

Introducing the Eskaya writing system: a complex Messianic script from the southern Philippines.

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces and documents the Eskaya (ᜆᜏᜒᜓ᜔) writing system of the Philippines, developed ca. 1920–1937, and attempts to reconstruct the circumstances of its creation. Although the script is used for representing Visayan (Cebuano)—a widely used language of the southern Philippines—its privileged role is in the written reproduction of a constructed utopian language, referred to as Eskayan or Bisayan Declarado. Held to have been invented by the ancestral ‘Pope Pinay’, the Eskayan language and its script are used by approximately 550 people for restricted purposes in the southeast of the island of Bohol. Of the approximately 1065 characters in the system, a primary set of twenty-four are alphabetic with optional syllabic values; the remaining letters have syllabic values only and can be decomposed into an *inahan* (‘mother’), standing for (C)V, and a *sinyas* (‘gesture’) indicating consonant diacritics on either side of the nucleus. Coda diacritics are largely inconsistent, meaning that each syllabic character needs to be acquired independently. The script has minor logographic elements with ideography employed in the decimal numeral system. Over half of all Eskaya characters are redundant and at least thirty-seven represent phonotactic impossibilities in either Visayan or Eskayan. The sheer size, complexity and irregularity of the hybrid Eskaya script is unparalleled among the world’s writing systems. I argue that the very opacity of Eskaya writing is, in part, what makes it attractive to new learners and has contributed to its successful transmission for ninety years.

keywords: grammatogeny, writing systems, Philippine scripts, artificial languages

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of script invention on the part of literate or semi-literate communities is a relatively rare event. Only a handful of examples are reported in the nineteenth century, of which the most celebrated are the Cherokee script created by Sequoyah in 1821 and the Vai script of Liberia, developed by Mómolu Duwale Bukele in the 1830s.¹ But as European powers began to contract over the course of the twentieth century, a number of new scripts emerged in certain focal regions of the

¹ Others include the enigmatic Raffles Script of Indonesia reported in 1817 (Raffles [1817] 1988), and the Leke script of Burma that was developed 1844-1845 (Womack 2005). Note that Konrad Tuchsherer and P.E.H. Hair have investigated a potential historical connection between Cherokee and Vai (Tuchsherer and Hair 2002), but their findings are inconclusive.

colonized world. In West Africa at least ten new scripts were invented in the first half of the century, while the Asia-Pacific witnessed the emergence of five scripts in the same period; a further four appeared after World War II.² Several more scripts were created on the Indian subcontinent (for an overview see Brandt 2014). These new scripts were frequently associated with local demands for self-determination, ethnic revitalization and a revised moral order, sometimes in the aftermath of violent struggle.

The Eskaya script on the Philippine island of Bohol is believed by its users to have been created by the heroic ancestor Pinay and later ‘revealed’ in the 1920s to the veteran rebel Mariano Datahan (ca. 1875–1949) whose Messianic agenda had by that time attracted a large following in the southeast of the island. Having endured brutal conflict and successive occupations, Datahan’s followers valued the script as an index of an uncorrupted pre-contact civilization free from foreign influence (Kelly 2015a). Living in isolation from lowland town centres, the Eskaya people of the village of Taytay were later ‘discovered’ in 1980 by agricultural advisers. Their script was judged to be so unusual that a number of journalists and amateur anthropologists assumed that the community was an uncontacted indigenous minority.

Pinay’s script and its hybrid writing system is of particular sociolinguist interest, not just for its relative longevity but because its development coincided with the construction of a complex new *spoken* register still used today in restricted domains (Kelly 2012b). To the best of my knowledge, only one other case of simultaneous language-script invention is known in the historical record: that of the Medefaidrin (𐄓𐄌𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑𐄒) language and script of southern Nigeria, developed in about 1928 (Adams 1947, Hau 1961, Abasiattai 1989, Gibbon, Ekpenyong, and Urua 2010). Also extraordinary is the fact that users of the Eskayan language and script have, over the past five generations, redirected the focus of their original movement away from nationalist goals and towards a contemporary reimagination of what it means to be ‘indigenous’, thereby successfully adapting to the shifting concerns of the political mainstream (Kelly 2014). To date, a few annotated samples of the Eskaya script have been reproduced in locally published newspaper and magazine articles (Logarta 1981, Tirol 1989, 1990a, 1990b) and two postgraduate dissertations (Martinez 1993, Consul 2005). However this paper represents the first ever documentation and analysis of the form and function of Eskaya writing system as it relates to the phonologies of the languages it is designed to represent.

The Eskaya, as those who use the Eskayan language and writing system are now known, comprise approximately 3000³ individuals living in the villages of Cadapdapan, Biabas, Taytay, Lundag and Canta-ub in southeast Bohol (see Fig. 1).

² For an overview of new West African scripts see Dalby (1967, 1968, 1969), Schmitt (1980) and Unseth (2011); the early twentieth-century Asia-Pacific scripts that have come to my attention are the Caroline Islands Script (Riesenberg and Kaneshiro 1960), the Khom script of Laos (Sidwell 2008), the Eskaya script described in this paper, the Mama script of Easter Island (Fischer 1997) and the Iban script of Malaysian Borneo (Philip 2007). In the latter half of the century, two independent scripts were developed for the Hmong language of Laos (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990, Smalley and Wimmuttikol 1998), and scripts are reported in Vanuatu (Gray 2012) and Bougainville (pers. comm. James Tanis, Ruth Spriggs, Steven Tamiung).

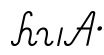
³ This is the conventional estimate provided by Eskaya leaders and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples in Bohol, although there is no survey or census data to support this claim. The only study to have provided a precise figure puts the population at 739 (Anania 2010) but it is not clear whether this number applies to all Eskaya people or only to those living within the municipality of Pilar.

terminology). Classes are divided between children and adults and run all day with a break for lunch. Children are taught the rudiments of the Eskaya writing system, while adult classes—which are sometimes conducted exclusively in the Eskayan language—focus on the acquisition of Eskayan vocabulary. Outside the traditional schools, senior women use Eskaya writing in the production of personal prayer books (in both Eskayan and Visayan), and in recent years Eskaya has appeared in the linguistic landscape of Taytay in the form of public signage. The primary domain of use for the writing system is in the reading and recopying of a substantial body of traditional Eskaya literature (also written in both Eskayan and Visayan), which will be discussed in more detail below.

Eskaya people contend that their writing system was the creation of Pinay (Fig. 2), a legendary ancestor described as the ‘first pope’ in the Philippines. Taking the form of the human body as his muse, Pinay is said to have created the Eskaya script and taught it to his people. However Pinay is credited with the concurrent creation of the Eskayan language, a separate lect bearing only a modest lexical resemblance to Visayan, but which is regarded by its speakers as Bohol’s ‘true’ language. One local prophecy has it that Eskayan will one day be spoken by everyone in the world. Although Pinay’s new writing system is used for both the Visayan and Eskayan languages in equal measure, it is the Eskayan language that is recognized as its more legitimate complement.

I have argued elsewhere that the Eskayan language is a sophisticated relexification of Visayan (Kelly 2012a). With some inspiration from the lexicons and phonotactic patterns of Visayan, Spanish and English, its creation involved the coining of some 3000 new lexemes that were grafted onto Visayan morphosyntax. Complicating this ‘neat’ operation is the fact that the complex system of Visayan verbal affixation was systematically reduced, with one Eskayan morpheme potentially corresponding to two or more Visayan affixes. Moreover, a high proportion of Eskayan verbs have irregular or suppletive inflections (Kelly 2012a), placing Eskayan somewhere on the continuum between a relexified register and an engineered mixed language. Pinay’s language will not be analysed here—see instead Kelly (2012a) for an overview of grammar and Kelly (forthcoming) for an account of the lexicon—but examples of vocabulary are shown in Table 1 below, indicating a few of his sources of inspiration. This is a non-representative sample since the majority of Eskayan lexemes are not so easily traced to outside languages. Note that throughout the paper, Romanized Eskayan is in **bold**, English glosses are in ‘inverted commas’, while Romanized Visayan (and other languages) words are written in *italics*.

Table 1 Eskayan words and their origins

<i>Script</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Origin</i>
	kinya	‘who’	Visayan: <i>kinsa</i> (‘who’)
	klir	‘make space for’	English: ‘clear’
	ligar	‘surround’, ‘go around’	Spanish: <i>ligar</i> (‘tie’, ‘bind’)
	sim	‘nine’	Visayan: <i>siyam</i> (‘nine’)

Many Eskaya people maintain that Pinay was a wise ancestor who lived some time prior to the Spanish colonisation of Bohol in the late sixteenth century. In certain oral histories, Pinay is said to have recorded his language and script on wooden tablets which he concealed in a cave, and that these tablets were rediscovered in the twentieth century by the rebel leader Mariano Datahan. Datahan deciphered Pinay's words and retransmitted the language and script to his followers. In another version, Mariano Datahan was the one who stored Eskaya records in a cave after having received direct linguistic inspiration from Pinay. Paleographic evidence for any pre-Hispanic writing systems is lacking for Bohol, and the earliest positive reference to the Eskayan language and script is in the record of a letter dated 1937. It is worth pointing out that younger Eskaya are more likely to emphasize the supposed antiquity of their language and script, while older Eskaya including the late leader Fabian Baja of Taytay (1918–2007) who had been taught by Datahan, are less hesitant in describing Pinay and Datahan as contemporaries or even as alternative embodiments of the same individual. Conclusions from my analysis of Eskayan grammar and vocabulary, in conjunction with genealogy, oral history and archival research are consistent with Baja's view, placing Mariano Datahan's (re)transmission or inspired discovery of Eskayan some time between 1920 and 1937 (Kelly 2012b). (For rhetorical convenience I here use the formula 'Pinay' to denote the putative originator of the language and script even if his identity cannot be verified.)



Figure 2. Pinay depicted on a chart of Eskaya ancestors, Taytay. The script transliterates as <pi><nay> <in><mun><sik><tur> ('Pinay the pope').

