

***SURAT SUG:***  
**JAWI TRADITION IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the coming of the Spaniards, scholars report the presence of a native Philippine script known as “Baybayin”. The word comes from an old Tagalog term from the root “baybay” meaning “spell”. According to Spanish accounts, the Tagalogs had already been writing in this script for at least a century. Among the Visayan, Baybayin was already evident in 1567 when Miguel Lopez de Legazpi reported that: “they (the Visayan) have their letter and characters like those of the Malays from whom they learned them”(Paul Morrow, *Baybayin-The Ancient Script of the Philippines*, p.1).

Early Spanish accounts called Baybayin “Tagalog Letters” or “Tagalog Writing”, while the Visayan called it “Moro Writing”. It was also called “Alibata”, a term coined by Paul Versoza and based on the Maguindanao (Moro) arrangement of letters of the alphabet after the Arabic “Alif, bah, tah” dropping the “f” for the sake of euphony (Morrow, p.3). This calls attention to the presence of writing among the people in the Philippines, not least the people of southern Mindanao long before Spanish colonization began.

“Alif, bah, tah” refers to the way Muslim pupils spell (maghijjah- to spell) out the Arabic letters in order to learn how to recognize them and pronounce the words. This is the initial stage in learning to read the Qur’an and is called paghijja (spelling). With reading comes writing although it cannot be generalized that all who learned to read the Qur’an also learned to write Arabic.

The presence of Arabic language was due to the coming of Islam to Southern Mindanao, which antedated the coming of Magellan in 1521, by more than a century. The establishment of the Sulu Sultanate in 1450 by Sharif Abubakar led to the institutionalization of education based on Arabic language, which was taught as part of religious education. Later, formal schools known as *madaris* were organized. However Arabic remained to be the ritual language for a native language, Bahasa Sug, preceded it.

## II. BAHASA SUG

In 1893, Andson Cowie wrote that the Sulu Language or Bahasa Sug was spoken by all the natives of Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, and by a considerable portion of the inhabitants of Maguindanao, Palawan, Balabac, Basilan, North Borneo, Darvel Bay and the adjacent islands extending southward as far as Cape Kanyongan, including the state of Balagan. He further noted that these places were at one time tributaries to the Sultan of Sulu (Cowie, 1893, p.1X). These areas represent the territorial boundary of the Sulu sultanate at the height of its power.

It goes without saying, that this territorial scope under the authority of the Sulu Sultanate required a form of communication, not only oral but also written, that would be understandable and accessible to all. While Arabic was the language of the Qur’an, it was not the lingua franca of the area. Rather Bahasa Sug or the Sulu language served this purpose. However, the Tausug language did not develop a script form; so the development of a script based on Arabic letters readily answered the communication need of the area and can be seen as a natural stage in the transformation of the oral to the written.

### III. SURAT SUG or Jawi

The adoption of Arabic script to indigenous language has already taken place among the Malays. In Indonesia this script was called Jawi a term which the Tausug (people of the Sulu archipelago) also adopted referring to Java (Jawi) as its origin. Dr Samuel Tan however has used the term Surat Sug to refer to this script while Americans writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century called it Sulu writing. In Maguindanao, a similar development also took place but here the script was called Kirim.

Cameron, an American colonial official, observed that the adoption of Arabic script for the use of the Tausug led to some modifications for two reasons: (C.R. Cameron, 1917:p.4-5).

1) Sulu contains sounds, both vowel and consonants; which are not provided for in the script adopted from the Arabic language. So far as the consonantal sounds are concerned, the lack has been supplied either by altering the power assigned to the Arabic consonants as in the case of *ghain* and *fa*, or by forming new consonants as in the case of *cha*, *nga* and *na* (p.4).

2) The Arabic alphabet contains 14 consonants representing sounds not found in pure Sulu and which the majority of Sulu are unable to pronounce correctly. These consonants are *tha*, *ha*, *kha*, *dhal*, *zai*, *shin*, *dad*, *ta*, *za*, *ain*, *ghain*, *fa*, and *kaf* (p. 5). See illustrations below.

Cowie pointed out another modification regarding the use of *baris* or signs to assist in distinguishing the vowels that the Malays left out (p. 1X-X). The *baris* refers to the vowel signs that are placed below or above the letters and corresponds to the Arabic signs for damma (dapan), fatha (hata'as), and kasrah (hababa').

