

The Calatagan Pot: A National Treasure with Bisayan Inscription

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Abstract

After 50 years as an enigma, the text inscribed around the shoulder of the famous Calatagan Pot, the country's oldest cultural artifact with pre-Hispanic writing, has been deciphered. It seems to have been written in the old Bisayan language.

This paper presents a review of the inscription puzzle, past and recent attempts at cracking the code, as well as the author's breakthrough in deciphering the symbols, determining its language and meaning, and inferring the possible use of the pot.

It now appears that the Calatagan artifact was a ritual pot particularly used as native incense burner for the *pag-ulî* (return) rite to retrieve the soul of a moribund person during the pre-Hispanic era. The inscription essentially provides the outline of a three-stage monologue, presumably elaborated by a *babaylan* (native priestess) in a trance during the *pag-ulî* ritual.

The pot was probably also used for ceremonies to retrieve victims of *bugkut*, disappeared persons believed to have been abducted by dwellers of the spirit world.

The paper provides a glossary of 26 Bisayan words that could be derived from the Calatagan Pot inscription.

Introduction

This paper presents the author's effort to decipher the mysterious inscription around the shoulder of the famous Calatagan Pot, the country's oldest cultural artifact with pre-Hispanic writing. This had remained an enigma for 50 years since its discovery until 2008, when he made his transcription, translation, analysis and conclusion that the text on the pot was written in the old Bisayan language. A feature article with the preliminary findings was published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on 23 May 2009 (Borrinaga 2009a, A16).

As its name suggests, the pot was discovered by local diggers at an archeological excavation site in Calatagan, Batangas in 1958. The finders sold it for P6.00 to Alfredo Evangelista. Later, this was purchased by the Anthropological Foundation of the

Philippines, which in turn donated it in 1961 to the National Museum, where it is presently displayed (Ilagan 2008, 1-2).

The Calatagan Pot (see Fig. 1) measures 12 cms high and 20.2 cms at its widest and weighs 872 grams. It is considered one of the country's most valuable cultural and anthropological artifacts. The first pot with inscription to be dug out archeologically in the country, it has been dated between the 14th and 16th centuries (*Ibid*).

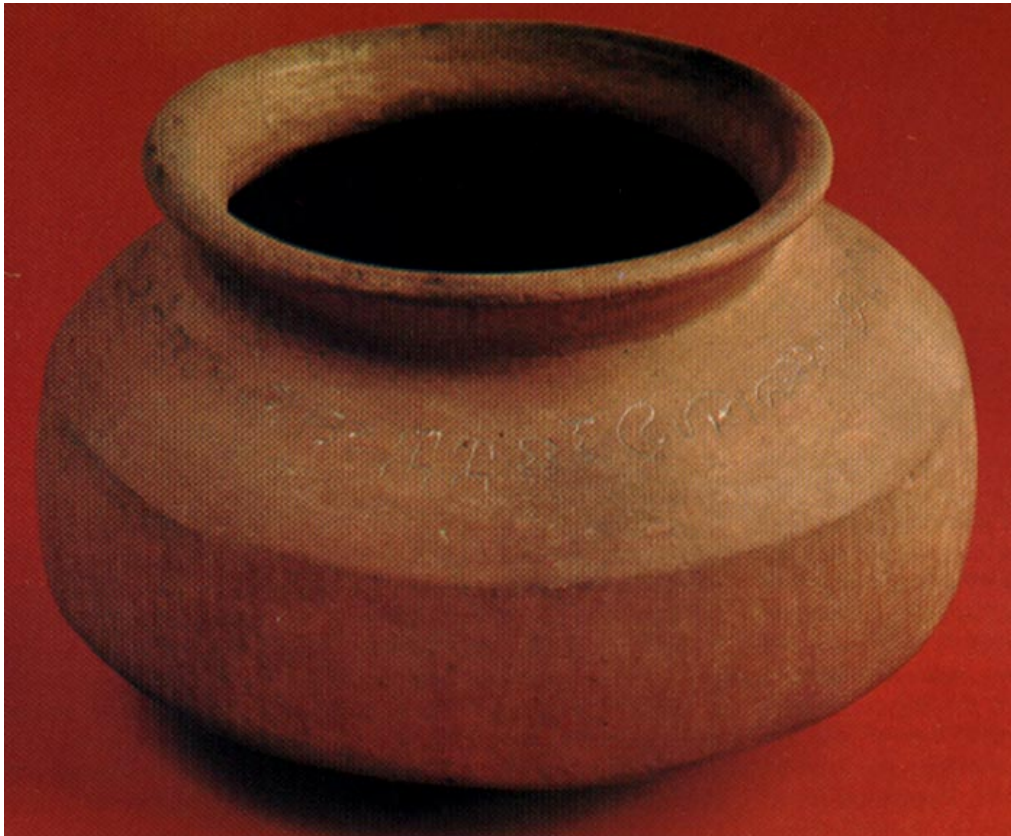


Fig. 1. The Calatagan Pot (www.geocities.com/gcalla1).

The circumstances of the discovery and the context of the Calatagan Pot are already described in the existing literature (Bernardo 1971, 64; Valdes 2004, 3; Guillermo and Paluga 2009, 26-28).

