers, and they preserve it in songs they have memorized and learned since childhood, hearing them sing when they row, when they make merry and entertain themselves, and even more when they mourn their dead.⁵⁴

With Chirino we are at the end of a list of witnesses taking us back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, all of them in agreement regarding the non-existence of pre-Spanish written documents.

Still one might be tempted to blame the missionaries of the sixteenth century for the destruction of such writings. Someone might say: "Well, there were no written records because the first friars destroyed them!"

In fact we have seen Beyer, Verzosa and Gardner launching such charges against the friars, and certainly they were not alone.

⁵³ Fr. Gaspar de San Agustín, *Conquistas de las Islas Philipinas* . . . (Madrid: Manuel Ruis de Murga 1698); Book I, Chapter 42, quoted by Vicente Barrantes, *El Teatro Tagalo* (Madrid: Manuel G. Hernández; 1889); p. 9.

⁵⁴ Chirino, *Relación*, p. 52.

We must confess that we have not succeeded in tracking down that priest in southern Luzon who, according to Beyer, boasted of having destroyed more than three hundred scrolls written in native characters. Beyer does not say who he was or where his testimony is found. Besides he claims their writings were *scrolls*, and this is an interesting detail, for as far as we know pre-Spanish Filipinos wrote only on the smooth surface of the bamboo canes, on banana leaves, on the bark of some trees, but we have found no reference to paper, parchments of skin of animals or any kind of scroll used for writing, and paper although familiar to the Chinese at that time, was a product altogether unknown in the Philippines.

Gardner mentions the habits of thought created by the Inquisition as responsible for the disappearance of the old records. But this institution, besides not being meant to repress the newly christianized natives, was never very active in the Philippines. In fact, the number of processes it undertook in the two centuries of its existence here hardly goes beyond four to five dozen, none of them against a native. No record is found of anyone, European or native, being investigated for reading or keeping old pagan writings, the closest case being that of a Spaniard accused of "going around among the indios and moros in their native way of clothing and practising their dances and rituals."⁵⁵

It is a fact that religious zeal moved missionaries to destroy the pagan little idols that the natives possessed at the time of their baptism.⁵⁶

Chirino himself relates how on one occasion he burned a tiny book in verse that served some native as *anting-anting*.⁵⁷ If we are to judge such amulets by similar specimens still circulating

⁵⁵ José Toribio Medina *El Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición, en las Islas Filipinas* (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Elzeviriana, 1833, p. 29 and passim).

⁵⁶ De la Costa, *The Jesuits*, pp. 155-56.

⁵⁷ In 1962, a young man approached the writer after Mass in Tinajeros, Malabon, asking him to bless his little book. It was a tiny volume, the size of a scapular, with prayers and charms for the most unlikely situations handwritten in an amusing mixture of corrupted Tagalog and barbarous Latin and Spanish, and pure abacadabra. Another such amulet was made known at the turn of the century by W. E. Retana, *Supersticiones de los Indios Filipinos: Un Libro de Amuletos* (Madrid: Vda. de N. Vinuesa de los Ríos, 1984). Retana believes his book is a copy made around 1850 of another much earlier specimen. He even suggests that the first copies might have been done soon after the first efforts at christianization.

among some of the country folk today — and there is reason to believe that those tiny booklets of Chirino's time did not differ much from the copies still going around today⁵⁸ — we must admit the meager literacy value of such talismans in book form. At any rate, the paper used, the very shape of the books, and even the nature of their contents, which are a mixture of old *anito* worship with more recent superstitions, mark those volumes unmistakably as post-conquest products.

In 1609, Fr. Chirino was asked by the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Manila to examine the many devotional handwritten books that had appeared of late. They were written in the old characters, and while we do not know how many of them he did burn, we can conjecture that not many of them were destroyed, judging from the admiring words of praise he dedicated to this question.⁵⁹

There is a point regarding Chirino's testimony which is worth noting. He, more than anybody else, was a person qualified to know the writings circulating among the natives fifty years after the missionaries began their labors. He personally examined the books the natives possessed, and he also affirmed that the natives "never used their characters except to write letters among themselves."

