

## Four Anthropological Constraints for Bamboo Tube RJM 18460<sup>1</sup>

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How does one formulate a series of (more or less) reliable, informative statements about a particular object when one is forced to start with nothing but very meagre (if not unreliable and ambiguous) data? Sometimes, such an occasion may tempt us with the Vastness of the space for imagination to roam and guessing to run rampant. But this is a temptation that must be tempered if we want to be able to appreciate the civilizational designs of the object in question *in its own terms* and within the set limits inherent in any such design.

In a previous paper (Guillermo and Paluga, 2011), MDP proposed three parameters to formalize the plausibility-checking or grounding of a generated reading of an object-with-an-inscription and the inscription itself. These parameters are: (1) lexical coherence and simplicity, (2) historical emplotment, and (3) sociological mapping or embeddedness (*ibid*, 151-159).

In that example (the Calatagan Pot Inscription), and this present case the disciplinary task is always how to rigorously treat and limit the vast imaginative possibility within which any and all sorts of readings

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<sup>1</sup> Working/supplemental paper for the presentation given during the Online Collaborative Workshop on Bamboo Tube, RJM 18460 sponsored by Philippine Studies at SOAS (University of London), 26 October 2021. This is a revised and expanded version of a previously-written 'Notes' (4, 5 August 2021) in response to the request of Dr. Cristina Martinez-Juan (SOAS, University of London) for the identification/reading of the scripts on the item labelled "Bamboo Tube, RJM 18460". All photos in this paper is from this site: <https://philippinestudies.uk/mapping/items/show/7418>. A short information on the provenance of this object is also provided in this site.

can move around, and yet still be able to say something more or something new about a particular object, taking-off with just one or two thin data attached to it.<sup>2</sup>

The interest of the present paper is to construct a working sequence of ethnography-based constraints in response to the above question of making inferential information on an anthropological item. Beyond the three “parameters” mentioned above, we will present in the following notes four (4) finer constraints—which can be taken as aspects of the third parameter, that is, sociological/anthropological mapping—that guided us in both generating the inferred information and also in checking and grounding such generated readings.

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The following paper has three sections: (I) Identification/Transcription, (II) Reading/Interpretation, (III) Anthropological notes on what (pre-*pueblo* colonial) writing/reading is and is about.

**Section I** is the easiest and most practical, and responds directly to the identificatory/classificatory status of “Bamboo Tube, RJM 18460” (henceforth BT-RJM 18460) (**Notes 1-2**). **Notes 3-4** carry this identificatory work a step further by making explicit a possible line of approach when one tries to make sense of the minimum structuring of what so far is just a series of transcribed scripts/letters.

**Section II** is exploratory and contains speculative elements and, at its base, presents a possible/probable reading of what the script is saying or what coherent sense can be read from it. **Note 5** argues for a preponderance of words, affixes, and articles in the script that is identifiably (or readable as) “Tagbanwa Calamian”. **Note 6-7** give the proposed complete reading/translation of BT-RJM 18460.

**Notes 8-9** contain additional qualifiers and observations to the present reading given in Notes 5-7—these notes are mostly in the *if-then* mode: *if* the reading is correct, then the interest is on this-and-that; *if not*, then we have at least marked or opened some specific aspects and constraints to consider for exploring alternative readings.

**Section III** is, for us, what is more important if we treat this object (bamboo-with-script) as an anthropological object proper.

It argues that (**Note 10**) we still have to take seriously the importance of *not* aligning our old non-alphabetic script to the colonial-period book-and-alphabet culture (about “letters” and *literate* “writings”) *but* to link this instead (non-intuitively perhaps for us now at present) *to* other elements like tattooing-lines and other items/practices that are seen, within a socio-symbolic system, as “marks”, “lines”, or “cuts” (and even “images” and drawings) that are placed on things. If so (**Note 11**)—that is, if the minimal socio-symbolic set we are dealing with here is this non-*pueblo*-based script *and* its relation to other types of “marks/cuts/images”—then another major constraint that cannot be disregarded when “reading” our old scripts is the direct socio-symbolic correlate of this object/script being studied. We will clarify the argument for this section as we move from note to note in the following.

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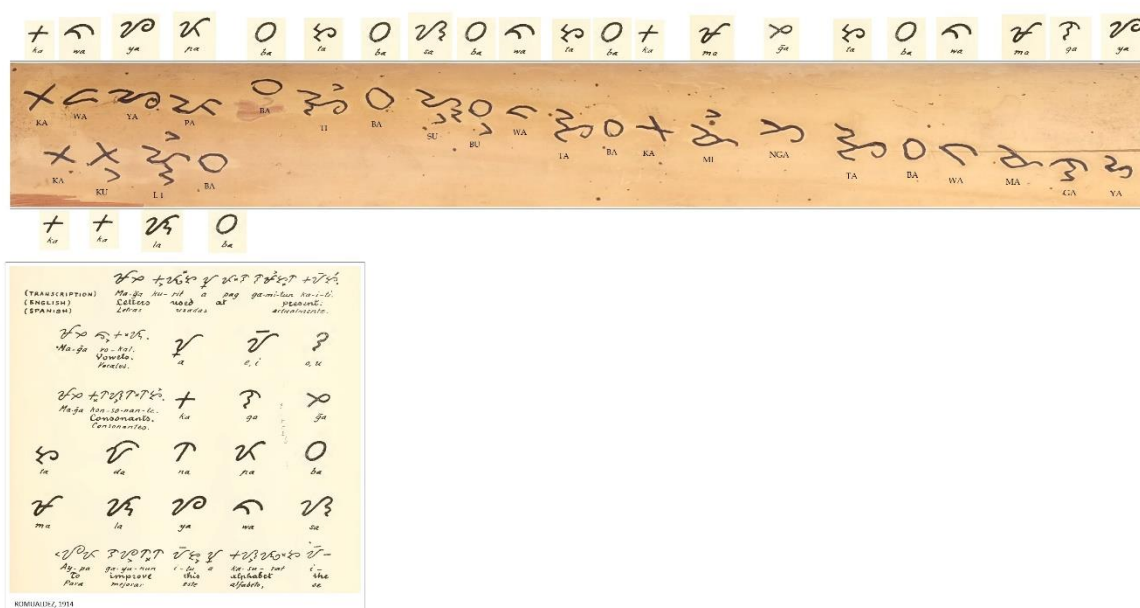
<sup>2</sup> In the “absence of a perfect datum”, these three broad parameters can work like “auto-associators that give us a preponderance of mutually consistent pieces of information” and work to “override an ambivalent piece in order to guess correctly the original (but non-accessible) state” (Guillermo and Paluga, 2011: 159).