A case of serendipity

The author's interest in the Calatagan Pot Inscription was stirred quite accidentally early morning on 18 November 2008, while browsing the Internet for materials on the old Philippine scripts, when he came across an item dated 22 September 2008, which reported the discovery of a pot shard with inscription in an ancient form of writing around its shoulder, dug up at an archaeological site in Intramuros, Manila (Philippine News.net, 2008).

A few weeks earlier, on 24 October 2008, the author had presented a paper on the 1984 correspondence between the late William Henry Scott and the late Fr. Cantius K. Kobak, OFM, two foremost scholars on the sixteenth-century society and culture of the Bisayas, at the 29th national conference of the Philippine National Historical Society in Banaue, Ifugao (Borrinaga 2009b, 205-225). Since the paper included as attachments a set of three ancient Bisayan syllabic writing compiled by Father Kobak (see Attachment “A”) and seventeenth-century Tagalog scripts summarized by Scott (see Attachment “B”), he thought he could possibly use these as guides in deciphering the inscription on the Calatagan Pot, which he first read about in a column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in 2007 (Ocampo 2007).

The author searched the Internet for an illustration of this inscription and found and downloaded one (see Fig. 2) from a blogspot item that cited its source as <http://www.bibingka.com>. He then started the trial-and-error deciphering process using the Kobak and Scott materials as guides and made it half-way during the day.



Fig. 2. Artist's illustration of the Calatagan Pot Inscription (www.bibingka.com).

In the evening of the same day, the author downloaded from the Internet other materials that he could use as references and as basis for comparing his findings with

other results (Ilagan 2008; Ocampo 2007; Guillermo 2008; Santos 1996a, 1996b). Other useful references (Valdes 2004; Bernardo 1971) and a good photo of the Calatagan Pot (www.geocities.com/gcalla1) were downloaded days later.

The author had made an almost complete preliminary transcription of the 40 symbols (excluding the five vertical separators) by the end of the second day, which he then compared with the transcriptions of previous researchers. The missing transcriptions for some three or four symbols were adopted from the works of previous researchers.

By the third day, it had become a matter of deciding which direction the transcribed symbols should be read: clockwise or counter-clockwise from the break in the circular inscription. He tried it clockwise, and he could not make any sense in the syllables. He tried it counter-clockwise, and he immediately noticed two-syllable Bisayan verbs (e.g., *bu-ka*, *la-ba*, *ni-nu*, *ba-ya*) and one-syllable adverbs (e.g., *na*, *ma*, *la*) after the verbs that made sense in the six lines of inscription. After the reading direction had been determined and some three lines had been fully transcribed, some cross-referenced adjustments had to be made in the transcription of a few symbols for their lines to make sense and cohere with the others.

As a teacher of Communication courses, the author is fully aware that in contrast to the Subject-plus-Verb basic order of words in English, the non-Tagalog languages in the Philippines usually start with a Verb or with a one-syllable prefix to indicate the verb's tense. He thus looked for the verbs first, and the old Bisayan verbs were detected in the counter-clockwise reading.

A feature article on the author's finding was then written and sent to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for possible publication. The same draft article was also sent to certain colleagues in the academic community for possible comments, who responded with silence, a guarded statement, and one adulatory comment. There was more silence after that. Then, much to the author's surprise, the *Inquirer* suddenly decided to publish the article six months after its submission, the promissory last sentence of which prompted the writing of this paper.

The publication of the newspaper article soon solicited comments from some academics in some Internet sites (<http://talastasangbakas.multiply.com/journal/item/38>; <http://bagongkasaysayan.multiply.com/journal/item/105>).

As for the reported Intramuros Pot that has triggered this research, its inscription has not yet been presented to the academic community or the general public.

Early efforts to decipher the Calatagan Pot Inscription

This section will focus on early efforts to decipher the inscription on the Calatagan Pot. To facilitate the presentation, we adopt the method used by Hector Santos in presenting the Calatagan Pot translations of past authors (1996a). He assigned a

numerical code for each symbol, arrayed in a counter-clockwise direction. When converted into a table, the number on the left (x-axis) represents the horizontal grouping of a set of symbols until the vertical marker. The number on the right (y-axis), after the dash (-), represents the vertical placement of the symbol along its horizontal group.