As mentioned earlier, the primary domain of Eskaya writing is in the reproduction of traditional literature. First dictated for transcription by Mariano Datahan, the Eskaya literary corpus is a handwritten collection of folklore, expository texts and local history amounting to approximately 25,000 words (Kelly 2015a). The texts are recopied from one generation to the next into personal notebooks by adults who are literate in the Eskaya script. Almost all are written in Visayan, with an Eskayan translation on a facing page (Fig. 3). (In my linguistic analysis of these documents I

have shown that the Eskayan text is a translation of the Visayan and not the other way around (Kelly 2012a)). To decipher the texts, Eskaya scholars often need to rely on a reference syllabary known as a Simplit which lists the Roman alphabetic equivalents for Eskayan characters. All data for this paper are drawn from various personal corpora of Eskaya literature that have been made available to me, including reference syllabaries and handwritten Visayan–Eskaya wordlists. All these texts are available for reference in digital form in the PARADISEC archive.⁵

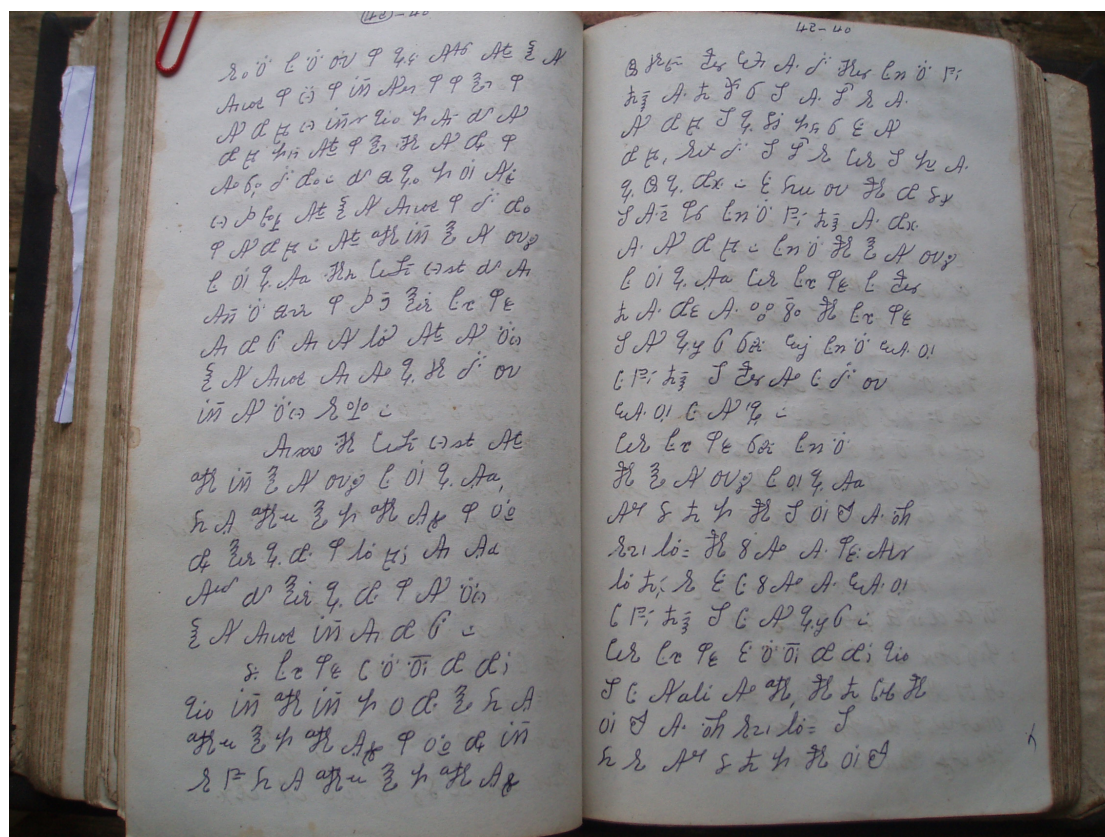


Figure 3. Pages from the Eskaya literary corpus. The left-hand page is in Visayan and the right-hand page in Eskayan.]

Language and writing are both persistent motifs in Eskaya literature. Two short texts deserve special mention since they discuss the nature of writing generally and of Eskayan in particular. ‘The Spanish and Eskayan Alphabets’ describes Eskaya writing as having emanated from the mind of Pinay who used the human anatomy as his source of inspiration.⁶ Thus the Eskayan letter *Ḷ* ‘kun’ is a divided human head while

⁵ The Eskaya Digital Archive hosted by the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources (PARADISEC) can be accessed at <http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/PK2/>. Items of specific relevance to this paper include PK2-04-MANCAD02 (an Abidiha and Simplit belonging to Gaudenci Pizaña of Cadapdapan), PK2-04-MANCAD05 (a rare collection of Eskaya literature that includes a Romanized transliteration and a Visayan translation), PK2-03-MANBIAB09 (the expository text ‘Atikisis’), PK2-03-MANBIAB12 (the Castañares Manuscript, one of the oldest surviving Eskaya documents).

⁶ A version of ‘The Spanish and Eskayan Alphabets’ is archived at <http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/PK2/items/04>, filename PK2-04-MANCAD05.

(-) <gi> represents the ears. The text laments that Visayan knowledge has since become imprisoned in Spanish letters that are derived from non-human, inconsequential and arbitrary objects. The Spanish letter ‘A’ was taken from the shape of a festive archway, the lowercase letter ‘g’ is taken from an animal’s tail, the letter ‘X’ from a pair of steel scissors, the letter ‘I’ from a candlestand, and the lowercase ‘a’ is modelled on a cup for drinking chocolate at fiestas. Another text entitled ‘Atikisis’ continues the theme of anthropomorphising Eskayan letters which are here personified as the human cultivators of different edible plants.⁷ In this text, the letter *Ŷ* <d>, for example, plants corn and rice while the letter *Ŷ* <r> plants tangerine and bitter orange. Unusual amongst Eskaya texts, ‘Atikisis’ is always written in Eskayan with no accompanying Visayan translation. Eskaya scribes are uncertain of the precise meaning of the word **atikisis**, but in another Eskaya text it is glossed with both the Visayan word *letra* ‘letter’ (from Spanish *letra*) and with the Spanish word *índice* (‘index’, ‘sign’). My suspicion is that **atikisis** is formed from the names of the letter sequence ‘a’ <a>, ‘t’ <t(i)>, ‘x’ <(i)kis>, ‘c’ <si>, on the same model as other Visayan words for ‘alphabet’, like *alibata* from the initial sequence of the Arabic alphabet: ‘Alif’, ‘Ba’, ‘Ta’; and *abakada* from the canonical sequence ‘A’, ‘Ba’, ‘Ka’, ‘Da’ for indigenous Philippine systems collectively termed ‘the Philippine script’.⁸ An Eskayan precedent for this kind of formation is in the well-established Eskayan word **abidiha** (‘alphabet’; hereafter ‘Abidiha’) from the letter names *Ŷ* <a>, *Ŷ* <b(i)>, *Ŷ* <d(i)> and either *Ŷ* <h> or *Ŷ* <ha>, to be discussed in more detail below. I am not aware of any significance to the sequences <a> <t(i)> <(i)kis> <si> or <a> <b(i)> <d(i)> <ha>.

1.1 Orthographic and Notational Conventions

The traditional script is always preferred by Eskayan scribes—no text is considered to be genuinely Eskayan unless it is rendered in this form. Roman orthographies are used solely in reference syllabaries, for teaching the script to children, for transliterations of Eskaya literature prepared for non-Eskayan speakers, and (more rarely) in text messaging. In this paper a Roman orthography is used to facilitate a comparison of Visayan (in *italics*) and Eskayan (**bold**), and ultimately to explain the mechanics of the writing system.

For ease of exposition and comparison I use a phonemic Visayan spelling system for all Roman transliterations of Visayan and Eskayan words. This system is based on the orthography employed by John U. Wolff (1972) and some contemporary Cebuano-Visayan publications. As with standard orthographies of major Philippine

The text begins on page 49. Note that the relationship between the Eskaya script and the human body has a parallel in one version of the Meetei Mayek script of North East India where consonant letters are ordered following a notional ordering of human body parts after which each letter is named (Singh 2011).

⁷ Versions of the text ‘Atikisis’ are archived at <http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/PK2/>, filenames PK2-03-MANBIAB09, PK2-03-MANBIAB10, PK2-04-MANCAD01.

⁸ I follow the precedent of Christopher Miller who uses the terms ‘Philippine script’ and ‘Old Philippine script’ to refer to the attested variants of the indigenous writing system of the Philippines. The manner in which colonial chroniclers documented and named script samples by region, was, in the words of Juan R. Francisco “an unconscious error, if not indeed a deliberate scheme, among earlier writers in their effort to create multiple cultural complexes in the Philippines. [...] upon examination of all these systems, there appears to be a singular affinity among them. If there was evidence of variety, this can only be understood as a result of the idiosyncrasies of the individual writers.” (Francisco 1973).

languages the sound /tʃ/ is represented as ‘ts’, /ŋ/ as ‘ng’, and /j/ as ‘y’. Glottal stops /ʔ/ are not represented at all when they appear at the beginning of a word or between two vowels. Following the lead of Eskaya scribes, I represent these with a straight apostrophe in other positions.

When it comes to writing Eskayan words there is one key exception to the Visayan orthography outlined above. The sound /dʒ/ is written with the trigraph **chd** in Roman representations of the Eskayan language, while in Visayan, this sound is typically written as *j* or *dy*. I have preserved the **chd** innovation because it was developed independently by Eskaya scribes and has remained relatively stable across generations and settlements. As we will see, the sounds /dʒ/ (‘**chd**’) and its voiceless counterpart /tʃ/ (‘**ts**’) have a special place in the Eskayan sound system. In proper names, Hispanic conventions—particularly the letter ‘**e**’ for /i/—are preserved wherever they have already become firmly established as a convention, eg, in the word **Eskaya** /iskaya/. See Table 2 for examples. Table 3, meanwhile, summarizes notational conventions used in this paper.

Table 2 Examples of orthographic conventions in Romanized Eskayan

<i>Antikira</i>	/ʔantikira/	Antequera	‘Antequera’ (a town in west Bohol)
<i>Atsil</i>	/ʔatʃil/	atsil	‘he’, ‘she’
<i>Baruun</i>	/baruʔun/	baruun	‘carry’
<i>Chdagwit</i>	/dʒagwit/	chdagwit	‘sharp-pointed’
<i>Dial</i>	/diʔal/	dial	‘small boat without a sail’
<i>Ngilus</i>	/ŋilus/	ngilus	‘darkness’
<i>Ridil’ayis</i>	/ridilʔayis/	ridil’ayis	‘dedicate s.t to s.o’
<i>Sa</i>	/saʔ/	sa’	‘small bag’

Table 3 Notational conventions for analysing sound systems and writing systems

[square brackets]	phonetic realization
/forward slashes/	phonemic form
⟨angle marks⟩	sound values assigned to specific elements of the script
‘single quotation marks’	Roman letters, independent of their sound values

2. A brief comparison of Visayan and Eskayan sound systems

Like Visayan, Eskayan vocabulary includes a number of borrowings from Spanish, as well as a few from English (Kelly forthcoming). In the phoneme inventories below, a dagger (†) is attached to sounds that occur only in words that have been borrowed from other languages; square brackets enclose allophones.