We end with some final remarks to summarize and reiterate the important anthropological constraints and the suppositions about the object BT-RJM 18460 and its inscription that we derived thorough careful speculation and use of these constraints.

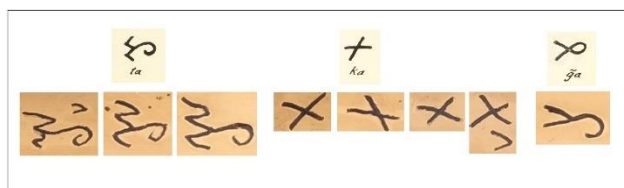
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## Section I. WHAT IS IT IF WRITTEN IN ALPHABETS FAMILIAR TO MANY?

1. **Script form identification: Tagbanwa.** The script in the bamboo is Tagbanwa in form. One can use Romualdez (1914: 2) to check the scripts—we attached the photo below for easy visual comparison the scripts given in Romualdez’s table:

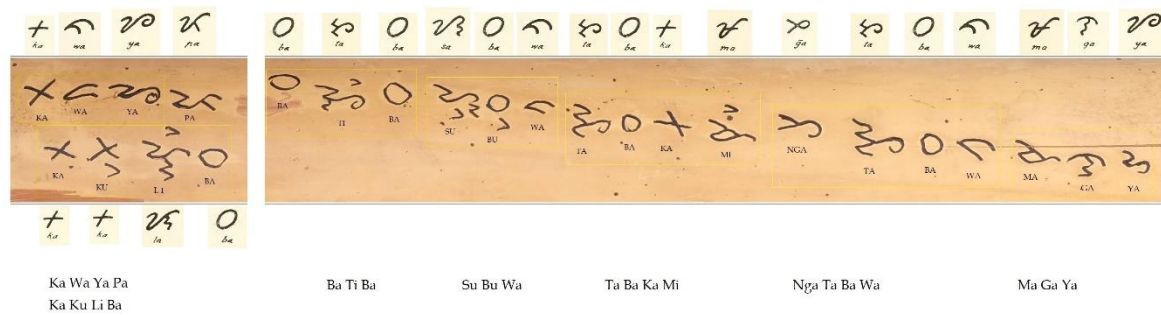


There are three slight (for “nga” and “ta”) and very slight (for “ka”) character-shape/orientation variations that can be noticed above—comparing BT-RJM 18460 with the Romualdez (1914)/Tagbanwa listing of characters (these variations in character shape will be taken up again below).



These differences are resolved by noting directly that the shapes given in Romualdez’s table give the shapes of his own “reforms”; the shapes/orientation in BT-RJM 18460 are that of the original/traditional Tagbanwa scripts. We will give an expanded discussion of this below (in *Interlude II*).

2. **Spatial arrangement: Blocked group and Diagonal group.** The script-characters appear to be spatially arranged in the medium: (a) the blocked group composed of two lines: “Ka Wa Ya Pa; Ka Ku Li Ba” and (b) the diagonally-sequenced group with one continuous line: “Ba Ti Ba” and so on. Getting some cues on character distances, we forward these possible word/phrase/verse-line groups:



3. **Working assumptions/constraints.** As we can only read this further (as sensible words and lines) if there are some constraining guides, we take the following as our minimal assumptions:

- (a) this is a kind of poetry (perhaps a familiar chanted/epic line, worthy of being given a durable form in bamboo inscription);
- (b) this is *measured* poetry; and,
- (c) the measures take the form of the so-called Austronesian “parallelism” (Fox 1988) wherein lines with the same meaning or idea or imagery are repeated. In Manobo this is called *pogsampal*, in Mandaya, *lindâ*, and we have also observed this in other Philippine epics (Paluga and Ragragio 2021).

4. **Proposed verse-line structure.** We view this argumentation for a definite line-structure as a distinct argument to be made before we move on to the hypothetical “sense-reading” (in the next section) Treating this as a separate step will definitely add to a more robust understanding of the object overall.

The 4-4/3-3/4-4-3 line-structure given below is based upon what we know about good measure and “parallelism” set out above. We know from our work with epic chanters that to “sound well” is as important as the sense of what is being said. To sound well is to have a “beautiful measure”: in Pantaron Manobo, this is captured by many terms: ‘true measure’ (*olog*), ‘exact and fearsomely true’ (*malogot*), and ‘beautiful figure or image’ (*maroyow*, or even *maroyow nu gimukod*). The measures (syllabic counts) and parallels (which seem directly palpable in the vertical group) could then flow easily once one gets the script-forms:

<b>ka-wa-ya-pa</b>	4
<b>ka-ku-li-ba</b>	4
<b>ba-ti-ba</b>	3
<b>su-bu-wa</b>	3
<b>ta-ba-ka-mi</b>	4
<b>nga-ta-ba-wa</b>	4
<b>ma-ga-ya</b>	3

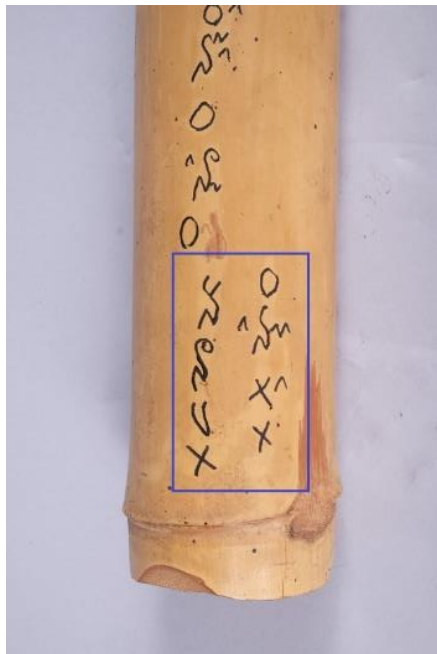
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### ***Interlude I: Technical notes***