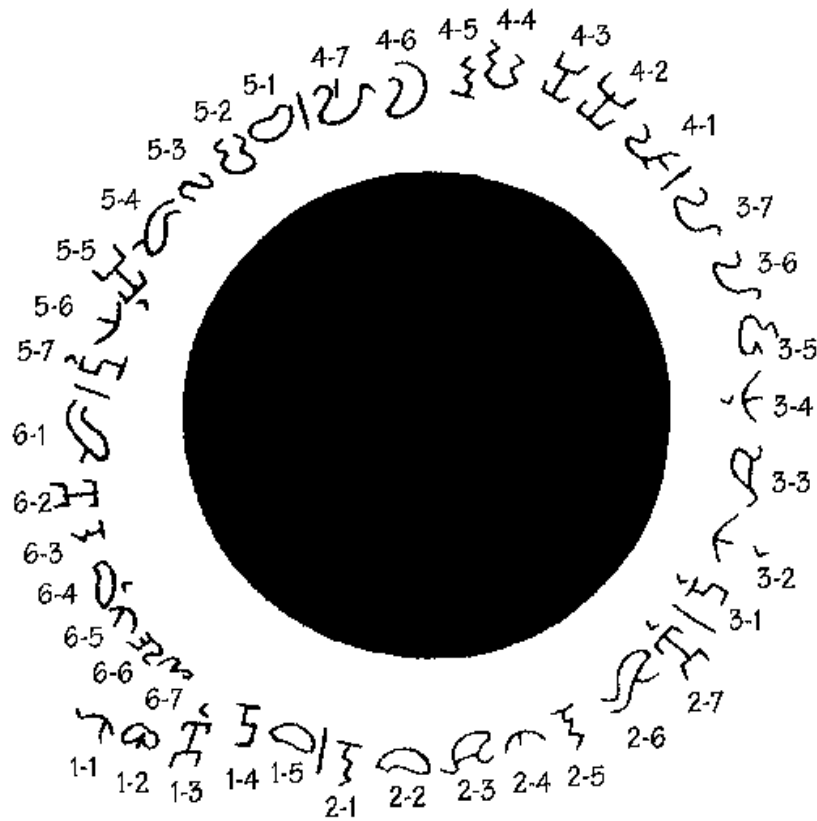


Fig. 3. The Calatagan Pot Inscription with assigned code numbers (www.bibingka.com).

A. The Tolentino Effort

Sometime in the early 1960s, the National Museum approached sculptor Guillermo Tolentino, the National Artist of the U.P. Oblation fame, for help in deciphering the inscription on the pot. He was known for his fascination with the ancient Tagalog *baybayin* alphabet (Guillermo 2008, 2).

Santos (1996a, 3) provided the results of Tolentino's effort to decipher the symbols (see Table 1), which was done in a counter-clockwise direction, as well as his transcription and translation of the deciphered symbols.

Table 1. Tolentino's Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-1	y-2	y-3	y-4	y-5	y-6	y-7
1-x	PA	?	KI	NA	BA		
2-x	LA	BA	MA	NA	LA	NGA	KI
3-x	NI	NU	MA	NI	I	MA	NGA
4-x	GA	KA	KA	I	LA	NGA	NI
5-x	BA	I	YA	NGA	KI	NA	NU
6-x	NGA	KA	LA	BI	NGA	GA	YA

However, in transcribing his decipherment effort, Tolentino placed Group 1 in the arrangement of the counter-clockwise groupings as follows (*Ibid.*):

LA-BAG MAN NA LA-NGA-KIN	Group 2
NI-NO MAN NI I-MA NGA	Group 3
GA KA-KA-I-LA-NGA-NIN	Group 4
BA I-YAN NGA KI-NA-NO	Group 5
NGA KA-LA-BIS NG GAN-YANG	Group 6
PA- * -KI-NA-BANG	Group 1

Santos claimed Tolentino provided a translation of his transcription for *The Manila Times*, which was never published. He hesitatingly published this translation in his website (*Ibid.*, 4) as follows:

<i>Ang Tunay na Diwa ng Alay</i>	Title added
<i>Labag man nga lang (sa) aki't (kalooban)</i>	Group 2
<i>Kanino man, kay ina'y magalay,</i>	Group 3
<i>gaano man ang kanyang kakailanganin, (sa kabila)</i>	Group 4
<i>Aba! Kanino man nga iyan galing,</i>	Group 5
<i>labis ang ganyang ating</i>	Group 6
<i>pakikinabangin (sa wakas) (na pagpapala ni Bathala)</i>	Group 1

The same text was published in other websites along with its English translation (Ilgan 2008, 2; Guillermo 2008, 2), sans the added title (which translation is provided below), as follows:

[The True Spirit of Offering]
 Though it may be against me and (my will)
 Whoever, offer to mother
 Whatever she may need (there beyond)
 And from whoever that may have come from
 We will benefit
 Greatly from it (in the end) (with God's grace).

Based on Tolentino's translation, the pot was supposed to be an offering of a child (son or daughter) to a dead mother or parent (*Ibid.*; Bernardo 1971, 64).

However, Tolentino's output was set aside on scientific grounds because it was allegedly achieved by means of a séance, during which he supposedly invoked the spirit of the ancient pot-maker and asked from him the meaning of the inscription (Ocampo 2007).

Santos noted that "(i)n spite of the liberties [Tolentino] took with the material, his translation has such a tortured syntax that it begs to be kept a secret" (Santos 1996a, 5).

Through the decades, other scholars, using more scientific approaches, have tried to decipher the inscription on the Calatagan Pot. Among them were Juan Francisco, Jean-Paul Potet, Antoon Postma, Harold Conklin, and Johannes de Casparis, known experts in the field of paleography. But no one was able to produce a translation of the text, whether complete or partial (Guillermo 2008, 2; Ilagan 2008, 2).