Accordingly, the Sulu script developed a total of 20 letters and a total of 32 letters when combined with Arabic (see appendix for the Arabic equivalence).

#### SULU ALPHABETH

1. Hamza	8. Dal	15. Lam
2. Alif	9. Ra	16. Mim
3. Ba	10. Sin	17. Nun
4. Ka	11. Ga	18. Ha
5. Na	12. Nga	19. Wao
6. Jim	13. Pa	20. Ya
7. Cha	14. Kaf	

Vowels: Dapan	Hata'as	Hababa'
Damma fatha	kasrah	

#### SULU-ARABIC ALPHABETH

1. Hamza	12. Dhal	23. Nga
2. Alif	13. Ra	24. Pa (fa)
3. Ba	14. Zai	25. Kaf
4. Ha	15. Sin	26. Kaf
5. Tha	16. Shin	27. Lam
6. Na	17. Sad	28. Mim
7. Jim	18. Dad	29. Nun
8. Ha	19. Ta	30. Ha
9. Kah	20. Za	31. Wao
10. Cha	21. Ain	32. Ya
11. Dal	22. Ga (ghain)	

Vowels: Dapan	Hata'as	Hababa'
Damma	Fatha	Kasrah

Cameron concludes that these modifications were necessary due to the nature of the Sulu language itself and the inability of the Sulus to pronounce some of the Arabic sounds correctly. He further observed that during this period, the Sulu language was a rich mixture of many foreign languages including Arabic, Persian, Hindustani, Dutch, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Malay, Bisayan and Tagalog. The greater part was made up of Malay vocabulary that came with Islam. These have reference to days of the week, months, religious, governmental and many abstract terms, social titles, compliments, terms relating to writing and agriculture and in general those new words required by a people developing along commercial and agricultural lines (Cameron, 131),

Cameron further claimed that Sulu was much closer to Arabic orthography than Malay for two reasons. First, the adoption of the Arabic script for writing Sulu (or Bahasa Sug) is more recent and there has been less time for internal development and evolution; and second, writing has not been, in the past, a popular accomplishment. He further observed that writing was confined to a select body like the panditas, (religious scholars) who also read the Koran (Qur'an) and were more aware of the correct Arabic forms of the words and used these forms in writing (p. 134). Even Cowie noted in 1893, that writing was confined to the Sulu nobility who all wrote with a certain amount of facility (p. 1X-X). Cameron, however, suggested that a simplification of the Arabic spelling should be undertaken if the trend of popularizing writing among the common people was to persist. That the Tausug script or Jawi did not become popular and in fact declined after this observation was made will be discussed later.

Nevertheless, at this point in time, the American colonial government was making use of the Jawi that Cameron called the Sulu-Arabic script for various circulars and laws. Besides these, Jawi was used in at least three publications such as (p. 146):

1. Sulu Reader for the Public Schools of the Moro Province by Dr. N.M. Saleeby, published by the government of the Moro Province, Zamboanga, Philippine Island, 1905.
2. The Sulu News (Ing Kabaitabaitan Sug), a monthly newspaper in English and Sulu, published at Zamboanga by the government of the Moro Province, edited by Charles R. Cameron, Datu Raja Muda Mandi, and Sheik Mustapha Ahmad. This was published only during 1911.
3. Surat Habar Sug, a monthly newspaper published in Sulu only by the Sulu Press, Zamboanga and edited by Rev. R.T. McCutechen and Aukasa Sampang and had been published since July 1915.

Evidently, the Surat Sug was gaining a more public exposure since it became the medium through which the colonial government made its laws and policies known to the people. In addition, if the editorship of Surat Habar Sug is any indication, the script was also being used for proselytization.

#### IV. USES OF SURAT SUG

Dr Tan classified the many types of Surat Sug such as:

**A. Documents**, letters and other communications of the Sulu Sultanate such as:

Surat Kasultanan-refers to the Sultanate papers made up of correspondences, opinions, news and commentaries. Important Treaties and Agreements are often written both in Surat Sug or Jawi and in the language of the other party.

Surat Kadatuan pertains to documents, including letters of Royal and non-royal datu;  
Surat Kahadjian are documents and letters from religious leaders;

Surat Kabanuwahan are letters and other documents from local officials and customary leaders; Surat Kaginisam are various types of communications of miscellaneous content.