(a) **On *olog*-measure, *pogsampal*-pairings, and *maroyow*-beautiful image.** Before we proceed to the next section, we will give here a comparative sample on what it's like to have a 'measured style' of Manobo *pogsampal* (parallelism or paired verses). The example below is from Elena Maquiso (1977: 198) but with an English translation by MDP. All four lines have eight (8) syllabic-count measures; the lines with similar 'senses' are given similar letter-labels ('a' or 'b'):

Kedda duwag kaliwa te, (8) (a)	Two sequential strides
Su amusu negtikesen; (8) (b)	Of legs with <i>tikos</i> (leglets)
Ne ke'empat kemeluluk, (8) (a)	Four alternating steps
Te lisen negbengkelingen (8) (b)	Of legs with <i>bengkeling</i> (leglets)

This epic-segment is both 'beautiful to hear' with one's ear and 'beautiful to see' with 'the eye/mind of one's breath (*goynawa*)', as a Manobo would say it.

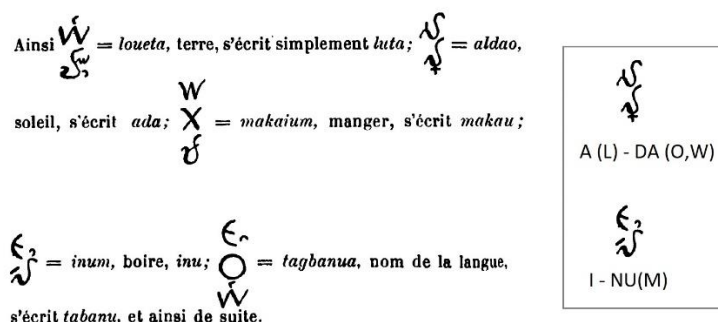


Indeed, when MDP first saw the photo of the object (see above, the characters inside the square), the very first thing that caught his eye was the same number of characters of the vertically arranged "opening" lines: 4-4. This figural gestalt reminded him of *olog* and *pogsampal*. This "imagery" easily catches one's attention even before one grasps what it might be saying.

(b) **On the bottom-up, vertical direction of writing the traditional Tagbanwa script.** Alfred Marche (1887: 329-330) gave samples<sup>3</sup> of how this "bottom to top from the right" (*ibid.*, 327: *de bas en haut à*

<sup>3</sup> Marche's script data is taken from the Puerto Princesa area, especially in some upstream area of the Iwahig [Yguahit] River (*op. cit.*, 319-320): "On April 8, at 5 a.m., I was leaving for the top from the Yguahit River, where I hoped to find one or two indigenous villages. [*Le 8 avril, à 5 heures du matin, je partais pour le haut de la rivière Yguahit, où j'espérais trouver un ou deux villages indigènes.*]

*partir de la droite*) direction in writing looked like (we placed in inset below two words—aldow/sun and inum/to drink—for greater clarity):



Norberto Romualdez (1914<sup>4</sup>: v-vi; boldfacing emphasis added)<sup>5</sup> echoed this by reporting that “the [traditional] Tagbanwas are yet<sup>6</sup> **accostumed to write vertically** from the bottom up, with the lines beginning at the left // *pues algunos **todavía escriben de abajo hacia arriba** quedando a la izquierda el primer renglon vertical*”.

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## Section II. WHAT IS IT SAYING?

5. **Words, articles.** So what can these material, phonological forms take/give as coherent “sense”?

<sup>4</sup> The script data from Romualdez is from the Aborlan area of Palawan (*op. cit.*, III; *emphasis added*): “At odd times, and through the kindness and knowledge of the dialect possessed by Mr. Manuel H. Venturillo and by the **teachers of the Aborlan Reservation**, Mr. and Mrs. Doroteo Soberano, I became acquainted with the tongue and its alphabet sufficiently to enable myself to prepare this little work.”

<sup>5</sup>

[p. -V-]

In the paragraph <Firstly> it is proposed that the direction in writing be horizontally from left to right, **as some of the Tagbanwas are yet accostumed to write vertically from the bottom up**, with the lines beginning at the left (6).

...

[6] I have not seen any Tagbanwa in the act of writing. But Mrs. Doroteo Soberano, who has been living among the Tagbanwas for some time, **informs me that these people write from the bottom up, beginning at the left side.** (Boldfacing-emphasis added)

[p. -VI-]

En el parrafo <Primero> se propone que la direccion de la escritura sea de izquierda a derecha, horizontalmente, **pues algunos todavía escriben de abajo hacia arriba** quedando a la izquierda el primer renglon vertical (6).

...

[6] No hemos visto a ningun tagbanwa escribir. Pero D.a [*sic*] Margarita Soberano, que ha vivido algun tiempo entre los tagbanwas **informa que la escritura es de abajo para arriba.** (Boldfacing-emphasis added)

<sup>6</sup> The “yet/*todavía*” here registers the on-going drive, by both the author and others (like, *la reforma del P. Lopez* [p. x]), to introduce “corrections” in what they thought are deficiencies and limitations of this “writing system” relative to the romanized/Latin scripts.



We are presently very limited in access to lexicon, wordlists and knowledgeable informants/speakers. Of the three Tagbanwa languages, we were only able to access some Tagbanwa Calamian sample texts/studies and one from the Central Tagbanwa group (Sebold, 2003). The following are our direct reference-sources for the lexical units and meanings in the following hypothetical reading: Aguilar and Aguilar (1976), Ruch (undated), and SIL International (2020).