Only Francisco (in 1973) and Potet (in 1983) had come up with more or less complete symbol equivalences. But they also failed to determine the actual language of the inscription (Guillermo 2008, 2).

B. The Francisco Effort

Juan R. Francisco, author of *Philippine Palaeography* (1973), conducted some analysis of the ancient letters on the Calatagan Pot in his monograph, but he could not fully decipher the writing (Santos 1996b, 2).

In a comparative table, Guillermo (2008, 17) provided the results Francisco's effort to decipher the inscriptions on the pot (see Table 2), presented in a clockwise direction, that is, starting with Symbol 6-7 in Fig. 3 and ending with Symbol 1-1.

Table 2. Francisco's Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-7	y-6	y-5	y-4	y-3	y-2	y-1
6-x		GA	NA	BI/BE	LA	KA	?
5-x	DO/DU	NA	KE/KI	?	HA	?	BA
4-x	YA	?	LA	?	KA	KA	GA
3-x	?	*	?	NE/NI	MA	NO/NU	DE/DI
2-x	KE/KI	?	LA	NA	MA	BA	LA
1-x			BA	DA	KE/KI	BO/BU	?

(*) Missing symbol in Francisco's diagram (Santos 1996c, 2).

Francisco was known to have arrived at his preliminary list of equivalences through sensitive and rigorous paleographic analysis by using as references the known syllabic scripts. But he could not offer a possible transliteration of the inscription due to the difficulty of identifying some of the symbols (Guillermo 2008, 2). He thus ignored Postma’s comment as early as 1964 that “the Calatagan inscription should be compared with an alphabet as a whole, *not* with separate letters in different alphabets and dialects” (Santos 1996a, 4).

C. The Potet Effort

Jean-Paul G. Potet, in his doctoral dissertation titled “Morphologie du Philippin” (1983), provided his own transliteration of the Calatagan writing. Santos (1996a) noted that Potet actually numbered his symbols and groups from right to left, i.e., starting at Symbol 6-7 in Fig. 3. But Santos reversed the order of Potet’s arrangement in Table 3, based on the premise that the latter considered Symbol 6-7 as an “end of text” marker.

Table 3. Potet’s Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-1	y-2	y-3	y-4	y-5	y-6	y-7
1-x	PA	BU	KI	NGA	BA		
2-x	LA	BA	MA	NU	LA	TA	KI
3-x	NGI	NU	MA	NI	GA	*	TA
4-x	A	KA	KA	GA	LA	WA	YA
5-x	BA	GA	HA	DA	KI	NA	NGU
6-x	DA	KA	LA	BI	NA	A	**

(*) Potet apparently used a sketch of the Calatagan Pot that only used six symbols for Group 3 (see Santos 1996c).

(**) Potet considers Symbol 6-7 in Fig. 3 as “end of text marker.” This suggests that he believes the writing went from left to right (Santos 1996a, 2).

However, despite his decipherment effort, Potet did not provide a translation of what he had accomplished.

Past attempts at deciphering the Calatagan Pot Inscription were faced with three seemingly insurmountable problems: 1) the equivalents of many symbols are unknown; 2) the language used in composing the inscription is unknown, although the possibility of Tagalog or Mangyan had been proposed; and, 3) even if the symbols are successfully identified, it is difficult to determine the start and end of words as well as the final consonants of certain words (Guillermo 2008, 3).

Recent attempts

A. The Guillermo Effort

Early in 2008, Ramon G. Guillermo of U.P. Diliman published results of his attempt to decode the Calatagan Pot Inscription. He said he used paleography, cryptography and “brute force” to crack the code and decipher the symbols around the mouth of the pot. He approached his task by transcribing in clockwise fashion starting from the last character at the break in the circle of symbols, similar to what Francisco had done before. He described his effort in a paper titled “*Ina Bisa Kata: An Experimental Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription,*” which has been posted in the Internet (Guillermo 2008).

Table 4 presents the results of Guillermo’s effort to decipher the inscriptions on the pot, rendered in a clockwise direction (*Ibid.*, 17).

Table 4. Guillermo’s Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-7	y-6	y-5	y-4	y-3	y-2	y-1
6-x		E/I	NA	BI/BE	SA	KA	TA
5-x	GO/GU	NA	KE/KI	TA	PA	YA	BA
4-x	?	?	SA	YA	KA	KA	E/I
3-x	?	?	YA	NE/NI	MA	NO/NU	GE-GI
2-x	KE/KI	TA	SA	NA	MA	BA	SA
1-x			BA	GA	KA	BO/BU	NGA

In early March 2008, Guillermo released a complete interpretation of the script as follows (Ilagan 2008, 2):

INA BISA KATA
 GUNA KITA PAYABA
 DULANG SAYA KAU KAIN
 DADA YANG ‘NI MANOGI
 KITA SANA MABASAH
 BAGAI KE BUNGA

The following was Guillermo’s translation of his transcribed text (*Ibid.*, 3):

*Sinikap sabihin ni ina
 Para sa iyo mahal kong anak
 Kumain ka sa aking dulang
 Dibdib ko ‘tong mabango
 Doon ika’y mabasa
 Tulad ng bulaklak*

His version carries a mother’s endearing message to her beloved child, the reverse of Tolentino’s interpretation.