Table 4 Visayan (The eastern dialect of Boholano-Visayan)

p	t	†tʃ	k	ʔ	i	u [ə]
b	d	†dʒ [dy]	g			
	s			h		a
m	n		ŋ			
	l [w], r [ɹ]					
w		j [dʒ] (‘y’)				

Table 5 Eskayan

p	t	tʃ	k	ʔ	i	u
b	d	dʒ [dy] ‘ chd ’	g			
	s			h		a
m	n		ŋ			
	l, r [ɹ]					
w		j (‘ y ’)				

Of particular relevance to an analysis of the Eskaya writing system is the curious fact that /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ represent loaned phonemes in Visayan but are ‘native’ in Eskayan; in other words these sounds appear in Eskayan terms that have not been borrowed or inspired by other languages. It is also worth pointing out that the phone [dʒ] is a socially marked feature of the Boholano-Visayan dialect and is perceived by Visayan speakers as being emblematic of Bohol.

Phonotactic differences between Visayan and Eskayan are even more considerable. Consonant clusters do not feature in non-borrowed Visayan vocabulary but are widespread throughout the Eskayan lexicon, particularly in Eskayan onsets. In brief, the syllable structure of native Visayan lexemes is as follows: C (G) V (G)/(C) while Eskayan permits C (C)/(G) V (G)/C (C).⁹ A comprehensive overview of Eskayan phonology and phonotactics is available in Kelly (2015b).

⁹ Within the conventions of this notation ‘G’ represents a glide, parentheses enclose optional values and / stands for ‘or’.

3. Eskayan ideologies of writing

Although many linguists do not view writing as belonging to grammar, or even to language, the Eskaya script has a determined relationship to Eskayan phonology, and is thus integral to any understanding of Eskayan as a linguistic system. On the whole, Eskayan words are ‘seen and not heard’. Writing is central to the primary domains of Eskayan, particularly in its formal transmission and acquisition in the traditional schools. The practice of expressing Eskayan through writing is underpinned by a linguistic ideology that I have termed ‘literality’ (Kelly 2012b) that is, the notion that writing is the true and ‘correct’ embodiment of language and that grammatical ‘intuition’ is judged by the extent to which an Eskayan utterance coincides with the written records. Indeed, in local ideology no categorical distinction is made between the script and language, meaning that any language—be it Visayan, Spanish or English—is seen to *become* Eskayan by virtue of being written in the Eskaya script. This special material status accorded to the script is witnessed elsewhere in cultural proscriptions against crossing out, destroying or trampling on Eskayan text. It can be controversial for a non-Eskaya person to write or circulate words in the Eskaya script, while speaking the language is accepted and even encouraged. In the course of fieldwork in Taytay, I was permitted to record sung performances of a sacred Eskayan hymn—described by its singers as a *nubina* (Visayan: ‘novena’)—but not to transcribe it in any form of writing.¹⁰

These ideologies have specific relevance to Eskayan phonology and its relationship to the writing system. Since the written form provides the primary cues for pronunciation, the analysis of Eskayan phonology cannot easily be separated from its material representation. Like sign languages, the visible representation of Eskayan words can be understood as a kind of ‘phonology’ whose structure has potentially significant effects on the language as a whole. Thus, for example, $\mathcal{A}^{\circ} \mathcal{Q}^{\circ} \mathcal{h}$ (<ʔa>bi>la>ki>)—the written form of the greeting **abilaki** (‘hello’)—is not construed as a representative medium for its phonetic form /abilaki/, but quite the reverse: the utterance /abilaki/ is understood, in local ideology, as an phonetic by-product of the ‘real’ written word $\mathcal{A}^{\circ} \mathcal{Q}^{\circ} \mathcal{h}$.

4. Writing system

I follow Coulmas’ formal/functional distinction of a ‘script’ as a graphic set of written symbols, and ‘writing system’ as the system by which these symbols are applied and interpreted, e.g., as an alphabet, syllabary etc (Coulmas 1996, 454). In this section I review the Eskaya writing system: how it is organized, how it relates to the sound system of Eskayan and how it works in actual practice. The form of the writing and its relationship to other scripts is discussed later, although form and function cannot always be separated descriptively.

What is immediately evident about the Eskaya writing system is that, like Western alphabets, words are written from left to right and are separated by spaces. Further, Eskaya texts are punctuated with commas, colons and quotation marks in a conventional Roman-style, although the Eskaya question mark $\mathcal{Q}$ and the full stop $\circ$ have been elaborated slightly.¹¹ This contrasts with the conventions of the pre-

¹⁰ This novena is led by the female members of the congregation every Sunday after Mass. It does not appear to follow the Roman Catholic novena tradition of a nine-day devotional observance. For more on Eskaya ideologies of writing see Kelly (2015a).

¹¹ See Marciana Galambao’s documentation of the Abidiha, numeral set and punctuation here: <http://www.ling.hawaii.edu/ldtc/languages/eskaya/WritingSystem.html>. Note that she

Hispanic Philippine script in which words were written from top to bottom and were not separated by spaces or punctuation.

Eskaya people conventionally describe their writing system as being divided into an Abidiha ('Alphabet') of 46 letters and a Simplit ('Syllabary') of approximately 1000 letters. This division is realized in handwritten texts used as reference documents by Eskaya scribes. Each of the 46 **litri** ('letters') of the Abidiha represents an independent syllable while some may be realized as either a syllable or as an alphabetic consonant depending on a judgment made by the reader. Thus, although it is described as an 'alphabet', the Abidiha is perhaps better defined as an alphasyllabary in its broadest sense, since it contains dual-purpose alphabetic and syllabic characters. The Simplit, meanwhile, has no alphabetic or alphasyllabic characters and amounts to an expansion of the syllable set. Due to the variation among Eskaya manuscripts the description I present here is based on the largest and most complete copies of Abidihas and Simplits made available to me; two of these are now available to the public in the Eskaya Digital Archive hosted by PARADISEC.¹²

4.1 The Abidiha

The iconic relationship between letters of the Abidiha and the parts or arrangements of the human body they are said to be derived from is made explicit in classroom charts (Fig. 4).

has recorded monosyllabic Eskayan terms for punctuation marks and mathematical functions, potentially allowing meta-commentary in Eskayan on these aspects of the system.

¹² See <http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/PK2>. The most comprehensive reference syllabary I have had access to is the item PK2-04-MANCAD02, penned by Gaudencia Pizaña. It has approximately 1065 individual **litri** which are subdivided into fifty-six sets. (This figure excludes repetitions of identical characters in different sections of a Simplit but includes variant characters of the same syllable.) A smaller but beautifully illustrated version is PK2-05-MANTAY02 penned by Alberta Galambao of Taytay.

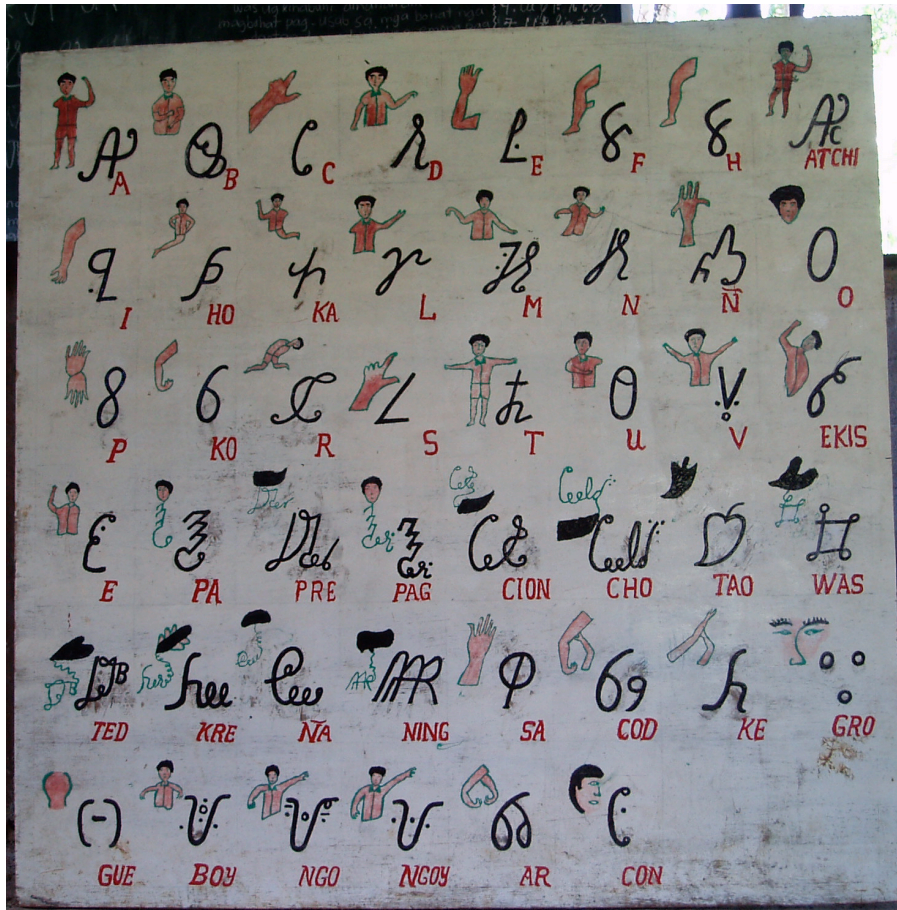


Figure 4. An Abidiha displayed on a wooden board at the Eskaya school in Taytay.

Of the 46 characters in the Abidiha the first twenty-five are notionally alphabetic, though a large proportion of these have a dual alphabetic-syllabic value. What this means is that certain consonantal alphabetic characters may be realized either as C or as CV, according to a judgment made by the reader. This contrasts considerably with the indigenous Philippine script in which consonants have an inherent */a/* unless an alternative vowel is specified. In Philippine systems, consonant or semivowel codas are conventionally left off altogether, requiring the reader to infer these from the context. Thus the Tagalog word *bantay* ('guard'), would be represented as 𐄀𐄁 (⟨ba>ta>), a homograph of *bata* ('child').