There are nine (9) word-forms and three (3) articles that can be read from the above transcript (Note 4):

<b>kawayan</b> (bamboo)	1
<b>kakuli</b> (difficult)	2
<b>bagtik</b> (joined closely together)	3
<b>subuwaw</b> (to be foolhardy)	4
<b>tagbak</b> (fully saturated), <b>kami</b> (we-outward)	5, 6
<b>nga</b> (you), <b>tagbanwa</b> (ethnonym)	7, 8
<b>maganyat</b> (persuade others to join in action)	9
...	
<b>pa, ba</b> (twice)	10, 11, 12

6. **Verse-lines construction.** If one assembles these lexical units together in their sequential occurrences as verse-lines we will have the following text-construction:

<b>Ka-wa-ya(n) pa</b> <b>Kakuli ba</b>	<b>Kawayan* pa<sup>1</sup></b> <b>Kakuli<sup>2</sup> ba<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Bamboo, yet</b> <b>Difficult, really</b>
<b>Ba(g)-ti(k) ba</b> <b>Su-bu-wa(w)</b>	<b>Bagtik* ba<sup>3</sup></b> <b>Subuwaw<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>Joined-closely-together, really</b> <b>Be foolhardy</b>
<b>Ta(g)-ba(k) ka-mi</b> <b>Nga Ta(g)-ba(n)-wa</b> <b>Ma-ga(n)-ya(t)!</b>	<b>Tagbak* kami<sup>4</sup></b> <b>Nga<sup>4</sup> Tagbanwa*</b> <b>Maganyat<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>We, fully saturated</b> <b>You, Tagbanwas</b> <b>Join us in action</b>

<sup>1</sup> The phrase-forms [word + **pa**, word + **ba**] are fairly common in Ruch (n.d.), *lutaw pa*, *magapuy pa*, etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Kakurian* and *kakulian* [kakuli/kakuri + an (affix)] as “difficulty” are listed in SIL International/Tagbanwa Calamian Dictionary (2020) as variant forms. Ruch (n.d.: 86) has the form *kakuri*, as in a line in a story: *Abee, maganing yang kanug ang lalii. Maning, Juan, kung belaga ilem yawa, maayen nang tau, midyu kakuri rin.* (“Wow,” said the male eagle. He said, “John, if it weren’t you, you are a good person, our getting it would appear very **difficult**.”)

<sup>3</sup> Aguilar and Aguilar (1976: 9) has this sentence-entry: “‘**Ba**, *Pusung*,’ *aganing yang iganti ...*”

<sup>4</sup> Ruch (n.d.: 28, 10.2) shows that ‘**kami**’ and ‘**yami**’ forms for *we* are both present in Calamian.

<sup>4</sup>Ruch (n.d., *passim*) gives several sentence examples where ‘nga’ functions to signify ‘you’ in Calamian.

\* Actual word-form entries can be found in SIL International/*Tagbanwa Calamian Dictionary* (2020)

† The actual entry in SIL International (2020) are the “regular” morphological forms (‘subu’ [“to be foolhardy”], ‘ganyat’ [“to persuade others to join speaker in an action”]); the affixed forms ‘subuwaw’ and ‘maganyat’ are in the given sentence-examples of the entries.

7. **Hypothetical complete translation.** The following is, therefore, this paper’s proposed reading/translation of what BT-RJM 18460 contains:

Still, of this bamboo  
Difficult, really  
  
Linked together, really  
So take risk  
  
We, we are true  
And you, you Tagbanwa  
Come, act with us

8. **Extended comments on the hypothetical translation.**

There are two interesting aspects of the proposed reading/translation given above (Notes 6-7):

(a) **The object’s prosopopoeia: ‘We are true,’ says the bamboo/script.** Our readings surfaced one relatively certain pronoun (we/*kami*), another probable pronoun (you/*nga*), and a derivative pronoun (‘us’, based on the definition of *ganyat* in the proposed word-form *ma-ganyat*). So who is enunciating the ‘we’—*kami*—here? It might be a kind of ‘Spirits of the Bamboo’ agency, addressing the Tagbanwas: is the text/poem about a plural bamboo-spirits talking to the Tagbanwa-addressee, asking them to be one with them?

(b) **“Multiple pairing technique” as constraint.** The phenomenon of this so-called “parallelism” or “multiple pairing technique” in Philippine poetic verses—a verse-level expression of a “cutting-and-linking” figure in Philippine indigenous life (discussed in Paluga and Ragragio, 2021)—allows for a reshuffling/re-ordering of verse-lines without distorting the overall sense of the stanza/poem. The first two parallel lines given above (Note 7)—grouped according to syllabic measures—can be re-ordered by grouping the lines by *pogsampal/lindâ* rule. The verse-grouping transformation is, thus:

**ba-ba-cde→aa-bb-cde.**

Here are the lines structured along its sonorous syllabic-measure counts, 4-4/3-3/4-4-3 (Note 3), with each line labelled by letters (a, b, c, d) for their echoing senses, to form the *pogsampal/ lindâ*-grouping **ab-ba-cde**:

Still, of this bamboo (4) (b) [*Kawayan pa, Kakuli ba*]  
Difficult, really (4) (a)  
  
Linked together, really (3) (b) [*Bagtik ba, Subuwaw*]  
So take risk (3) (a)



We, we are true (4) (c) [*Tagbak kami, Nga Tagbanwa, Maganyat*]  
 And you, you Tagbanwa (4) (d)  
 Come, act with us (3) (e)

And here is the transformed grouping—grouping the lines now along similarity of senses, reshuffling the syllabic-measure pairings, giving us a non-actualized, “hovering” transformation, **aa-bb-cde**, while still retaining the overall sense of the poetry:

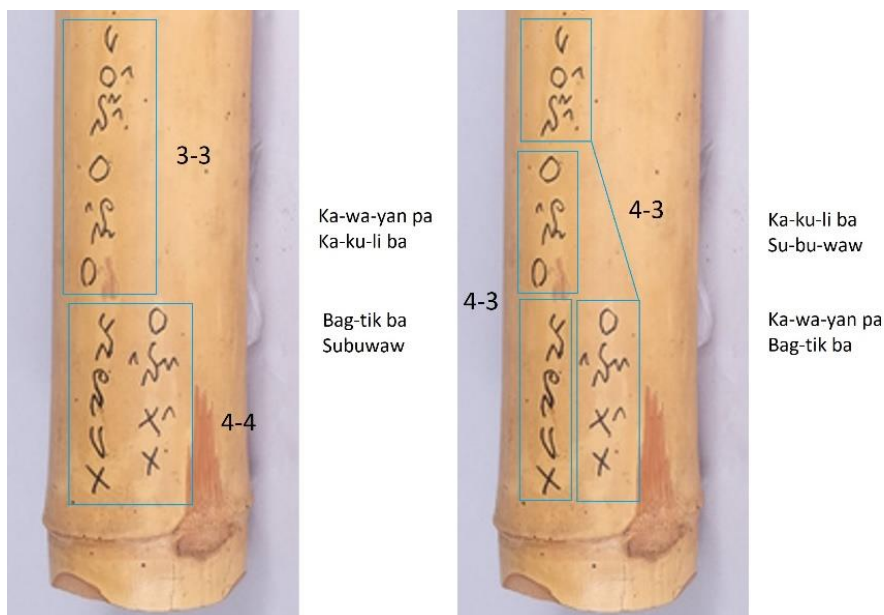
Difficult, really (4) (a) [*Kakuli ba, Subuwaw*]  
 So take risk (3) (a)

Still, of this bamboo (4) (b) [*Kawayan pa, Bagtik ba*]  
 Linked together, really (3) (b)

We, we are true (4) (c) [*Tagbak kami, Nga Tagbanwa, Maganyat*]  
 And you, you Tagbanwa (4) (d)  
 Come, act with us (3) (e)

Note that the sonorous syllabic-measure for this transformed group (based on the original Tagbanwa trascription: Note 3) still shows an aligning of lines with similar syllabic-lengths, and so: 4-3/4-3/4-4-3.

This is how the shuffling would look when one sees them when holding the bamboo:



□ □

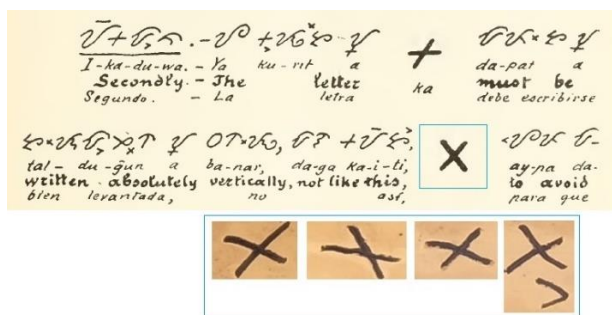
### ***Interlude II: Additional technical notes***

(a) **On the non-presence of danda.** Not all baybayin variants appear to use the danda-separator: character arrangements, comparative group spacing/gap, and durable phrasings can take the functionality of a line-separator.

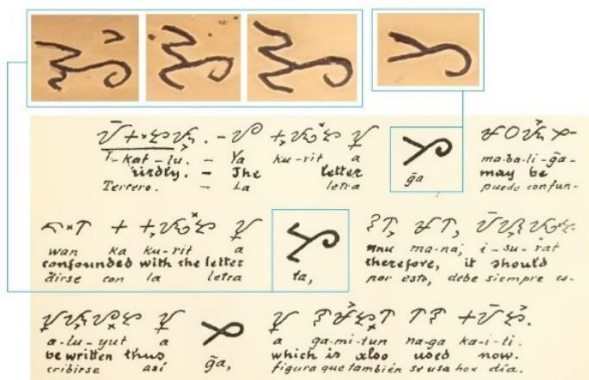
(b) **On the non-presence of the so-called *virama* “vowel-killer”.** One can say that the item is not within the influence of the “reforms” of the spirit advocated by Romualdez (1914) and previous others who proposed and practiced including a “vowel-killer”. This accords with the year of acquisition of the item (1906).

(c) **On the shape-differences for “nga”, “ta”, and “ka” in BT-RJM 18460 and Romualdez (1914).** The shapes for the three characters reflected in the table of Romualdez (1914: 2) are his own “reforms”. The pre-reforms, traditional shapes that he discussed in his book’s text are more similar to the corresponding shapes in BT-RJM 18460.

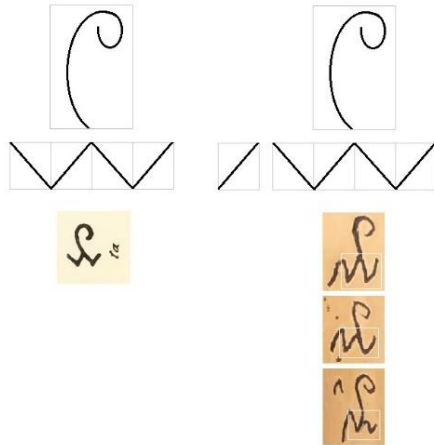
Let us take this one by one. The true “ka” is what, according to Romualdez (1914: 3), should not anymore be continued—it “must be written absolutely vertically [+], not like this [x], to avoid confusion”. The four occurrences of “ka/ku” in BT-RJM 18460 is more like the latter than the reformed shape:



The true “ta” and “nga” are also more like that of BT-RJM 18460 if one reads the discussion of Romualdez (1914: 3): the ribbon-like “nga” [written by Romualdez as letter “g” with tilde + “a”] is his replacement/correction for the traditional shape because, in his view, this latter shape “may be confounded with the letter ‘ta’”.



Of the three shapes, we are, therefore, left with only one very slightly varying character, the “ta”. If, for descriptive purposes, we break the shape of the Romualdez-documented “ta”, we will have a 4-line zigzag plus a curl-tail; the **unique/extra-zig of BT-RJM 18460’s “ta”** is quite consistent.



At this point, the best we can say is to posit the possibility of a local variant or writing-practice area *within* the Tagbanwa script-groups, different from the pool-source of Romualdez’s documentation.