But although the methods that Guillermo used were deemed scientific and technical enough in academic circles, and his output was declared “most definitive” in an Internet feature story (*Ibid.*), there were lingering doubts from some sectors that the final revelation has yet to come (<http://marnek.multiply.com/journal>).

B. The Oropilla Effort

Also in 2008, a parallel effort to decipher the Calatagan Pot Inscription appeared in the public domain. This was conducted by Quintin F. Oropilla, who published his findings in the book *Deciphered Secrets: The Calatagan Pot (A Philippine National Treasure) Ancient Inscriptions*.

Table 5 presents the results of Oropilla’s effort to decipher the inscription on the pot, rendered in a counter-clockwise direction.

Table 5. Oropilla’s Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-1	y-2	y-3	y-4	y-5	y-6	y-7
1-x	PA	BA	KI	DA	BA		
2-x	LA	BA	MA	NU	LA	SA	KI
3-x	DI	NO	MA	NI	NGA	MA	YA
4-x	GA	KA	KA	NGA	LA	WA	YA
5-x	BA	NGA	RA	SA	KI	NA	DO
6-x	SA	KA	LA	BI	NA	GA	A

However, in transcribing his decipherment effort, Oropilla started at Group 2 as illustrated in Fig. 3 and placed Group 1 at the bottom (Calatagan Pot Scripts 2009, 2), like what Tolentino had done. He argued that the inscription on the Calatagan Pot is written in the Pangasinan language, similar to the one still spoken today in that Luzon province. The perceived Pangasinan words in the transcription, some provided with end-consonants, are presented below with their English translations underneath:

- | | | | |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------|---------|
| LA-BA(N) | MA-NU-LA(Y) | SA-KI(T) | Group 2 |
| Fight | Rain | Illness | |
| (against) | | | |
| DI-NO(T) | MA-NI-NGA(S) | MA(G)-YA(T) | Group 3 |
| Slowly | Have Difficulty | Suddenly | |
| | Breathing | | |

GA(M)-KA(T)-KA(T) NGA-LA(N) WA(D)-YA Staring blankly Names Inside the	Group 4
BA-NGA RA(Y) SA-KI(T) NA(N)-DO(N) Pot Names Sick In There of those	Group 5
SA-KA-LA(N) BI-NA-GA-A(N) Copied, Are Already Informed	Group 6
PA(Y)-BA-KI DA(M)-BA Thou Send Love (Relief)	Group 1

Based on the above transcription, it has been suggested that the Calatagan pot “is an animistic ‘ritual’ vessel imploring help by a shaman for her sick people” (*Ibid.*, 1).

C. The Guillermo and Paluga Effort

After the author’s feature article on the Calatagan Pot appeared in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in May 2009, he learned from various sources that Ramon Guillermo, in collaboration with Myfel Joseph Paduga of U.P. Mindanao, had come up with new findings and a paper that presents a Bisayan language reading of the inscription. This turned out as “*Barang King Banga: Isang Eksperimental na Pagbasang Bisaya sa Inskripsyon sa Banga ng Calagatan*” (Guillermo and Paluga 2009).

Table 6 presents the results of Guillermo’s and Paluga’s effort to decipher the inscription on the pot, again rendered in a clockwise direction from Symbol 6-7 in Fig. 3.

Table 6. Guillermo’s and Paluga’s Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-7	y-6	y-5	y-4	y-3	y-2	y-1
6-x	*	GA	NA	BI	SA	KA	TA
5-x	DU	NA	KI	TA	HA	LA	BA
4-x	YA	WA	SA	LA	KA	KA	GA
3-x	YA	YA	LA	NI	MA	NU	DI
2-x	KI	TA	SA	NA	MA	BA	SA
1-x			BA	DA	KI	BA	NGA

(*) Symbol 6-7, interpreted as “end of text marker” by Potet.

The proposed Bisayan reading of the transcription, some provided with end-consonants, and some with consonant or vowel inserts, is provided below. Also provided is the English translation of key words, some of which provided by this author.

GANA BISA KATA

Gana Can Say

[Deity]

DUNA KITA(Y) HALABA(S)

Have We Long Sword

YAWA SALA KAKAGA

Devil Sin Falsehood

YA(M)YA(M) LA NI MANU(G)D(A)I(T)

Chant Only This Shaman

KITA SANA MA(G)BASA

We That Shall Read

BARA(NG) KI(NG) BANGA

Spell Of This Water Jar

The correct English version is supposed to be read this way:

Gana Bisa Kata (*Gana's Word is Powerful*)

We have a sword

Evil, faults, falsehood

Just chant this, Shaman/s

Let us read the signs

Spell/Power of this pot!

Guillermo and Paluga (2009, 76) have tentatively concluded that the inscription on the Calatagan Pot is written in the Bisayan language and that it is apparently a *barang* or magical incantation.

***Nabuki(ki) na ba* (Is it open already)?**

Earlier, we discussed the circumstances of the author's interest in the Calatagan Pot Inscription, the methods and guides he used in approaching the research, and the references he accessed in the Internet. This section presents the details of his findings and some observations.