Within the Eskaya Abidiha the inherent vowel is not */a/* by default, but corresponds to its recited alphabetic value. Thus the characters 𐄀 and 𐄁 can represent [b] and [t] respectively in the alphabetically written word 𐄀𐄁𐄃𐄄 (⟨b>r>i>t>), **brit**: 'female plant or animal') but may be realized as [bi] and [ti] in the word 𐄀𐄁 (⟨bi>ti>, **biti**: 'skilled'). These alternative syllabic realizations have the vowel [i] as a nucleus simply because [bi] and [ti] are the conventional pronunciations of the equivalent letter names in a recited Visayan or Spanish alphabet.¹³ Such inherent alphabetic-syllabic flexibility is reminiscent of the way a Visayan speaker today might exploit the

¹³ A precedent for this system of vocalising recited letter names is found in the Type 2 variant of Caroline Islands Script (Riesenberg & Kaneshiro 1960).

dual phonetic realizations in SMS messages such as ‘naa sa balay *cla*’ (*naa sa balay sila*: ‘it’s at their house’); see also Fig. 5 below. When used syllabically, the alphabetic characters with two-syllable names—*ɸ* ‘f’ /ɸhi/, *ʔ* ‘h’ /ʔachi/, *ɺ* ‘i’ /ɺili/, *ʃ* ‘m’ /ʃimi/, *ɺ* ‘n’ /ɺini/, *ɺɺ* ‘ñ’ /ɺɺini/ and *ʃ* ‘x’ /ʃix/—are conventionally shortened to their final syllable when used as a component of a word: [hi], [chi], [li], [mi], [ni], [nyi] and [kis].



Figure 5. Sign to the caves known as Bugnao Sii (literally: ‘very cold’) on the Anda peninsula east of Biabas. The East Boholano intensifier *sii* /siɺiɺ/ is represented as ‘c, e’, referencing the pronunciation of these letters in an English alphabet.

One striking feature of the Abidiha is its apparently redundant elements. For example, the phoneme /i/ may be represented by either *ɺ* or *ɺ* while /u/ may take *0* or *θ*. An examination of Fig. 4 above reveals that all four characters are clearly designated with different Roman letters: *ɺ* (‘e’) and *ɺ* (‘i’), *0* (‘o’) and *θ* (‘u’), even if there is a formal resemblance between the shapes of the paired characters. Nonetheless, the orthographic distinctions within each pair do not correspond to a contrast in Eskayan or Visayan, let alone any meaningful phonemic contrast (see Tables 4 and 5 above). It could be argued that the script has retained the representation of an historical contrast in the Eskayan language that is no longer

meaningful in its present form. But to my mind, the most likely explanation for this ‘redundancy’ is that the Abidiha is not representing a sound system—phonemic or otherwise—so much as *another writing system*. In other words, the Abidiha is designed as a cipher for transliterating a Spanish alphabet or a Spanish orthography of Visayan. This is borne out in other ‘foreign’ elements of the Abidiha. The symbols $\mathcal{F}$ (‘f’, /f/) and $\mathcal{V}$ (‘v’, /v/) are assigned to Roman letters representing sounds that are absent from the phonologies of both Eskayan or Visayan. Likewise, the Abidiha includes the symbol $\mathcal{X}$ for transliterating the letter ‘x’, $\mathcal{N}$ for ‘ñ’, and $\mathcal{Q}$ for ‘q’—all letters that are absent from modern orthographies of Visayan but which do feature in English and Spanish alphabets, obsolete Hispanic-Visayan orthographies and Philippine proper names of Spanish origin. The fact that the Abidiha faithfully follows standard Roman alphabetic recitation order in reference texts adds weight to this impression, although the absence of an Eskaya equivalent for the Hispanic and English letter ‘z’ is curious.

Table 6 below lists the alphabetic-syllabic characters of the Abidiha accompanied by their phonetic realizations and their corresponding Roman transliterations:

Table 6 Abidiha (alphabetic-syllabic characters)

$\mathcal{A}$	[a]	‘a’
$\mathcal{B}$	[b], [bi]	‘b’
$\mathcal{C}$	[s], [si], [k]	‘c’
$\mathcal{D}$	[d], [di]	‘d’
$\mathcal{E}$	[i]	‘e’
$\mathcal{F}$	[f]	‘f’
$\mathcal{G}$	[g], [h], [hi]	‘g’
$\mathcal{H}$	[h], [tsi]	‘h’
$\mathcal{I}$	[i]	‘i’
$\mathcal{J}$	[hu]	‘j’
$\mathcal{K}$	[k], [ka]	‘k’
$\mathcal{L}$	[l] [li]	‘l’
$\mathcal{M}$	[m] [mi]	‘m’
$\mathcal{N}$	[n] [ni]	‘n’
$\mathcal{O}$	[nj]	‘ñ’
$\mathcal{P}$	[u]	‘o’
$\mathcal{Q}$	[p], [pi]	‘p’
$\mathcal{R}$	[k], [ku]	‘q’
$\mathcal{S}$	[r], [ri]	‘r’
$\mathcal{T}$	[s], [si]	‘s’
$\mathcal{U}$	[t], [ti]	‘t’
$\mathcal{V}$	[u]	‘u’

·/	[b], [bi]	‘v’
∫	[kɪs]	‘x’
Ǝ	[j]	‘y’

A comparison of the Abidiha with the phoneme inventory of the Eskayan language (Table 5) shows a number of interesting discrepancies. Not only does the Abidiha *include* characters that stand for the *unattested* phones [f] and [v], but it excludes symbols for the regular phonemic Eskayan sounds /w/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ŋ/ and /ʔ/. These are found only as components of syllables in later sets of the Simplit. These facts in isolation suggest that the Abidiha was not devised with the Eskayan language in mind. If, instead, the Abidiha is understood as a mostly alphabetic system for transliterating a Hispanic Roman alphabet, then the majority of these phonemes would not require unique representation. The sound /tʃ/ could be managed through the digraphic combination of <c> and <h> which represents this phoneme in Spanish systems (e.g., ‘Chile’). Likewise, /ŋ/ could be transliterated as <ng> (e.g., ‘Tango’), and /w/ variously as <u> or <o> (e.g., ‘Juan’, ‘Oaxaca’). And yet, despite its frequency in Eskayan lexemes /dʒ/ has no alphabetic counterpart and cannot be approximated through any combination of characters in the Abidiha. To a large extent this pattern is reflected in the remaining twenty-one syllabic characters in the Abidiha which includes symbols for the commonplace Visayan affixes /pag-/ , /ning-/ , and /gi-/ , as well as the particles /sa/ (*sa* ‘to’) and /pa/ (*pa* ‘yet’); although curiously the more-frequent Visayan particles *ang* (determiner, ‘the’) and *mga* (plural marker) are not represented. Typical Hispanic syllables are also found here including /pri/, a Spanish verbal prefix; /kun/ for the morpheme *con* (‘with’); /ar/, an ending for infinitive verbs such as *vibrar* (‘vibrate’); and /sjun/ (transliterated as ‘cion’) which is a common nominalizer (e.g., *vibración* ‘vibration’). All this suggests that the Abidiha is more conventionally suited to the transliteration of Spanish, or of Visayan (using a Spanish orthography), than it is to the Eskayan language, a fact which is crucial to the investigation of its historical development.

4.2 Syllabic Characters

When Eskaya pupils have progressed to a sufficient level, they are introduced to the remainder of the Simplit which comprises fifty-three syllable sets, each containing between nine and thirty-one characters, and two sets for numerals and fractions. There is no expectation to commit all characters to memory. Instead, students are required to transcribe an existing Simplit for reference. Through regular use and repetition the most frequent characters are soon memorized. Without an organising principle the Simplit would be an unwieldy reference document, but even though no two handwritten syllabaries are exactly alike, they each conform to a basic organizational pattern. The first of the syllable sets to follow the Abidiha is headed up with the letter ‘a’ (A) then proceeds: <ab>, <am> <ab>, <as> The second set begins with the letter ‘b’ (B) and continues in the sequence <ba>, <bal>, <bam> <bab>, <bas> In this way, the order in which each syllable set is placed roughly follows the ‘alphabetical’ order of the Abidiha but this is not consistent across individual Simplits. The order of the syllable codas within sets also varies however the most common pattern is as follows: <-V>, <-b>, <-m>, <-b>, <-s>, <-n>, <-p>, <-r>, <-t>, <-d>, <-ŋ>, <-y>, <-g>, <-w>, <-ʔ>, <-k>.

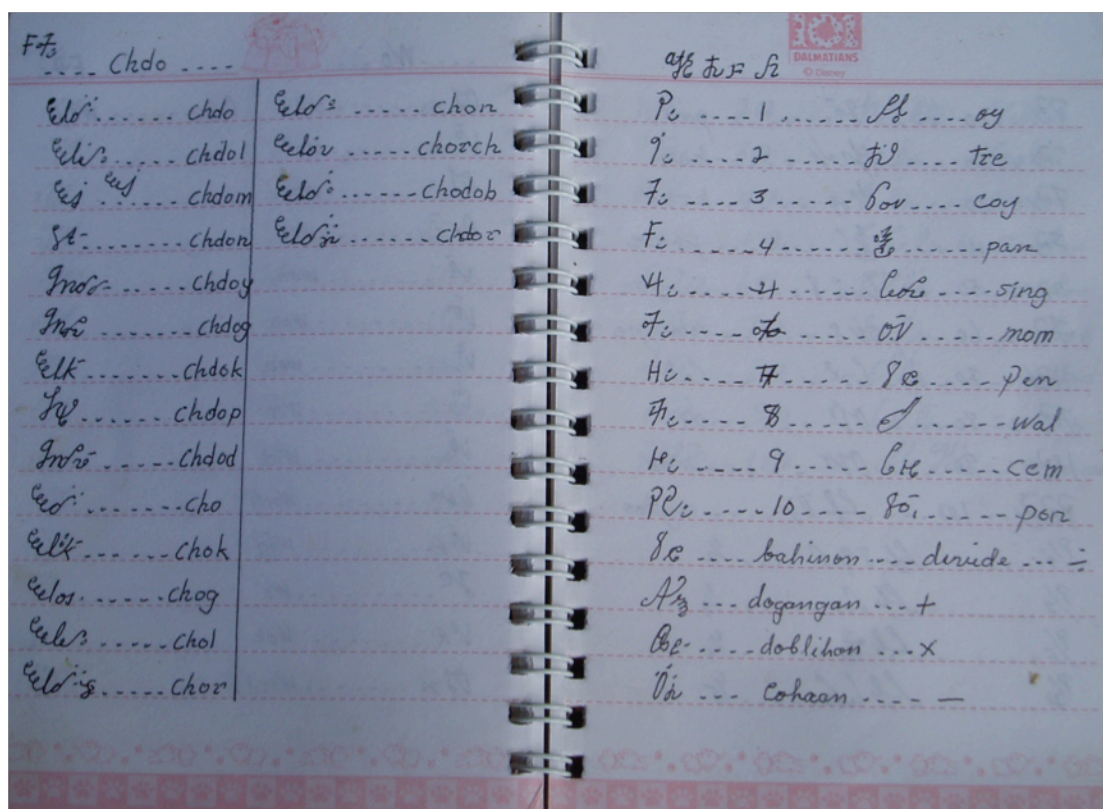


Figure 6. The <chdu> syllable set and part of the numeral set in an Eskayan Simplit.