**B. Kitab (Arabic for book)** refers to writings that discuss religious topics. Dr Tan has collected and annotated eighth (8) kitabs written by different authors. These are Kitab Dammang, Jallaw, Naser, Asakil, Tiblani, Juaini and Ulao.

### 1. The content of these kitabs can be described as follows:

- a. Explanations/ discussions on religious matters like prayers, attributes of God, Qur'anic verses (tafsir), the soul, iman (faith), fear of God, Tawhid (Unity or Oneness of God), death, Day of Judgment, Jakat (zakat, religious tax);
- b. Discussion of the correct way to perform rituals for weddings, bathing or cleansing of the dead, Cleansing Day (Panulak Balah), ritual concerning the slaughter of animals;
- c. Dua- prayers or supplications in relation to fasting, purification (spiritual and physical) and Dua Tasbi;
- d. Dua Pagkausug- These are prayers or supplications for attaining invulnerability. This is for men only.
- e. Kutikaan or putikaan - This refers to fortune telling. Although regarded by religious scholars as unIslamic, fortune telling is well-known among the local people even today. This is usually resorted to predict the outcome of journeys, transactions and other endeavors to prevent loss or grave catastrophes.

### 2. Problems in accessing these kitabs

Some of the problems encountered by Dr Tan in accessing these kitabs are: some materials do not fully disclose the name of the author or the date. In some cases, the kitab was a copy from an original source but the name of the author is not given. Punctuation marks (or vowel signs) are also absent and makes it difficult to read the text. In addition, deep knowledge of the Tausug language (or the classical Tausug) is needed to fully understand the texts. Knowledge of the locality is also important, as there are some linguistic differences among the Tausug based on locations.

## V. DECLINE OF SURAT SUG IN SULU

It can be observed that in the early period of the American colonial period, attempts were made to incorporate Jawi script as part of official communications. Existing copies of documents, letters and other forms of communication show that all levels of society indeed utilized Jawi script.

In addition to the Jawi materials in Dr Tan's possession consisting of 300 pages of primary documents on Sulu history dating from the last decade of Spanish rule up to the Commonwealth in 1935 (Tan, 2004), Dr Karim Hedzaji, an American scholar, also has 200 Jawi documents in his possession. Half of these materials had to do with politics and historical events and the other half records of daily life. This only proves that the Jawi script was indeed a working medium of communication. Unfortunately, not all have been fully translated.

The decline of Jawi script began with the introduction of the American system of public education where English was used as the medium of communication and instruction. Slowly, English began to be the favored language for all types of communications, both oral and written.

Public schools were started in 1900 as per report of General Kobbe whose Annual Report stated that schools had been established in various parts of Mindanao including Jolo. He noted that

the pupils were eager to learn English and for this purpose American soldiers were detailed to these schools as English teachers (Gowing, 1977:63-64).

The acceptability of the public schools, particularly in Sulu, was attributed to the presence of the children of some datus who attended these schools. In 1919, the Director of the Public Education reported that “six of the highest ranking Mohammedan princesses of the Sultanate of Sulu were teaching in the public schools, one of them a niece of the Sultan.” (Gowing, 1977: 306). The observation was made that the “preparation and employment of these princesses had a positive effect in overcoming much of the prejudice against Government schools held by some Moros” (ibid, 303).

The Pensionado (Government Scholarship) program of the American colonial government also reinforced the participation of the Moro elites whose children were sent to local schools and even to America. For example, Princess Tarhata, niece of Sultan Jamalul Kiram II, was sent to study in the US and later graduated from the University of Illinois (Gowing, 303). The Tausug elites who participated in these programs quickly lost touch with their own cultural traditions including Jawi writing.

The abolition of the Sulu Sultanate in 1915 through the Carpenter’s Agreement further contributed to the decline of Surat Sug. The Agreement vested the administrative control of what once was the territory of the Sulu Sultanate completely in the hands of the American colonial government. The superimposition of American socio-political, economic, legal and educational institutions on the indigenous institutions of the people of Sulu can be traced to this period.

In addition, the attitude of the Colonial officials toward local culture left much to be desired. Leonard Wood, Governor-General of the Moro Province (1903-1906) had a strong imperial streak and “believed that English must become the lingua franca of the Moros and vigorously pushed the language in the school system.” He had a low regard for the native languages stating, (Gowing, 134)

*There is no object whatever in attempting to preserve the native dialects...as they are crude, devoid of literature and limited in range...The language ...is not believed to present any feature of value or interest other than a type of savage tongue.*

It is not surprising therefore to find English supplanting Surat Sug as the medium of communication in quick order.