Table 7 presents the results of the author's effort to decipher the inscription on the pot, rendered in a counter-clockwise direction, the sources of the equivalents for the deciphered characters, and some notes on a few other curious symbols.

Table 7. Borrinaga’s Decipherment of the Calatagan Pot Inscription

	y-1	y-2	y-3	y-4	y-5	y-6	y-7
1-x	NA (a)	BU (d)	KI (t)	NA (t)	BA (t)		
2-x	LA (t)	BA (t)	MA (t)	NA (t)	LA (t)	DA (t)	KI (t)
3-x	NI (t)	NU (t)	MA (t)	NI (t)	YA (g)	MA (T)	NGA (T)
4-x	GA (e)	KA (t)	KA (t)	YA (g)	LA (t)	NGA (a)	YA (p)
5-x	BA (t)	YA (g)	HA (f, p)	DA (t)	KI (t)	NA (t)	NU (t)
6-x	DA (t)	KA (t)	LA (t)	BI (t)	NA (t)	GA (e)	~

Sources:

- (a) – Alcina Script, see Attachment “A”.
(d) – Delgado Script, see Attachment “A”.
(e) – Ezquerra Script, see Attachment “A”.
(f) – Francisco transcription, see Table 2.
(g) – Guillermo 2008, 20, see Fig. 3.
(p) – Potet transcription, see Table 3.
(t) – Tagalog Script, see Attachment “B”.
(T) – Tolentino transcription, see Table 1.
(~) – Potet transcription as “end of text” marker, see Table 3.

Notes: 1. Symbols 2-3 and 3-3 were transcribed as “MA” because they appear as vertical mirror images of the relevant symbol in the Tagalog script.

2. Symbols 2-6, 5-4, and 6-1 were transcribed as “DA” because they appear as horizontal mirror images of the relevant symbol in the Tagalog script.

Out of 40 symbols in the inscription, the author’s initial attempt matched with 24 equivalents in Tolentino’s transcription, 25 in Francisco’s, and 22 in Potet’s.

The Bisayan transcription of the deciphered symbols, some provided with end-consonants and one with repeated syllable, and with the English translation of key words, is as follows:

NA-BU-KI-(KI) NA BA
Open, Already, Is it?

LA-BA MA NA LA DA-KI(T)
Gain, That’s It, Already, Nevertheless, *Dākit* Tree

NI-NU MA NIYA MA-N(G)GA
Mistook, That’s It, By Him/Her, Mango Tree

GA-KA(T)-KA(T) YA LA NGA-YA(N)
Crossed due to fear, He/She, Only, Is That So?

BA-YA HA DA-KI(T) NA NU
Leave, From, *Dakit* Tree, Already, Will You?

DA KA-LA(G) BI-NA-GA(T) ~
Shame/Intimidate/Bring Back, Soul, Encountered

A glossary of 26 possible Bisayan words that can be inferred from the deciphered inscription on the Calatagan Pot is found in Attachment “C”.

Process Findings

The Bisayan language and direction of the inscription on the Calatagan Pot were known right after deciphering the Group 1 symbols, tentatively transcribed as NA-BU-KA NA BA, which literally means “Open already, is it?” The opening was not only in words; it was also graphically illustrated by the actual break of the line from the circular arrangement of the symbols around the pot. This tentative transcription of the first line appeared in the *Inquirer* article (Borrinaga 2009, A16).

Later, the *kudlít* (notch) on top of Symbol 1-3 for “KA”, which indicates the vowel “T”, could no longer be ignored, and so the transcription was adjusted to become NA-BU-KI-(KI) NA BA. The meaning is still the same, although *bukíkí* is more figurative than the word *buká*.

The single-syllable adverbs that followed the verbs in other groups of symbols are decidedly Bisayan in tone and accent, the type that can still be heard from residents in the hinterlands of Samar Island, e.g., *mâ* instead of *man* in lowlands or coastal areas.

While trying to translate the transcription to English, the author found that the modern meanings of such archaic verbs as *labâ*, *ninû*, *katkat*, *dã* (for *dalá*), and *bagat* are not appropriate for their original context and would denigrate an otherwise serious message. So he looked for their old meanings mainly from the *Vocabulario de la Lengua Bisaya* by Jesuit Fr. Mateo Sanchez (1711). The results are found in Attachment “C”.

The identification of the word DA-KI(T), for the Bisayan *dākit* or the Tagalog *balete*, in Group 2 and Group 5, and the word KA-LA(G), for *kalág* or soul, in Group 6 established the ritual purpose of the pot.

Symbols 3-6 and 3-7 in Fig. 3, which look similar but were differently designated as “MA” and “NGA”, respectively, by Tolentino, present a special problem for the entire inscription. As simple graphics, much like the (text-supported) visual appearance of the Group 1 symbols, they could represent the outline of mounds, hills, trees, or even waves

of the sea. In a sense, the two symbols might have functioned as a blank that a *babaylan* (native priestess) could fill in with the specific nature-object believed to have confused the strayed soul during a ritual. In our presentation in Table 7, the two symbols were tentatively made to represent MA-N(G)GA, for *mangga* or a mango tree, but this could be any other nature-object.