There is broad variability, and also clustering, of the forms/shapes of the so-called ‘*baybayin* scripts’ if one plots formally the data from Spanish-colonial period reports up to the latest shapes we have in the (Bikol/Masbate region) “Ticao stones” scripts (Paluga and Mata, 2011)<sup>7</sup>. A quick glance at some specimen samples will give us a view of the range of shapes that “ta” can take:

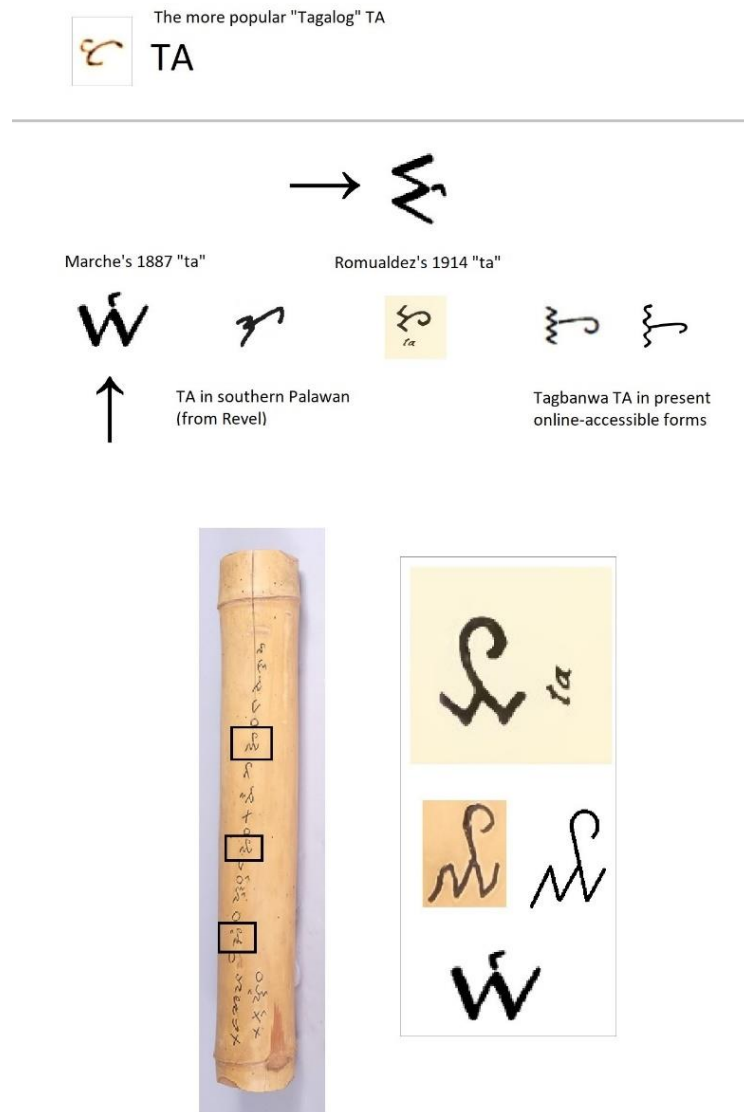
	A	E/I	O/U	B	K	D	G	H	L	M	N	NG	P	S	T	W/V	Y	R
Maricao (Spanish)	⌘	⌘	3	0	I	2	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
Alifan				0	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
Agutaya	⌘	⌘	3	0	I	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
Itanara (Mororan)	⌘	⌘	3	0	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
BP-2			3		I	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
Imula (Mororan)	⌘	⌘	3		⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘
Luzon	⌘	⌘	3	0	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘	⌘

“Ta”’s Mangyan form, compared to Tagbanwa, might be seen having the angular *n*-zigzag and *non-present* curl-tail of the Tagbanwa. All the other forms are consistent in their overall curliness.

(d) **On the rotated orientation of the script from Marche (1887) to Romualdez (1914).** The orientation of the Tagbanwa characters as embodied in its traditional medium (in bamboo, writing/reading vertically from bottom to top) as reported in Marche (1887) has rotated 90 degrees when the writing was transferred to the medium of the paper (writing/reading horizontally from left to write),

<sup>7</sup> Paluga and Mata (2011) gives a comparative analysis of twenty-three (23) *baybayin* scripts (Philippine alpha-syllabaries or abugidas), plus one non-*baybayin*/Sumatran script for Southeast Asian comparison, using computer-based image analysis to produce a formal matrix of similarity values; the range of variations can then be visualized in dendrogram and multidimensional scaling analysis plots.

as one can see in the Tagbanwa-script writings in Romualdez (1914).<sup>8</sup> The case of “ta” can be taken here as a clear example (the “ta” from Revel [1990: 30-40] is inserted for comparison):



9. *More sources of constraints for narrowing the possible space for doing “readings” are needed.* As long as the constraints are only of the kind and scope given above (slim data plus our three heuristic constraints), we cannot move beyond giving this speculative “reading”.

<sup>8</sup> The rotated (*Umdrehung, Drehung, gedreht*) orientations of some Philippine scripts was first observed by Foy (in Meyer and Schadenberg [1895]) but he framed this in unnecessarily complicated linear evolutionary phases across regional variants. He noted (p. 24), for example, that the “Zambales alphabets” (*Alphabete von Zambales*) are “the preliminary stage to the forms of Palawan” (*die Vorstufe zu den Formen von Palawan*), and that the “alphabets from Palawan ... show the resulting shape rotated 90 ° to the left” (*Alphabete von Palawan ... zeigen die so entstandene Form um 90° nach links gedreht*).

### Section III. WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Scholars of Balinese letters have often noted in passing that the characters, or *aksara*, employed to write Balinese texts are taken to be “alive” by those who use them ... —Richard Fox

#### 10. What is our old “writing system” about and what kind of “reading” is being practiced relative to such ‘writings’?

We come now to another kind of anthropological constraint; this constraint begs us to suspend, at least temporarily, what usually passes as the “universal” idea of what a writing system is and is about.

The approach here is to take our non-alphabetic writing system as *not* foremostly about practices that are usually associated with *pueblo*-based/(so-called) modern “writing system”. By practices associated with modern/European “writing system” we mean how they mostly served (and continue to do so) as ‘storage of information to either account for the disposition of practical items’ or ‘as receptacle for religious-conversion or transmission of ideas.’ Instead of this, we posit that our traditional/post-traditional ‘scripts’ are *more related to* ‘person-object-place markings and image-making’ and so, therefore, also of the correlative practices and institutions vis-a-vis such scripts.