The establishment of Public School education based on the western model became the primary means that the Americans hoped to transmit their values and their ways to the Moro society and the English language became its major vehicle. The colonial government’s patronage of the public school system means that the indigenous systems would suffer, more so since the American colonial government also viewed the madaris or pandita schools as “valueless from the standpoint of Government” (Gowing, 302).

True enough. By the time of independence in 1946, the madaris had suffered a serious setback because it was not able to compete with the secular educational system based on the English language, which became the basis for job opportunities, political positions, and social prestige.

Although the Madaris are experiencing a revival today, the preferred language and script is Arabic rather than the Jawi.

## VI. CONCLUSION: SCRIPT AND IDENTITY

The politics of identity calls into play the idea of culture of which language is a significant element. Among the Tausug (as with other Moro groups) identity is expressed in three intertwining elements composed of Hula (territory) Agama (religion) and Bangsa (nation or people). The popular medium of expressing these concepts however was the oral rather than script form. A large body of Tausug oral traditions, notably the Kissa Parang Sabil, celebrates in songs, the exploits of heroes who fought against the Spanish and American colonizers in defense of the three concepts mentioned.

In an ironic twist, today, the aspirations of the Bangsa Moro<sup>1</sup> struggle, which erupted in the 1970s, is being spoken of and written in English, the colonial language. As already discussed, this development is understandable in the light of the colonial enterprise that relegated Tausug culture including language (true to other Moro groups) as largely an unacceptable basis for organizing Tausug society. In its place, the colonizers put their own culture and language as the more valid basis on which civilization was to be crafted.

Although Jawi script has not been totally lost, there is no movement towards its revival as an expression of identity. Pilipino (the National language) and English have become entrenched as the preferred written and oral medium for communications. However, the transfer to Pilipino as the preferred language of identity has not taken place completely. This is because there is a continuing resistance among the Tausug masses to be counted as Filipinos due in part to the strong historical consciousness of their past as an independent state and to the perceived neglect from the national government. In spite of being granted regional autonomy since the signing of the Tripoli Agreement in 1976, to the specific provisions on autonomy in the 1987 Constitution, and the signing of the Final Peace Agreement in 1996, the general conditions of the Tausug and other Moro groups have not significantly improved.

Meanwhile, continuing Islamization has accented the use of Arabic not only as ritual language but also as a medium of communication. However, the infrastructure to support the learning of Arabic language is limited and the goal to produce a trilingual (Pilipino, English, Arabic) Bangsa Moro will not be easily achieved.

For the moment at least, the final arbiter of identity for the Tausug in terms of language remains to be the oral rather than the script form.

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<sup>1</sup> Bangsa Moro is the collective name for the Muslims in southern Philippines. It was introduced by the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) in the 70s and has entered the literature.

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## SULU ALPHABETH

1. Hamza	ء	8. Dal	ڊ	15. Lam	ل
2. Alif	ا	9. Ra	ر	16. Mim	م
3. Ba	ب	10. Sin	س	17. Nun	ن
4. Ka	ك	11. Ga	غ	18. Ha	ه
5. Na	پ	12. Nga	نڠ	19. Wao	و
6. Jim	ج	13. Pa	ڤ	20. Ya	ي
7. Cha	چ	14. Kaf	ق		
Vowels: Dapan	ء	Hata'as	ا	Hababa'	ا
Dammaa		fatha		kasrah	ا

## SULU-ARABIC ALPHABETH

1. Hamza	ء	12. Dhal	ذ	23. Nga	نڠ
2. Alif	ا	13. Ra	ر	24. Pa (fa)	ڤ
3. Ba	ب	14. Zai	ز	25. Kaf	ق
4. (Ha)Ta	ت	15. Sin	س	26. Kaf	ك
5. Tha	ث	16. Shin	ش	27. Lam	ل
6. Na	پ	17. Sad	ص	28. Mim	م
7. Jim	ج	18. Dad	ض	29. Nun	ن
8. Ha	ح	19. Ta	ط	30. Ha	ه
9. Kah	خ	20. Za	ظ	31. Wao	و
10. Cha	چ	21. Ain	ع	32. Ya	ي
11. Dal	ڊ	22. Ga (ghain)	غ		
Vowels: Dapan	ء	Hata'as	ا	Hababa'	ا
Damma		Fatha		Kasrah	ا