If we grant that Tolentino was correct in his “MA” and “NGA” transcription of the two symbols, then the Bisayan word *mangad*, which meant “whatever thing or object, a little more or less” in an old dictionary (Sanchez 1711), could further bolster the assertion that these symbols indeed functioned as a blank for the *babaylan* to fill in. The provision of this blank in the inscription strongly suggests that these ritual pots were probably made in multiple quantities for a specific clientele and inscribed by pot-makers somewhere in the Bisayas region, and sold or bartered to *babaylans* in different parts of the country, including Calatagan.

Some Observations

It now appears that the Calatagan artifact was a ritual pot particularly used as native incense burner or oil or water container for the expensive and elaborate *pag-ulî* (return) ceremony of the pre-Hispanic Filipinos (Scott 1994, 88; Alcina 1668, Part I, Book 3, Ch. 14). This was presumably performed in front of a *dākit* (*balete* to the Tagalogs), a tree held sacred by the natives, to retrieve a soul believed to have just crossed over to the other realm, and to return this to its moribund earthly body.

Fr. Cantius J. Kobak, OFM, had published an extensively-documented paper that describes the Pre-Hispanic concept of divinity, spirit-world sacrifices, and rites and rituals among the Bisayans in the Philippines. He noted that, in lieu of the stone temples elsewhere, the ancient Filipinos had the *nunuk* or *dalakît*, *dākit* in this paper, which was the “Living Temple of the Bisayans: its roots in the underworld, its trunk in the world of [the] Bisayans, and the earth itself and its extensive branches reaching out to the heavens” (Kobak 2004, 452).

The Bisayan translation of the transcribed text from the Calatagan Pot Inscription, with its corresponding English translation, provides an actor’s guide for a live ritual drama as follows:

*Nabukîkî na ba?
Labâ mâ na lâ, dākit,
Ninû mâ niya mangga,
Gakatkat ‘ya lâ ngay-an,
Bayâ ha dākit na, nu?
Dā kalág binagat. ~*

Is it open already? [the gateway to the spirit underworld]
Take it as a gain now, nevertheless, *dākit* tree,

That he/she [strayed soul] mistook you for a mango tree,
 [He/She] just crossed [to your domain] out of fear alone, is that so?
 Leave the *dākit* tree now, will you?
 Shame/Intimidate/Bring [back] the soul that you [were told to] encounter. ~

The inscription outlines a three-stage monologue, presumably elaborated with body movements and dancing by a *babaylan* (native priestess) in a trance during the *pag-ulî* ritual. It is alternately addressed to the *humalagar* or ancestor-spirit that the *babaylan* had commissioned for the soul-retrieval operation (lines 1, 5 and 6) on the one hand and, on the other, to the spirit underworld represented by the *dākit* tree (lines 2, 3, and 4).

The same ritual pot was probably used also for ceremonies to retrieve victims of *bugkut*, disappeared persons believed to have been abducted by fairies who dwell in the *dākit*.

When the Spanish friars entered the socio-cultural scene of the early Filipinos in the sixteenth-century, they forcibly destroyed and burned in massive quantities the shrines, equipment and paraphernalia used by the *babaylans* in their mission areas, presumably including ritual pots like the Calatagan Pot among them. In his extensive report on the Jesuit missions published in 1604, Fr. Pedro Chirino mentioned about his success in burning the community shrines in the hamlets of the Pintados, i.e., Bisayans (Chirino 1604, in *B&R* Vol. 12, 268). By the time Jesuit Fr. Francisco Alcina wrote his manuscripts in 1668, the *babaylans* had been reduced to using *hunguts* (cleaned half-coconut shells) as native incense burners or oil or water containers for their rituals (Alcina 1668, Part I, Book 3, Ch. 14). The pots had disappeared, and most rituals were already conducted inside the houses and no longer in front of the *dākit* or in the fields.

The celebrated Filipino author, Nick Joaquin, had written a classic short story titled “The Summer Solstice,” which was adapted into a sex-spiced feature film titled *Tatarin* in 2001 (The Summer Solstice – Wikipedia). Set in the 1850s, the story tells about a ritual performed by women to invoke the gods or spirits to grant them the blessing of fertility by dancing around a *balete* tree that was a century old. With the inscription on the Calatagan Pot now deciphered, we already have a clear idea as to how this parallel ritual was actually performed by a *babaylan* using a similar pot.

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Attachment "A"

ANCIENT SAMAREÑO SYLLABIC WRITING

Syllabic writing as recorded by
writers who lived in Samar & Leyte

Sound Equivalent	ALCINA 1668 Palapag	EZGUERRA 1747 Carigara	DELGADO 1751 Guiuan
A	4 CP	P P	V
E-I		m F	m
O+U		3	3
B	O	O	O
C	F	I	I
D	G	G V	U
G	L	R	C
H	S	S	S
L	G	3	F
M	V	P	U
N	S	G	M
P	F	P	V
S	G	V	S
T	P	S	C
R	X		P
NGA	h		

1. Characters without punctuation, above or below them, are sounded with an a - for example:

O - BA S - LA
G - DA t - MA
L - GA ...etc...