The greatest organizational variation between different Simplits is found amongst those syllables that represent borrowed sounds in Visayan. Thus voiced and unvoiced sounds may be grouped together (as in Fig. 6), and symbols that transliterate either ‘v’ or ‘b’ (both letters are realized as [b]) are also arranged haphazardly.¹⁴ To my mind this points to a kind of ‘correction’ to a more native Visayan phonology and a more familiar orthography among Eskaya scribes. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of convergence towards a norm. With so many available syllables to choose from, scribes have a great deal of freedom in deciding how to transliterate any given word. Thus **katsila**’ (‘Spanish’) is attested in traditional stories as both ᜆᜄᜅᜆᜄᜅᜆᜄ (<ka><tsi><la>) and ᜆᜄᜅᜆᜄᜅᜆᜄ (<kat><si><la>), the latter form notionally dividing the digraph ‘ts’ (representing /tʃ/) onto separate characters.

But while apparent redundancy and lack are found amongst the twenty-five characters of the Abidiha, the remaining syllabic symbols in the Simplit as a whole are characterized by excess. Of the 1065 symbols found in the syllabary, only about 460 of them are actually needed to represent the possible syllables in Eskayan or Visayan words. Even among these letters there are a number of duplicate forms, for example <par> is represented as both ᜆᜆ and ᜆᜆ , <ri> as both ᜆᜆ and ᜆᜆ ; <taw> as ᜆᜆ and ᜆᜆ , <was> as ᜆᜆ and ᜆᜆ , among other examples.

Further, the Simplit goes so far as to include characters for consonant clusters that are not found in *any* Eskayan or Visayan words at all. These are listed in Table 7 below.

¹⁴ Here the written distinction between ‘ch’ and ‘chd’ is not an idiosyncrasy of the scribe. That the characters in Fig. 7 feature both /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ sounds can be adduced through comparison with other reference syllabaries and in evidence from the corpus.

Table 7 Eskayan characters for unattested syllable shapes. A dagger indicates that the shape is attested only in loans.

*tʃa-	⟨tsa⟩	
	⟨tsak⟩	
	⟨tsal⟩	
	⟨tsang⟩	
	⟨tsap⟩	
	⟨tsar⟩	
	⟨tsat⟩	
*tʃu-	⟨tsudub⟩	
	⟨tsug⟩	
	⟨tsuk⟩	
	⟨tsul⟩	
	⟨tsur⟩	
	⟨tsurts⟩	
*bli-	⟨bli⟩	
	⟨blim⟩	
	⟨blin⟩	
*gl-	⟨glad⟩	
	⟨glan⟩	
	⟨gli⟩	
	⟨glur⟩	
†tri-	⟨tri⟩	
	⟨trid⟩	
	⟨trik⟩	
	⟨trim⟩	
	⟨trin⟩	
	⟨trip⟩	
	⟨tris⟩	
	⟨trit⟩	
†tru-	⟨tru⟩	
	⟨trul⟩	

	⟨trum⟩	
	⟨trup⟩	
	⟨trus⟩	
*-[c]	⟨marts⟩	
	⟨nurts⟩	
	⟨rits⟩	
	⟨tsurts⟩	

In reviewing these unattested syllables, what is of immediate interest is the fact that the sound sequences are (theoretically) available in Spanish or English words even if they are not found in Eskayan or Visayan. This extraordinary state of affairs reinforces the view that Pinay devised the Eskaya writing system primarily to replicate—and exceed—European systems, even at the expense of practicality. Consistent with prophecies that Eskayan will one day be spoken everywhere in the world, perhaps Pinay thought to compile a more ‘complete’ set of symbols to live up to an universalist ambition for the language.

4.3 *Inahan and Sinyas*

For a large number of the purely syllabic characters, Eskaya scribes distinguish between the *inahan* (‘mother’)—the central graphic component of the character, typically representing a (C)CV- onset—and the smaller *sinyas* (‘gesture’), which stands for the coda and generally appears to the right of the *inahan*. Interestingly, the term *inahan* harmonizes with the conventional terminology used for other Malay writing systems such as Volan’Onjatsy, Batak, Buginese and Had Lampung where C(V) characters are referred to as ‘mothers’ and diacritics as ‘children’ (Adelaar 2005). To illustrate this distinction with an Eskaya example, the *inahan* character  stands for a CV- onset. But with the addition of a *sinyas* standing for the coda -ʔ one can produce the CVC character . In rarer cases, however, the *inahan* stands for a vowel nucleus while the *sinyas* indicates an onset. For example, in the case of the character , the *inahan* is the portion that resembles a Roman ‘A’ and the *sinyas* is the closed curl at its far right. Another *sinyas* can be added in the form of a second closed curl to make ; the system here is reminiscent of Korean Hangul in which single characters stand for independent syllables but these syllables are further broken down graphically into alphabetic segments. In short, any Eskayan character with the shape CVC is decomposable into two components as CV- combined with -C, or ‘alphabetically’ as three components C-, -V-, and -C. It is also worth pointing out that although Eskayan is written from left to right, a *sinyas* representing an onset will, in most cases, still be written to the right of the *inahan*, as in the case of  above.

Complicating this system is the fact that the *sinyas* components do not function as regular diacritics. Graphically identical *sinyas* may be associated with different consonant values in different sets. For example, the characters  and  are distinguished by the feature ʔ, however in the set that follows the same feature differentiates  from . The *inahan* components may also be irregular: compare for example  with . This irregularity accounts for the great difficulty in learning Eskayan characters and is analogous to the irregularity in Eskayan vocabulary with its abundant suppletive verbs (Kelly 2012a).

4.4 Logographic Elements

While for the most part, Eskaya characters and diacritics represent single segments or syllables, there are two exceptions: the disyllabic $\mathcal{U}$ <narin> (**narin**, ‘T’) and the trisyllabic $\mathcal{E}_{\text{low}}$ <chdiyarū> (**chdiyarū**, ‘our’) are logograms that are not easily analysable into syllabic components.¹⁵ Other monosyllabic logograms can be isolated within the system. Among the twenty-one characters of the Abidiha that have syllabic values only (see lines four to six of Fig. 4), there are found characters for common Visayan morphemes like *pa*, *pag-*, *ning-*, *sa*, *ki-* and *gi-*; morphemes common in Spanish or Visayan words of Spanish origin, such as *pri-* (‘pre-’), *-syun* (‘-cion’), *-ar* (‘-ar’) and *kun* (‘con’); as well as other syllables that do not appear to be morphemic in either Visayan, Spanish or Eskayan, such as <ngoy> and <was>. Within this isolated set, it is arguable that at least $\mathcal{E}$ <pa>, $\mathcal{M}$ <ning>, $\mathcal{P}$ <sa>, $\mathcal{h}$ <ki>, $(-)$ <gi>, $\mathcal{O}$ <ar> and $\mathcal{C}$ <kun> satisfy the criteria of being logograms since their letters represent a distinct morpheme without being analysable into constituent phonemes. Letters such as $\mathcal{E}_{\text{low}}$ <pag>, though representing a common Visayan morpheme, cannot be regarded as logograms since the glyph can be theoretically reduced to two elements in which $\mathcal{E}$ <pa> constitutes the *inahan*. The letter $\mathcal{D}$ <taw> is intriguing as a potential rebus-like logogram because it is derived from the stylized shape of a human heart (familiar from Catholic sacred heart iconography) and represents the Visayan word *taw* ‘person’. All these apparently logographic elements are less compelling when viewed in the context of the entire Simplit, where *inahan* shapes such as $\mathcal{E}$ <pa> and $\mathcal{P}$ <sa> are highly productive in generating a wide range of CVC syllables. Moreover, the scope for logography in the Eskaya writing system is limited by the fact that monosyllabic roots like *taw* are rare in both Eskayan and Visayan. In effect, syllable-based writing systems do not present many opportunities for logography when monosyllabic words are scarce.

4.5 Numbers

Less problematic as bona fide logograms or ideograms are the Eskaya numerals. The numeral system shown in Fig. 6 above (see the full set in PARADISEC¹⁶) specifies an ideographic numeral as well as a sound value. Thus the number ‘1’ is $\mathcal{P}$ but its phonetic form ‘one’ is $\mathcal{P}_{\text{low}}$ <ɔy> (**uy**). Eskaya numerals accord with the Hindu-Arabic decimal system such that the placement of the symbol in a sequence determines its value to the power of ten. Hence $\mathcal{P}\mathcal{P}$ is read as ‘11’. The Eskaya numeral system uses the symbol $\mathcal{O}$ for ‘0’ even though there is no attested word for it, and the innovation of mathematical functions such as = (+), / (÷) and % (×) means that equations can be performed in Eskayan. Indeed, Eskayan arithmetic is taught in the traditional schools using the script (Fig. 7 below).¹⁷ There is no question, therefore, that Pinay’s numerals

¹⁵ Note nonetheless that left-most graphic element of $\mathcal{E}_{\text{low}}$ <chdiyarū> can at least be isolated as the syllable $\mathcal{E}$ <chdi>. One Simplit includes a character for the sequence **tsudub** /tʃudub/ (see Fig. 6) which does not have a known meaning and is not attested in Eskaya literature or wordlists.

¹⁶ See the document PK2-04-MANCAD.pdf pages 26 to 28, in *Eskaya manuscripts from Cadapdapan Bohol* (<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/PK2>).