We are justified to conclude, then:

First, that it is highly doubtful that pre-Spanish written records ever existed.

Second, knowledge of writing in the sixteenth century Philippines did not necessarily entail the existence of pre-Spanish written literature. Undoubtedly literary compositions existed, but they were improvised or adapted to the circumstances, and handed down orally.

Third, the accusation that the friars destroyed the written records of the early Filipinos cannot be accepted as an explanation for the lack of pre-Spanish writings.

Fourth, if there was any destruction of written materials, such a destruction was not systematic or wholesale, nor attributable

⁵⁸ W. E. Retana, *Libro de Aniterias*, Prologue, pp. XLIII-XLIV.

⁵⁹ Pedro Chirino, *Primera Parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Philipinas*, Bk. 3, Ch. X, quoted in Colín-Pastells, *Labor Evangélica*; Introd.; p. 223.

to any pre-established policy, because it is doubtful they ever existed, if for no other reason.⁶⁰

Fifth, due consideration must be given to the highly perishable nature of the materials used in writing.

Sixth, perhaps the loss of the art of writing in the old characters and the tastes imposed by the missionaries influenced the disappearance of literature handed down orally.⁶¹

It was precisely the friars who preserved what we now know about the ancient syllabary.

Its preservation is not a mere historical accident; rather it is obviously the result of the decision of the Spanish missionaries to administer to the newly conquered people in their own languages. In its turn this decision was based on a realistic evaluation of the Philippine situation.

Allusion has been made to the diversity of languages existing in the islands,⁶² and also to the fact that most of our early missionaries had labored for some time in Mexico. Moreover, for a time at least, all the religious orders had their superiors in Nueva España and this meant they were to follow the pastoral directives emanating to a high degree, from the experience and practices in Mexico. Thus when the question whether the catechumens were to be instructed in Spanish or in their own language came up for discussion in the first Synod of Manila in 1581, the problem had already been solved in practice. The same question had come up in Mexico and the decision made was in favor of native languages. The friars in the Philippines only followed the decision and practice in Mexico. Perhaps that is why this question although of so far reaching consequences, seems to have been decided without prolonged debate.⁶³

⁶⁰ John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1939), p. 18.

⁶¹ Bienvenido Lumbera, "Tagalog Poetry During the Seventeenth Century," *Philippine Studies*, XVI, No. I (January, 1968); 106.

⁶² This multiplicity of languages still exists today. A. L. Kroeber has suggested a geographical explanation of the proliferation of languages in the Philippines.

⁶³ Juan de la Concepción, *Historia General de Philipinas* (14 vol.; Manila: Impr. Seminario Conciliar y Real de S. Carlos, 1788-1792), II, 54. See also H. de la Costa, *The Jesuits*, p. 35; J. L. Phelan, "Philippine Linguistics," pp. 153, 156.

Certainly it was outright impossible for the overburdened and never numerous missionaries to dabble as school teachers; and since outside Manila and a few other towns, the parish priest was the only Spaniard with whom the natives were in daily contact, Spanish made very little headway towards becoming the *lingua franca* of the archipelago.⁶⁴ Besides missionaries were too well aware that their primary objective was to christianize the Filipinos.

On the other hand, the friars saw very realistically that it was not within their capacity to simplify the complex linguistic pattern of the Philippines, by converting one of the native languages into a *lingua franca* no matter how much such a development could have facilitated their own labors.⁶⁵

To the early missionaries, Tagalog seemed the native language best qualified to aspire to the role of *lingua franca*. They heaped up praises on the excellencies of this language, not hesitating to compare it even to the Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the prestigious language of the letters and religion.