2. Characters with a point placed ABOVE them, are sounded with an E or I - for example:

F - CI or CE L - GE or GI
G - DI or DE ...etc...

3. Characters with a point placed BELOW them, are sounded with an O or U - for example:

F - CO or CU L - GO or GU
G - DO or DU ...etc...

4. The pre-Hispanic Samareños, as a result, did not use vowel characters in their writing unless two vowels came together, or when the words began with a vowel. Nor did they use the consonants, whether intermediate or final, because when there were two consonants, except in the character NGA, whatever was not there was supplied by the one reading - for example:

S - SA (R) is supplied on L, D.
t - MA

5. Ancient Samareño pattern of writing was not from left to right and across the page; their lines went from top right vertically and then from bottom to top and so on until they finished on the left-hand side, where we begin.

SOURCE: HISTORIA...1668, Francisco Ignacio Alzina, Munoz Text, Pt. I, Bk. 3, chap. 2. FR. CANTY J. KOBAK, O.F.M.

Ancient Samareño Syllabic Writing, summarized by Fr. Cantius J. Kobak, OFM.

Attachment "B"

Fig. 5. The Philippine alphabet as written by Filipinos. Seventeenth-century variations traced from Santamaría or the documents listed in n. 21 p. 53, with "standard" López forms on the left.

A	Æ	ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ
B	Ω	o o o o o
K	Ɔ	z z z z z
D	Ɔ	z z z z z
G	Ɔ	z z z z z
H	Ɔ	z z z z z
I-E	Ɔ	z z z z z
L	Ɔ	z z z z z
M	Ɔ	z z z z z
N	Ɔ	z z z z z
NG	Ɔ	z z z z z
O-U	Ɔ	z z z z z
P	Ɔ	z z z z z
S	Ɔ	z z z z z
T	Ɔ	z z z z z
W	Ɔ	z z z z z
Y	Ɔ	z z z z z

Seventeenth-Century Tagalog Scripts, summarized by Dr. William Henry Scott (Source: Scott 1984, 60)

Attachment “C”**Glossary of Possible Bisayan Words Inferred from
the Deciphered Inscription on the Calatagan Pot**

Ba – *interj.*, be for sure! (Tramp 1995).

Bagat – to leave or to put to the encounter (Sanchez 1711).

Baya (ba.yâ) – to leave (Sanchez 1711).

Buka (bu.ká) – to open up.

Bukiki (bu.kî.kî) - to open a wrapping; to discover, to uncover a wound or another thing (Sanchez and Valeriano 1914); to search; to inquire; to scan; to investigate (Tramp 1995); to pry open.

Kalag (ka.lág) – soul.

Katkat – to upset; to cross out of fear or shame (Sanchez and Valeriano 1914).

Daka – *v.* (Samar dialect) to exaggerate (Tramp 1995)

Dala (da.lá) – shame, embarrassment, timidity (Sanchez 1711); to bring (Cebuano); *var.*, *dara*, to bring (Waray). In many Cebuano-speaking areas, the “l” is omitted in speech and the “a” sound is prolonged, thus this becomes *dã*.

Dalakit (da.la.kít) –Leyte-Samar Bisayan for the *balete* (*Ficus prasincarpa*), a tree believed to be the dwelling place of fairies and spirits (Tramp 1995; Alcina 1668). Also known as *nunuk* (Alcina 1668), and *dãkit* in Cebuano.

Ga – prefix to indicate present action.

Ha – a particle (small word) that usually means “of the”; tag end of imperative construction meaning O.K. (Tramp 1995).

Labá (la.bâ) – *n.* gain; an increase or an increment to what is sold or exchanged (Sanchez 1711).

La (lâ) – *adv.*, alone; just; merely; no more; only; nevertheless (Tramp 1995); only; alone (Sanchez 1711).

Ma (mâ) – in Eastern Samar, complementary expression, lit., “that’s it.” **Man** – equivalent of *mâ* in other Bisayan dialects; *adv.*, also (Sanchez 1711).

Manga: бага, daw (man.gâ) - a particle [similar in meaning to “as,” “like,” “seemingly”] (Sanchez 1711; Tramp 1995).

Mangad (ma.ngád) - whatever thing or object, this is a little thing, a little more or less (Sanchez 1711).

Mangga – mango (*Mangifera indica*) (Tramp 1995).

Na – prefix to indicate past or present tense of the verb it is attached to; already; now (as a single word).

Ngahaw – *adv.* again; however. *adj.* same; selfsame. *n.* self (Tramp 1995); *adv.* self same (Makabenta 1979).

Ngani (nga.nî) – an assertive particle (Sanchez 1711); actually, truly; expression of annoyance (Tramp 1995).

Ngay-an – *interj.*, is that so?! (Tramp 1995).

Nu – question attached to a statement; contraction of *Ano*; Bisayan expression equivalent in meaning to “isn’t it?” or “will you?”

Ninu (ni.nû) – genitive of without? Of the one who? (Sanchez 1711); designated, mistaken for.

Niya – his/her (pronoun in object position).

Ya – contraction of *hiya* (he/she or himself/herself), heard in many conversation situations.