This heuristic constraint was first suggested by the comment of a Jangan friend/interlocutor to MDP when he inquired about their old tattooing practices. Our interlocutor said: ‘I can clearly recall my grandfather telling us when we were still young that “in the same manner as the Christians have their written book, the Bible, we have also ours in the form of tattoos”’. Much later, we learned of the Manobo term *penuris* from an explanation of tattooing among the Western Bukidnon (Polenda 2002: 158, 391-392). We quoted this explanation in full in Ragrario and Paluga (2019: 268), inserting in brackets and emphasizing in bold the pertinent Manobo terms:

Another kind of arm ornamentation is tattooing [**pengeteb**]. Anyone, men, women, or children may be tattooed [**ebpengetevan**]. It is done [**Emun pengeteb**] by making small incisions [**penuris**] in the skin with a sharp knife [**ebpenurisen kes lundis te megarang he kurta**] and any design may be made [**ibpengeteb is ed-iringen**], a name, a bird, or a human figure.

*Penuris* here means ‘to *incise* tattoos’ but is also related and comparable to Bahasa Indonesia *menulis* or *tulis*, meaning ‘to write’, or more generally, ‘written’ or ‘writings’ (Guillermo et al. 2017: xiv), showing/suggesting an old categorial link between writing and tattooing, perhaps bridged by the action of incising<sup>9</sup>. Note in the above that “a name” is included in the design options for Western Bukidnon tattooing. During more recent (2019) fieldwork, a young Manobo woman described to AMR how her grandmother tattooed her: “She held the tool just like a pencil” (indeed, this is exactly what it looks like when tattoo practitioners demonstrate how to tattoo).

<sup>9</sup> We are making a comparative/extrapolative point here for Tagbanwa *with* our Manobo data. In Manobo contexts, ‘making incision’ (on body and/or non-body surfaces)—*penuris* or its synonymous category *kulit/kurit/kulis*, which, in Manobo particularly, can both mean ‘lines in the palm’, ‘to write marks’, ‘to engrave’, or ‘to sculpt’. In specific junctures of habitual practices, *penuris/kulit* can relate to the schema associating breathing (*goynawa*)-as-cutting (*bigtow*) with valuing (*goynawa*)-as-marking/making-sign (*timaan, tuus, indan*) (cf. Paluga, 2021).

Is this category of “incising” a relevant comparative approach for Tagbanwa? The Palawan group studied by Revel (1990), who borrowed the Tagbanwa script in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (calling this either *surat tinagbanuwa* or *surat inabärlan* [*ibid.*, 30]), has this to say:

We write by **incising** the bamboo (*écrit en incisant le bambou*) with the everted point of the *paqis*, the small curved knife which is used to taper the rattan, we then make **bägritän** characters ([from] **bägrit**, “**incision, engraving**”) [*on fait alors des caractères bägritän* (< *bägrit* «incision, gravure»)]. (*Ibid.*, 32; Emphasis added.)

Pursuing the possible implication of this heuristic line, we can ask: How do people actually “read”—in early 20<sup>th</sup> century or earlier times—such types of incising/writing? What is it to “read” *penuris/bägrit* marks before there were romanized/Latin and Arabic (and/or *Jawi*) scripts/characters in our archipelago? We take these sequence of categories (and their related terms and objects)—[*penuris*]→[*surat*]→[*letra*—as important pointers or conceptual nodes for doing anthropologically-informed inquiries about our historical experiences and construals vis-à-vis “writing/reading” practices.

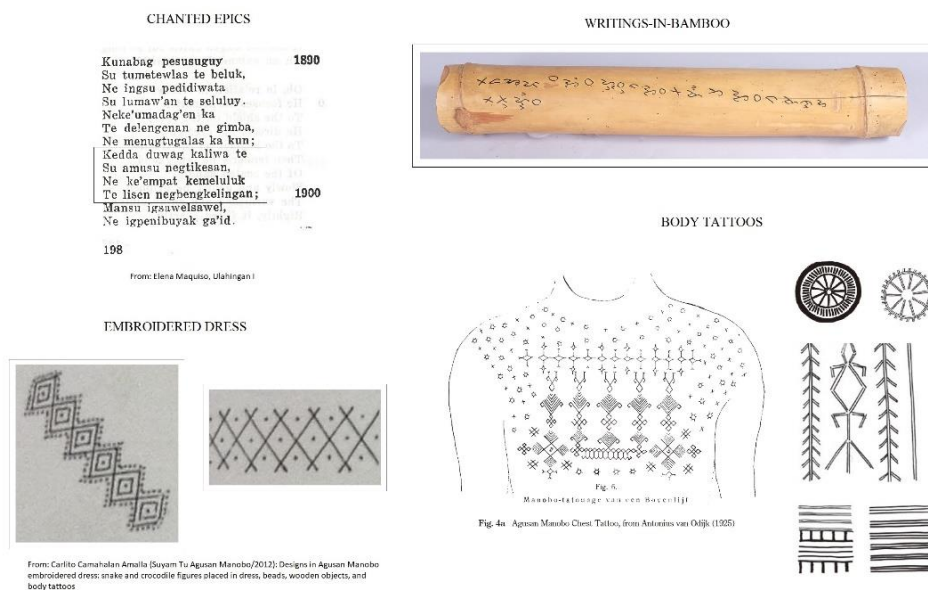
If we have to have a local Philippine category to use as entry-point for studying this semiotic notion of “reading” such set of *penuris* marks, a tandem step might be the deepening of our grasp of Philippine indigenous tradition/s of doing *basa*-style of “reading” (compare *basa* with Javanese *maca*, which “has the original meaning ‘to voice’” [Arps, 1996: 168]). The form or style of this kind of “reading” practice might be like the one described in the annotation of the proposed Calatagan Pot Inscription line, *Kita sana magbasa/Let us read the signs* (Guillermo and Paluga, 2017: 156). The note on this word *magbasa* (‘to read the signs’) is what is apropos here, pursuing the sense hinted by this so-called tradition of “alphabet mysticism” in Southeast Asia (*op. cit.*):

- (5) *Magbasa, yamyam* and the prehistoric roots of this *oracion/libreto* series: The use of secret, written formularies (*oracion, libreto* as part of ‘alphabet mysticism’<sup>71</sup>) that are passed on to succeeding generations of ‘healers’ are also well documented in various ethnographies as part of an enduring tradition. One New Israel (Makilala, North Cotabato<sup>72</sup>) Moncadista priest-healer (a Waray), for example, mentions the practice of *sabak* (‘mentoring a prospective healer’) and the yearly collective sacrifice-celebration attended by his network of healers. This priest, although from Samar, is associated with healers residing in Bohol and has married a Bol-anon and resided in a Bohol village for some time. He makes a regular yearly visit to Bohol where collective offerings are made to the *abyan* (‘unseen friend’). The proposed reading of the CPI (mentioning a collective subject of *daitan*), an inscription in what might be taken as a ritual pot (perhaps a regular offering vessel), would make sense as a central vessel in the context of yearly communal rituals and the magico-religious practice of ‘alphabet mysticism’.