¹⁷ Interestingly, Pahawh Hmong also has unique symbols for arithmetic functions, although the original Source Version did not include a zero (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990, 79).

are a mere cipher for a post-contact decimal system, even if a base-ten counting system was in use in the Visayas prior to Spanish colonization.¹⁸

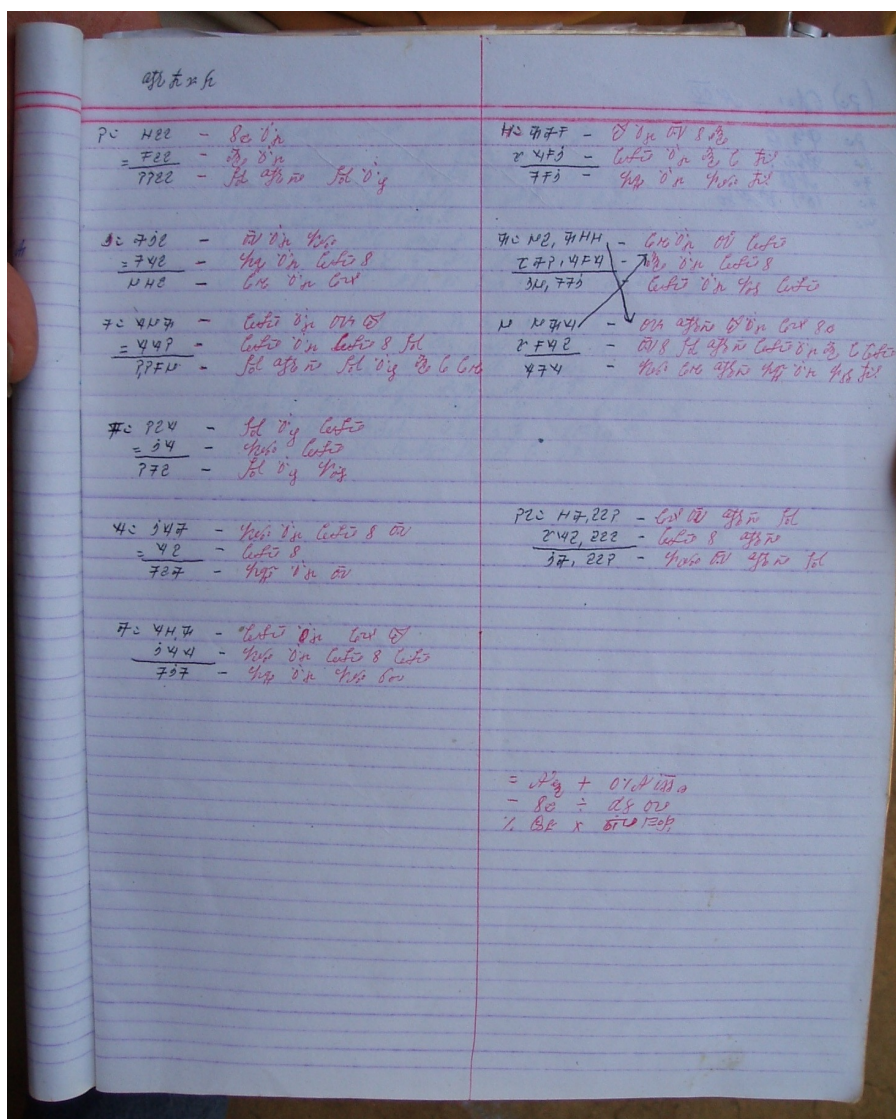


Figure 7. Page of equations using Eskayan numerals, Cadapdap

In addition to taking inspiration from the Hindu-Arabic system, a peculiarity of certain Eskaya numerals is that Pinay appears to have been inspired by their graphic form as well. However, as can be seen in Table 8 below, Eskaya numerals do not necessarily have the same value as their ostensible Hindu-Arabic counterparts.

Table 8 Eskaya symbols and words for numerals.

¹⁸ This is evident from etymologies of Visayan numerals but is also noted in the historical record. Ignacio Francisco Alcina observed that “[the Visayans] did not have arithmetic or numbers which may correspond to ours in writing, although, it is certain they counted by tens as we do” ([1668] 2005, 91).

0	Ƨ'	[no word]
1	ρ	uy
2	Ƨ	tri
3	7	kuy
4	f	pan
5	4	sing
6	7	num
7	H	pin
8	7	wal
9	μ	sim

Note for example that the subtly varying forms of 7 ('3'), 7 ('6') and 7 ('8') are apparently based on the Hindu-Arabic '7', and that 4 ('5') resembles the Hindu-Arabic '4'. It is possible that Pinay took inspiration from the idea of the 'numeral' but not the value itself (in the way that the Cherokee alphabet takes inspiration from the form of certain Roman letters) or that there was a more conscious attempt at disguise or reassignment. It is interesting to observe that the Eskayan word for 'two' is **tri**, possibly inspired by English 'three' or Spanish *tres* while other numbers are less ambiguous borrowings from Spanish (eg, **sing** from Spanish *cinco* 'five') or Visayan (**pan**, *upat*, 'four'; **num**, *unum*, 'six'; **pin**, *pitu* 'seven'; **wal**, *walu*, 'eight')¹⁹. Similar reassignments of form and value are found in the Pahawh Hmong script, a writing system developed by the Messianic cultural revivalist Shong Lue in 1959 in northern Vietnam. Although the system's biographers (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990) do not comment on the resemblance, the Pahawh Hmong 0 ('0') appears to be directly modelled on the Hindu-Arabic '0', and 3'2' resembles the Hindu-Arabic '3'. For those educated in a conventional government school it must be especially confusing to perform equations in the Eskaya script. Not only are the form and semantics of Eskaya numerals misleading but some of the mathematical functions are also reassigned: the Eskaya glyph = looks like an equals sign but actually represents +, and the Eskaya glyph % resembles a percentage sign but in fact represents ×. To my mind, the most likely explanation for this non-systematicity is deliberate obfuscation on the part of Pinay, since it is unlikely that he would have been familiar with the mechanics of a decimal system yet naive about number shapes and their meanings.

If deliberate obfuscation can be isolated in the numeral set it raises the question as to whether other non-systematic elements within the Eskaya system were also engineered for the purposes of mystifying those who are not formally trained in the script. A similar—though less forecful—hypothesis has also been suggested for Cherokee. In his influential volume on writing systems David Diringer argued that since there is no single Roman-derived Cherokee symbol that has retained its

¹⁹ Jes Tirol argued that **tri** ('two'), **kuy** (three') and **pan** ('four') were derived from Sanskrit *tri* ('three'), *catur* ('four') and *panca* ('five'), and that the Sanskrit *dua* ('two') had been dropped in Eskayan bring about a recalibration of the numeral sequence (Tirol 1993).

‘original’ Roman phonetic value, the inventor Sequoyah must have intended to create a script that deliberately differentiated itself from the Roman alphabet (in which, by implication, he must have also been literate) ([1948] 1968, 129).

5. Script

The Eskaya script is transmitted through rote copying of the Simplit from teacher to student. As a result of ongoing intergenerational transcriptions there are minor differences between versions, just as there are slight variations in the rote-transcribed Eskaya literature, but these have not yet brought about serious problems for intelligibility. This method of transmission accounts for the survival, in reference form, of characters for syllables that are unattested in the Eskayan or Visayan languages and the fact that most Eskaya scribes are not conscious of these redundancies (Kelly 2012c).

Local commentators have compared the form of the Eskaya script to Greek (Cuizon 1980, Payot 1981), the Hebrew alphabet (Tirol 1989, 1990a, 1991), and the Indic script inscribed on an artefact known as the Butuan silver strip (Tirol 1990b). Two Eskaya advocates declared that the Egyptian, Phoenician, Arabic, Javanese and Hebrew writing systems all bore a connection to Eskayan (Datahan and Palaca 2005). I have not been able to establish a predictable formal or functional relationship between Eskayan and any of these scripts; indeed, the very fact that Eskayan is written from left to right is immediately at odds with any Semitic theory. Moreover, there is no obvious formal correspondence between Eskayan and the Philippine script. As we have seen, the Eskayan system does not universally make use of an inherent vowel (except, to some extent, in the Abidiha), nor any consistent system of diacritics. For most of the hundreds of characters that make up the Simplit, each symbol stands for a distinct syllable and must be learned independently.

A pictographic origin for certain Eskaya letter shapes bears some consideration. Although for Eskaya people the human anatomy is identified as the sole source of inspiration for Eskaya letters, it can be argued that body parts and poses were first and foremost a mnemonic prompt for those acquiring literacy in Eskayan, and that the traditional stories are a *post hoc* rationale for what is essentially a pedagogical strategy.²⁰ This anthropomorphization is nonetheless integral to the traditional view that that script is a natural and ‘embodied’, as opposed to arbitrary and frivolous like the derided letters of the ‘Spanish’ (i.e. Roman) alphabet. Metaphors of personhood and the human body even enter the (Visayan) metalanguage for describing the Eskaya syllabary where the diacritic *sinyas* (‘gesture’ but more properly ‘body signal’) physically emanates from the *inahan* (‘mother’). The Eskaya were not alone in associating Philippine writing with the human body. As interest in the Philippine script experienced a revival among nationalists in the years prior to the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898), the eccentric cultural revivalist Pedro Paterno surmized that the Philippine symbols  and  as in  (⟨ba⟩⟨ha⟩⟨da⟩, *bathala* ‘god’) were imitative of the female and male sexual organs respectively, and that  represented a divine ray of light uniting the two (Paterno [1887] 1915).

Whether anatomic resemblances preceded or followed the initial creation of the Eskaya script, the alphabetic characters of the Abidiha are represented as

²⁰ This presents another functional parallel to the Hangul system (created ca. 1443) wherein consonant characters were designed to represent human speech organs as a mnemonic to their place and manner of articulation.

corresponding—with varying degrees of iconicity—to whole body poses or arrangements of individual limbs or hands (see Fig. 4). The non-alphabetic characters in the Abidiha are also associated with body positions, however eleven of them are compared or derived from internal organs. The letters  ⟨pa⟩ and  ⟨pag⟩ for example, are shown to represent the head and its connection to the oesophagus and intestines, while a heart models the syllable  ⟨taw⟩, as discussed earlier. Eskaya consultants identified the letters  ⟨pri⟩,  ⟨syun⟩,  ⟨tsu⟩,  ⟨was⟩,  ⟨tid⟩,  ⟨kri⟩,  ⟨nya⟩ and  ⟨ning⟩, as internal body parts but were uncertain about which organs they corresponded to.

The anatomic iconicity of Eskaya letters, is not however, the only advantage available to learners of the script. It is clear that certain Eskaya characters are modelled on their Roman counterparts; in the Abidiha, characters that are evidently inspired by the Roman alphabet include  ⟨a⟩,  ⟨c⟩,  ⟨o⟩,  ⟨t⟩ and  ⟨v⟩. But a Roman influence also penetrates into the syllable system as we will see.