No doubt, the desire for a common language in the archipelago and the ever increasing political importance of Manila over the entire colony account for the overwhelming emphasis placed on Tagalog which in turn resulted in a better knowledge and in a higher appreciation of this language.

Small wonder, then, that when the synod of Manila decided against making catechumens learn the Spanish language, and decreeing that natives be instructed in their own language, the Tagalog language had the privilege of being the first native language to have a catechism approved and printed in the Philippines.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The friars have been accused of having deliberately opposed the teaching of Spanish to the natives. Such an assertion is simply an error of fact. According to Phelan, the factors that contributed most to the failure of Spanish to spread in the Philippines are the following: a) shortage of instructors, the parish priests themselves being ordinarily unable to dabble in teaching; b) paucity of contacts with Spaniards who were never numerous, along with the absence of a plantation economy; c) lack of social incentives to learn Spanish; d) meager interest on the part of Filipinos when exposed to that language. J. L. Phelan, "Philippine Linguistics," pp. 168-70.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-70.

⁶⁶ Both the "Doctrina Christiana en letra y lengua China" and the "Doctrina Christiana en lengua española y Tagala" came off the press some time before June 20, 1593. Actually they were not printed in the conventional way but by the xylographic method, familiar to the Chinese craftsmen in Manila. Each individual page of the text was printed from one

Herein lies the paramount importance and the inherent weakness of that book, the *Doctrina Christiana*, as a primary source of a philological study of Tagalog. It had seventy-four pages in all of text in Spanish, Tagalog trans-literated into Roman letters, and Tagalog in Tagalog characters. Here we find the shape of of the Tagalog characters as they were used in 1593 without the corrections introduced later by Fr. Francisco López, and with their interpretation and transcription. But at the same time, it must be borne in mind that it was printed xylographically; thus lacking spontaneity and absolute uniformity and containing likely errors impossible to correct. Furthermore, the wood blocks were probably engraved by a Chinese, possibly not too familiar either with the Spanish or with the Tagalog characters.

At this time it is sufficient to underscore the significance of the fact that when the missionaries printed this first book in the Philippines, they used the indigenous writing system, and at the same time started the romanization of writing.

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woodblock which had been carved by hand, in a manner very much similar to rubber stamping. As to which of the two Catechisms was actually printed first, it is still a guess. W. E. Retana thinks that the Tagalog came out first because the Tagalog speaking people were more numerous; according to E. Wolf, 2nd, there is no way of telling. A. Santamaria and J. Gayo opine in favor of the Chinese because the craftsman was certainly a chinaman and it was still done in the Parian rather than in Binondo. W. E. Retana, *Orígenes de la Imprenta Filipina* (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1911), p. 37. *Doctrina Christiana: the First Book Printed in the Philippines: Manila, 1593. A facsimile of the copy in the Lessing J. Rosewald Collection, Library Congress, Washington*, with an Introductory Essay by Edwin Wolf, 2nd (Philadelphia, 1947), p. 40. Fr. Alberto Santamaria, O.P. "La Doctrina Tagala de 1593," *Unitas*, XXI (Octubre Diciembre, 1948), 882. *Doctrina Christiana. Primer Libro Impreso en Filipinas. Facsimil del Ejemplar Existente en la Biblioteca Vaticana, con un Ensayo Histórico-Bibliográfico por Fr. J. Gayo Aragón, O.P. y Observaciones Filológicas y Traducción Española de Fr. Antonio Domínguez, O.P.* (Manila: Universidad de Santo Tomás, 1951), p. 81.

Perhaps we should also keep in mind that Fr. Juan Cobo's *Tratado de la Iglesia y de Ciencias Naturales*, in Chinese, by the same procedure came off the press in Manila "the second moon of the spring of 1593," that is, in the month of March, as it is stated in the title page of the book. See Carlos Sanz *Primitivas Relaciones de España con Asia y Oceanía* (Madrid: Librería General Victoriano Suárez, 1958).