In the course of writing this paper and mulling over this different style of doing writing-and-reading, we encountered a similar theoretical view, but much more systematically presented, in an ethnography done by Fox (2018) on Bali’s *aksara* scripts. Fox’s highly perceptive ethnography opened with this question—“What would happen if we inverted [the usual] assumption and approached ostensibly literary objects as if they were amulets, or even living beings?” In each of his book’s chapter he pursued the various implications of this initial question, and in the process was able to clearly describe the social “language ecology” of what he called as “two conflicting conceptions of writing” that is at work in Bali’s *aksara* scripts (*op. cit.*, 1, 54; see also. pp. 174-175).



For the Philippine context we can perhaps, for purposes of giving focus to a conceptual differentiation, construct a name for an inductive task that is yet to be done systematically. This task is to explore if there really is robust content for this posited tandem *penuris/basa writing-and-reading practice*, one that durably differs from our colonial-*pueblo*-based scripts—even as this practice could co-exist, mix, or integrate with the non-native scripts in the colonial/post-colonial period. We may find that “writing-and-reading” (as a demarcated region-of-practice) could then take as one set at least four different ‘things’ or ‘parts’: ‘a bamboo with scripts’, ‘a flow of chanted words in an epic’, ‘an embroidered dress’, and ‘a tattooed part of a human body’. Why? Because specific and determinate ‘marks’, ‘images’, and ‘figures’ can themselves be *recognized/practiced by users* as similar and associated in their “expressive language” (to borrow a phrase from Heinz Werner [1955]).



To give a concrete example, among Agusan Manobo, there are at least two *named* figures/marks—the *binakosan* (“snake”) and the *binuaja* (“crocodile”)—which, *as names and as figures* (shapes or images), durably cuts across different varied media: in a study by Amalla (2012: 112), these two *named figures* can be found in ‘embroidered dress’, in ‘beads’, in ‘gold or wooden objects’, and in ‘body tattoos’.

11. *What is the ‘it’ that we have to know vis-à-vis things of this sort?* The ‘it’ or the ‘thing’ that is really at stake here—above and beyond getting the script’s direct textual sense and meanings—is the societal practice and the symbolic system that encompass objects of this sort: an *object-with-scripts*. We propose this as *the* theoretical object that should demand our inquisitiveness. Studies of various (so-called) *baybayin* scripts can only be strengthened by this purposive, if not self-conscious, shift in focus.

It is the word, the figure, the action ...  
*(Il est la parole, la figure, le geste ...)*  
 —Maurice Leenhardt

### Final Remarks. FOUR HEURISTIC CONSTRAINTS

We opened by posing the challenge of how we might rigorously limit the Vast possibility of generating informative readings on a particular object-with-an-old-Philippine-script. Certainly, the expectation that any reading must have a coherent message and must demonstrably be socio-historically embedded remain very much valid. But in order to fulfill these broad demands the steps to be taken must be refined further, which we have attempted to do above with the eleven Notes through which we presented our arguments step-by-step. Of these eleven Notes, four finer constraints upon which our argument explicitly and importantly relies bear repeating; these are the three minimal working assumptions/constraints in Note 3, and the broader embedding of this bamboo object in its socio-historical context in Palawan, the Philippines, and beyond. To re-state these finer constraints in a different way (that may be additionally helpful for similar cases to the BT-RJM 18460 item-to-be-read in question), here is a series of four question-and-answer steps vis-à-vis the item in question:

- (1) **Q.** What forms of “expressive language” (Werner, 1955) are used in things of this sort?  
**A.** Poetic forms.
- (2) **Q.** What kind of poetic form?  
**A.** Syllabically-measured kind (in the range most skilfully expressed in varied Philippine epic chantings).
- (3) **Q.** What style of ‘measured lines’?  
**A.** The range of ‘measuring’ styles used in Philippine indigenous “multiple pairing technique” style (like that shown in varied Philippine epic verse-lines).
- (4) **Q.** What are objects of this sort broadly about?  
**A.** Relative to what Fox (2018: 54) outlined as Southeast Asia’s “two conflicting conceptions of writing”, this object—a ‘bamboo-with-Tagbanwa (Calamian) script-and-poetry’—appears to adumbrate a practice that is not so far from what Fox described as a script-ecology that is “allied to a different articulation of agency, life, and matter.”

Needless to say, all the assumptions/constraints above can take alternate propositions: (1) the form can be non-poetic, (2) the poetry can be of non-measured type or tracking other aspects to measure other than the syllabic counts, (3) the lines can have other forms of complex patternings other than those covered by what is called parallelism or multiple pairing, and (4) objects of this sort can be more about, say, (state-oriented style) ‘politics and economy’ than ‘religion/spirituality’. But these all still need to be borne out rigorously as this present case-example set out to do.

How determinative are these constraints? At the moment, they are just enough to direct a non-random, anthropologically-guided reading of the object-and-script. An example is this study’s determination that the script’s language is “Tagbanwa Calamian”: while we are able to present a coherent reading that allows fitting it as *preponderantly (probably)* Tagbanwa Calamian, an alternate *complete* reading coming from the Arborlan/Iwahig-area Tagbanwa language cannot yet be discounted this early. In fact, at least two word-forms we present here (*kawayan* and *tagbak*) are present in other Tagbanwa/Palawan languages.

□ □

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