Although Eskayan ‘pseudo-diacritics’ resist generalization, and thus ease of acquisition, there are helpful family resemblances between components of certain Eskayan syllabic graphemes and the Roman alphabet, just as there are in the Abidiha. There are many Eskayan characters of which the *inahan* is comparable in both form and sound value to a Roman ‘a’ or ‘o’ in upper or lower case. These are too numerous to reproduce here, but by way of brief example: the *inahan* component of the characters  ⟨ba⟩,  ⟨bag⟩,  ⟨wa⟩ and  ⟨wang⟩ has affinities with Roman lowercase ‘a’; the letters  ⟨ga⟩,  ⟨nas⟩,  ⟨tag⟩ and  ⟨yab⟩ with the uppercase ‘A’; and the letters  ⟨bu⟩,  ⟨duk⟩,  ⟨ul⟩ with ‘O’, among dozens of others. Certain onsets and codas are also represented with *sinayas* that resemble a corresponding Roman letter. Where this occurs, the form tends to be less arbitrary and is found to have the same value in more than one character. The sounds  ⟨i⟩, and  ⟨in⟩, become ⟨yi⟩ and ⟨yin⟩ with the addition of a *sinayas* that resembles a lowercase Roman ‘y’. The various *sinayas* for the coda -/t/ frequently resemble the crossed line in Roman lowercase ‘t’, as in ⟨at⟩, ⟨bit⟩, ⟨dit⟩, ⟨hit⟩ and ⟨mat⟩. Likewise, for many characters with the coda -/k/, the *sinayas* resembles a lowercase Roman ‘k’ or ‘c’, such as ⟨kik⟩, ⟨mak⟩, ⟨dik⟩ and ⟨tik⟩, among many others. The use of *k* [-k] as a ‘pseudo-diacritic’ has implications for the historical development of the Eskaya script, as I will discuss in the next section.

A final observation on the morphology of the Eskaya script concerns its tendency to overdifferentiate between characters. Many common syllables are far too elaborate for frequent reproduction and generate contrasts that exceed the requirements of ordinary readability—an analogy could be made to a hypothetical language that has a superfluity of phonemes. Even apparently minor variations between characters are perhaps overdetermined. Christopher Miller (pers. comm.) observed that the contrast between  ⟨e⟩ and  ⟨i⟩ is in itself unusual, given that most scripts exhibit a preference for a consistent orientation of strokes and loops.

6. How Pinay’s System was Revealed: a Conjectural Reconstruction

The Hispanic orthographic influence in the Eskaya writing system, particularly the Abidiha, and the distinct Roman influence in the script plainly suggest that Pinay’s linguistic project was undertaken in a post-contact environment in which Hispanic and Roman features were available as sources of inspiration. For early scribes, the form of the script would have been both exotic and familiar: the letters  ⟨a⟩,  ⟨c⟩,  ⟨o⟩, ⟨t⟩ and ⟨v⟩ might have appeared to be archaic reflexes of their Roman

equivalents, while other symbols such as  (‘ñ’) were entirely out of the ordinary. Contrary to traditional understandings of the system’s origins, it is thus likely that the ancestor Pinay was a post-contact figure.

How, then, did his creation unfold? Three minor observations substantiate the view that Abidiha was developed prior to the Simplit. Firstly, the Abidiha contains putative pictographic elements (body parts and poses) as well as possible logograms (in for example  ‘taw’ and unique symbols for Visayan particles), a fact which coincides with an observed historical tendency among writing systems for pictography and logography to precede syllabic and alphabetic developments. Secondly, despite the enormous variation and inconsistency in the morphology of Eskaya letters, the greatest number of Eskaya ‘stereotypes’—or morphologically foundational forms—are found amongst the twenty-five alphasyllabic letters of the Abidiha, suggesting that the more complex ‘variant’ forms in the Simplit are sequentially later derivations. Thirdly, for every pair of redundant letters, one is always found in the Abidiha and the other in the Simplit. Accidental reinventions of new letters for the same sound would be less likely if all letters had been created as part of one systematic or continuous effort.²¹

These, however, are no more than circumstantial impressions. Better evidence comes from the relationship between the Eskaya writing system and the languages it has been used for. In its order and structure, the Abidiha serves as a near-complete cipher of the Hispanic alphabet. Thus the Abidiha is virtually purpose-built for direct transliteration of Visayan (represented historically in an Hispanic orthography), or Spanish. Although today the Eskaya writing system is most closely associated with the Eskayan language—a cryptic register of Visayan that was also revealed to Mariano Datahan via Pinay—a number of letters in the Abidiha cannot possibly have been inspired by any segmental analysis of Eskayan words. For this reason, it is probable that the Abidiha was originally designed for Visayan (and Spanish) and appeared some time prior to the revelation of the Eskayan language. Further support for this hypothesis comes from certain Visayan-language texts from the Eskaya literary corpus in which isolated Eskayan words and phrases are invoked to exemplify how Pinay’s language used to be spoken in Bohol, indicating that the Eskayan lexicon was not fully developed when Mariano Datahan first dictated these stories for transcription in the 1930s (Kelly 2012b). The ultimate vindication of this theory would be the discovery of an early Visayan or Spanish manuscript that was written exclusively with letters from the Abidiha and not from the Simplit.

The strong resemblance between the consistent pseudo-diacritic *k* [-k] and the Roman letter ‘k’ would imply that Pinay had access to modern orthographies that included it. Indeed the letter ‘k’ is absent from Hispanic orthographies of Philippine languages: the sound /k/ was represented with ‘c’ whenever it preceded an ‘a’, ‘o’ or ‘u’, or appeared in syllable-final position, and with ‘qu’ prior to ‘i’. Reformed Visayan orthographies that included ‘k’ for /k/ were never to become mainstream within the lifetime of Mariano Datahan. Thus the pseudo-diacritic *k* could well reflect the influence of English in its written form, after the 1901 defeat of Bohol and its subsequent occupation by the United States. But it is also worth bearing in mind that use of the letter ‘k’ became indexical of anti-colonial resistance in the late nineteenth century. The preeminent nationalist Dr. José Rizal (1861–1896) was a firm advocate of orthographic reform, and especially the introduction of ‘k’ and ‘w’ to replace the

²¹ In this respect, the development of the Eskaya writing system has followed the same two-stage developmental sequence as the Kikakui (or Mende) script invented in Sierra Leone in the 1920s, wherein 42 semi-alphabetic characters were produced in a primary phase to be later followed by a further 153 purely syllabic characters (Dalby 1968).

Hispanic conventions.²² Prior to the Philippine Revolution, use or non-use of the letter ‘k’ was a signal of political allegiances (Thomas 2012), and was to become iconic in the rise of the revolutionary nationalist movement, the Kataas-taasan, Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan, or KKK. Among the various flags flown by the revolutionaries some displayed the Roman ‘k’; others bore the symbol , resurrected from the Philippine script. In taking inspiration from the reformist ‘k’, Pinay could not have been oblivious to its wider significance.

In Spanish reference documents, indigenous Philippine alphabets were arranged in a conventional order which placed  ‘a’ at the beginning of the series, followed by  ‘b(a)’,  ‘k(a)’ and  ‘d(a)’, etc. The Eskayan words **abidiha** and **atikisis** appear to follow the same etymological pattern as the words ‘alphabet’, *abakada* and *alibata*, in that they are compounds made up of sequential letter names in the Eskayan alphabet, even if they are not all contiguous. Conceivably the coinage of these terms was calculated to invite comparisons with known alphabets and to assume for it an equivalent historical status. Given that Datahan’s dictated literature engages intertextually with regional Filipino folklore (Kelly 2015a), we must also consider the possibility that the word Abidiha is a direct loan from the name of the folkloric heroine Abedeja (pronounced identically to ‘Abidiha’) a Filipina Cinderella figure whose father Abac and her mother Abadisa are also alphasyllabically named, though writing does not otherwise figure among the story’s motifs in versions that have been recorded (Fansler 1921, 316-319).

Whatever the case, if Pinay-Datahan had been sufficiently familiar with the so called *abakada* or *alibata* systems as to label the Eskaya script on the same etymological model, there is every chance that he knew something about how these systems operated. In this light, the existence of dual alphabetic-syllabic characters within the Abidiha may point to a familiarity with the principles of the inherent vowel in historical Philippine writing systems, even if their actual systematicity was not exploited in quite the same way. Alternatively, the syllabicity of the Eskaya writing could simply be an outcome of the fact that newly generated writing systems tend to represent syllables and not phonemes (Daniels 1992, Faber 1992).

Residents of Biabas say that the first Eskaya school was constructed in the 1920s and that prior to this time, lessons took place in Datahan’s house. Just as the Abidiha directly replicated features of Spanish orthography, Datahan’s school system was a direct, if subversive, reproduction of the American educational model: students were divided by gender, and separate ‘night school’ classes were held for adults. Classes in the Biabas school focused primarily on literacy in the writing system. My surmise is that in the early years, most of the traditional literature was not yet available for use in pedagogy but texts like ‘Atikisis’ and ‘The Spanish and Eskayan Alphabets’ were ideally suited as literacy materials. Importantly, the symbols that are explicitly mentioned in these texts all belong to the Abidiha and not the Simplit which was yet

²² Rizal was not the first to recommend reforms to Tagalog spelling. By his own admission he had taken inspiration from the prominent Filipino intellectuals Trinidad Pardo de Tavera and Pedro Serrano Laktaw who were already using elements of this new system. Indeed, the latter had gone so far as to revise the spelling of his own family name from ‘Lactao’ to ‘Laktaw’. He was not without his opponents. While his new orthography had the effect of clarifying the sound system of Tagalog, it also disguised and indigenized Spanish loanwords. Critics writing for the *Catholic Review* considered the foreign letter ‘k’ to be an unpatriotically ‘German’ imposition and an affront to mother Spain. One went so far as to sign an article with the provocative pseudonym *hindí aleman* (Tagalog: ‘not German’); this context is described in Thomas (2012, 153-166).

to be developed. In time, Datahan's pupils would have gained full literacy in the Abidiha, and it is possible that those of them who did not also attend American schools were literate exclusively in this system.

Once the alphabetic characters of the Eskaya writing system had been developed, it is likely that Mariano Datahan dictated more Eskaya literature and the Eskayan lexicon began to be revealed. As more Visayan stories were committed to paper and new and exotic words came to light, the twenty-five letters of the Abidiha probably began to seem inadequate. At first a set of twenty-one syllabic symbols were appended to the original alphabet, some of which would have facilitated the transcription of Visayan stories since they stood for common Visayan function words like *sa* ('to' φ) and verbal affixes like *ning-* ($\mathcal{M}$) and *gi-* ($\neg$). These alone, however, would have been deemed insufficient for the wide range of syllabic shapes found in emerging Eskayan vocabulary. Thus the Simplit, a greatly expanded set of over 1000 syllabic characters, was revealed. Again, a surplus of forms was preferable to a deficit. Variation exists amongst Simplit reference documents used today, but the larger examples include over 500 characters for syllable shapes that are unattested in Eskayan words of which at least thirty-seven represent sound combinations that are *not even permissible* for Eskayan as it is used today (see Table 7). Perhaps it was imagined that the revelation of Eskayan would be an ongoing process and these symbols were recorded in order to preempt unforeseen syllable shapes for words that had not yet come to light.

7. The Future of Eskayan

In 1937 Datahan invited President Manuel Quezon to witness an Eskayan class in Biabas, but this was politely declined (Kelly 2012b). Needless to say, Datahan's prophecy that Eskayan would become a unifying language of the Philippines, or of the whole world, has not come to pass. The political status of Eskayan aside, the non-systematicity of the writing system and the elaborate form of many of the letters, even those representing common sounds, makes literacy acquisition especially laborious. Unlike other recent scripts such as Pahawh Hmong (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990) and Iban (Philip 2007), the Eskayan system never went through any stages of reform and simplification; if anything, it became more complicated as the Simplit expanded. Ironically perhaps, the very act of committing Eskayan letters to paper may have impeded its journey towards simplification. Crossing out or destroying Eskayan text is still disapproved of, making any act of drafting or reworking very difficult. It is, however, still possible that over time Eskaya scribes will consciously or unconsciously make changes in the system, simplifying elaborate characters, eliminating redundant or unattested syllables in reference documents and formalising a standard set of diacritics. The very fact that a majority of Eskaya characters in handwritten syllabaries are unused or no longer used, is perhaps a sign that simplification is already under way. However, if radical reforms to the system make the traditional literature unreadable to younger generations—as transpired with the reformation of the Shan script of Burma (Morey 2015) and the Romanisation of Turkish (Lewis 1999)—they are unlikely to gain acceptance.

Over time, the popularity of the Eskayan language and script has experienced peaks and troughs. Since Mariano Datahan's death in 1949, use of Eskayan went into sharp decline. The Philippine army subjected Biabas to sporadic raids, while Datahan's family broke into rival factions. It was at this time that the 31-year-old Fabian Baja led a break-away group of colonists into the mountains above Biabas where they carved a clearing in the jungle and established the new settlement of Taytay (Kelly 2012c). By the 1980s, Taytay was thriving in isolation under Baja's

military-style command. Every Sunday the Eskaya school was crammed with 150 students, both adults and children, some of whom had walked three hours up a steep trail from Biabas in order to attend. Such activity could not remain hidden from the outside world, and soon enough lowland agricultural advisors reported their discovery of a ‘lost tribe’ in southeast Bohol, speaking and writing in a mysterious language. Curious journalists and amateur anthropologists made visits to the community, generating ever more sensational stories of the exotic scenes they witnessed there (Kelly 2012c). From the 1980s onwards, schooling in Eskayan was revived in Biabas and introduced into other nearby villages with large Eskaya populations such as Lundag and Canta-ub (see Fig. 1). However, as Eskayan increased its geographic reach the overall numbers of regular pupils went into decline. Over the past 20 years, visitors have reported ever smaller classes in Taytay, and during the time in which I was regularly visiting the Eskaya villages between 2006 and 2011, I have recorded diminishing numbers. In Taytay and Biabas a typical class now has about 20 children and ten adults in attendance. My impression is that in Biabas classes are beginning to become more ‘ceremonial’, taking place on special occasions rather than as a regular Sunday event.

But out of this picture of general decline a few green shoots are surfacing. Eskayan has been introduced in Taytay’s local government-run elementary school for the first half an hour of each school day, and enthusiasm for Eskayan is on the rise in Cadapdapan where there are plans to build a school. Fabian Baja, like his mentor Mariano Datahan, was opposed to the learning and teaching of English, but since his passing in 2007 the Eskaya script is now used for writing English sentences for classroom exercises in the traditional Taytay school that combine script literacy with English-language acquisition. Evaluated against Peter Unseth’s scale of script vitality (Unseth 2011), the Eskaya script would thus probably be classed as ‘Hopeful’, since it has a corpus, community acceptance, and a degree official support. Most importantly, the domains of use for the Eskaya script are expanding, even as the outside world is encroaching. No longer isolated by the steep and forested terrain of the upland settlements, Eskaya youths are attending high school and universities in lowland towns of Bohol with some travelling to other islands for study or even overseas. Since 2009, electricity and mobile phone coverage is now available, albeit intermittently, in all Eskaya villages and text messaging is a relatively new but important communicative medium. Computers and smart phones are not widely available in the villages, however those Eskaya who have regular access to the lowlands are becoming computer literate and joining online social networks.

These developments have contributed to local demands for an Eskaya font in order for Eskaya writing to be represented and circulated in the digital realm (pers. comm. Marciana Galambao), even if this runs the risk of allowing others to use the script inappropriately or disrespectfully. If a unicode-enabled font with a keyboard input system becomes available for Eskayan, new domains for the script may open up in print publishing, the internet and smart phone communication. Further, an Eskaya font would facilitate the analysis and digital reproduction of the Eskaya literary corpus, a small but fascinating contribution to the cultural heritage of the southern Philippines. Above all, the mere existence of a font would be a statement of legitimacy for a community that often finds itself on the defensive against both its detractors and misinformed advocates. The characters reproduced in this paper are the early products of slow, collaborative work between specialists in Australia, Bohol and Manila. Just over half of the attested Eskaya letters have been designed and they have yet to be programmed in a keyboard input system.

8. Conclusion

The Eskaya writing system is unique among the world's scripts for the extent to which it combines various modes of sound and language representation. I have shown that the Eskaya system has alphabetic, alphasyllabic and strictly syllabic features with an inconsistent system of consonant diacritics and more than fifty percent redundancy in its recorded syllable characters, including thirty-seven characters for representing phonotactic impossibilities (see Table 7). Such redundancy is echoed in the morphology of the script where graphic contrasts are overdetermined with no clear tendency towards a stereotyped orientation of strokes and loops. Orthographic variation is also apparent in how individual scribes choose to segment words into syllables, consonants and vowels: one word may have a number of acceptable spellings.

Eskaya alphabetic letters have a cypher-like quality as if they were designed for direct transliteration (or encryption) of Spanish, or Hispanic orthographies of Visayan. Arguably, although not unequivocally, the system shows a degree of logography (and perhaps pictography and ideography) in the Abidiha, or primary 'alphabet'. Less ambiguously ideographic, the numeral set is decimal and can even be used for performing equations but appears to include deliberately obfuscatory or misleading elements from the perspective of a scribe who has prior literacy in a Hindu-Arabic numeral system. This obfuscation, detected in the apparent incongruence between certain number shapes, their semantics and their phonetic realizations, suggests the possibility of deliberate opacity in other aspects of the writing system. One such area is the Eskaya system of consonant pseudo-diacritics: one-off graphic elements that perform the function of differentiation only, with no combinatoric value. As for its inspiration, the script exhibits an influence from the Roman alphabet, while the writing system displays Hispanic alphabetic elements as well as inherent vowels reminiscent of indigenous scripts of the Philippines and Indonesia, even if Eskaya vowels display more variation in their default realizations. In summary, I propose that Eskaya is the *least* systematic writing system on record and in regular use today. As I have shown, this lack of systematicity is not so much about the relative depth of its orthography, i.e. the degree to which individual graphemes correspond to phonemes (Katz & Feldman 1983). Rather, it concerns its extraordinary combination of variant systems—(cypher)-alphabetic, alphasyllabic, syllabic, ideographic etc—and the marked superfluity of graphemes that are brought to the task of representing phonemes and syllables. In other words, Eskaya violates the maxim that there is an “underlying rationale of efficiency in matching a language's characteristic phonology and morphology to a written form” (Katz & Frost 1992).

Despite its extravagant non-systematicity the Eskaya script is not strictly arbitrary. Its relationship to the Roman alphabet, its putative derivation from the human body, and its application of various mechanisms (such as alphabetic letters, diacritics and inherent vowels) point to serious deliberation in its creation. The thoughtfulness that went into its construction suggests that its unsystematic elements were not merely (or always) naive oversights. Part accident, part design, the Eskaya writing system is less a feat of engineering than it is a work of scribal art.

Of its precise origins, little can be learned from the documentary record but the script itself lends clues to its own genesis. Whether chanced upon in a cave, given to Datahan directly by the ancestor Pinay, or retrieved through spiritual inspiration, the Abidiha, or primary alphabet, is likely to have emerged first. This was later followed by the twenty-one syllabic-only letters that are typically represented as part of the

Abidiha (see Fig. 4). Last to be revealed was the remaining body of approximately 1000 additional syllables of the Simplit.

The complex ideological motivations for the script's development (or 'revelation') have not been discussed in any detail here—for a thorough treatment see Kelly (2012c, forthcoming)—however it can be briefly noted that its social and historical circumstances are broadly similar to those of other twentieth-century scripts in the region. Just like the Iban script of Malaysian Borneo (Philip 2007), the Khom script of Laos (Sidwell 2008), and the Pahawh Hmong script of Vietnam (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990), the Eskaya system came to prominence in the context of extreme social upheaval and anti-colonial conflict—circumstances that gave impetus to radical religious change and a collective desire to rediscover and valorize ethnic identity.

However, unlike many of these scripts, Eskaya did not go through any process of reform to become more economical and feature-based. Indeed, its very non-systematicity may account, in part, for its successful transmission over the past ninety years: the 'misdirection', redundancy and inconsistency that make it opaque to outsiders may also serve to protect the knowledge and community identity it encodes in the traditional literature. Likewise, in the manner of Darwin's famous example of the impractical-but-desirable peacock's tail (1871, 135), the Eskaya script's elaborate and almost calligraphic morphology may increase its appeal to students wishing to learn it. As Diringer once noted, in a Darwinian mode, "[t]he best fitted resists and survives, although sometimes the surrounding circumstances may bear a greater influence on the survival of a script than its merits as a system of writing" ([1948] 1968, 4-5). Indeed, the relative merits of systematicity might, in the case of the Eskaya script, have given way to the greater survival benefits of hybridity, redundancy and *non*-systematicity. A product of unique human creativity, the Eskaya script will not be reduced to an elegant formula.

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