



Bamboo lime tubes, tobacco containers, and love letters inscribed in the Hanunóo script. Five of the inscribed articles shown, together with several hundred other bamboo "manuscripts," are now temporarily in the Anthropology Museum, University of California at Berkeley. (Photograph by H. A. Figueras)

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Bamboo Literacy on Mindoro

IN THE RUGGED MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHWESTERN MINDORO live the Hanunóo, one of the least known of the eighty-odd ethnic groups inhabiting the Philippine Islands. Isolated geographically, self-sufficient to an amazing degree, having contact with exceedingly few outsiders, and without formal schooling of any sort, these five to six thousand mountain folk have nevertheless distinguished themselves among Philippine pagans as *literate* tribesmen. During 1947 I had the opportunity of living with these interesting people and learning about their unique way of life and, especially, about their script.

Here, in use, I found one of those Philippine Islands scripts Professor A. L. Kroeber calls "...

the most remote descendants of the ancient Sanskrit alphabet." Except among one neighboring tribe, the Buid, and a few of the Central Tagbánuwá on Palawan Island, there are no other surviving Indic scripts in the Philippines today, and only among the Hanunóo does a high degree of literacy in this syllabic form of writing still prevail. At the time of Spanish discovery and occupation of the archipelago in the 16th century most of the advanced Filipinos, including the Tagalog, Bisaya, Iloko, Pangasinan, Pampanga, and Bikol lowlanders, were well acquainted with similar scripts, often writing on palm spathes with cuttlefish ink or inscribing the Indic characters on the shiny surface of bamboo with a sharp-pointed

piece of iron. Early Spanish chroniclers such as Morga (1609) often commented on the facility of both men and women in writing in this fashion. And the first book published in the Philippines, the *Doctrina Christiana* in 1593, was printed in Spanish and Tagalog, the latter both in Gothic letters and Tagalog (Indic) characters. During the following century, however, the Roman alphabet completely replaced the original script wherever Christianity became established. The Moros of Mindanao and southern Palawan, of course, had already begun to use Arabic letters even before the arrival of the Europeans. Thus, only in the remote interiors of a few islands, especially central Palawan and southern Mindoro, did certain pagan groups retain the ancient form of Indic writing until recent times.

Other peoples in Malaysia, such as the Batak and Lampong of Sumatra, Bugis and Makassar of southern Celebes, the Balinese, and the Javanese, have also retained forms of Indic scripts which spread into these areas and developed during the period between the early centuries of the Christian Era and the spread of Islam over most of the East Indies in the 15th century. Writing was most frequently inscribed on the light-colored leaves of the lontar palm (*Borassus flabelliformis*) or on sections of bamboo, although horn, other plant materials, and even copper plates were used occasionally. As time passed, paper came into more and more common use, and some of these scripts, under the Netherlands Indies government, were taught to the local populace in the elementary schools (as is still done in eastern Java, Bali, and southern Celebes). Originally, many of the more permanent writings in Indonesia were of religious, magical, or mythological import.

On Mindoro, however, I found that the Hanunóo possess no inscriptions of this sacred or semi-historic nature. But on the other hand, they have preserved their script in a much more indigenous manner—not yet having learned the use of paper nor having entered any classroom other than their jungle home. Before I describe their unique use of this ancient script it might be well to sketch the condition in which I found the Hanunóo in 1947, so that we may better comprehend what it has meant to these people to have been left out of the stream of Western and more advanced Philippine cultural influence for many centuries, in an area where the efforts of missionaries, soldiers, and teachers, so important throughout most of the

other islands in the archipelago, have rarely penetrated.

The mountainous terrain in which the Hanunóo live is largely covered by dense jungle and second growth forests of bamboo. In some areas, on more gradual slopes, extensive grazing fields of tough cogon grass have kept back the forest in parts previously burnt over for cultivation but now lying fallow. There are no roads and even the trails are rarely wide enough for more than single-file travel on foot. In certain sections near the coast either Philippine ponies or carabao may be employed, but in the interior even these means of transportation must be abandoned.

The Hanunóo favor promontories as sites for their many scattered communities, each of which consists of a group of five or six houses. There are no Christian settlements, schools, or government establishments within the area. Hanunóo houses are sturdy four-cornered structures raised several feet from the ground on wooden posts, roofed usually with cogon thatch, and floored with whole sections of bamboo which have been cracked and beaten flat like boards. Tree houses are frequently used as granaries. The size and character of Hanu-



Thatched hut built originally for the bone bundles of the dead and later occupied by the author during several months' residence in this Hanunóo community. Bamboo pole leaning against the doorway is the "ladder."



Detail of construction of Hanunoo bamboo house. The floor is of bamboo poles beaten flat. Cooking pot was made by the neighboring Buid. Their pottery is a major item of trade with the Hanunoo, who, in turn, supply the Buid with salt and other items from the coastal region.

nóo communities are largely determined by the nature of their inhabitants' upland cultivation of various food crops in vast "dibble fields" known throughout the Philippines as *kaingins*.

In these clearings, carefully fenced and guarded against pigs, monkeys, deer, and cattle, these mountain farmers raise a surprising number of food crops, the more important of which are rice, bananas, corn, sweet potatoes, taro, yams, and beans. Although their principal sustenance crops, by far, are bananas and rice, variety is not lacking. For example, of the former they cultivate more than *twenty-five* edible varieties ranging from the giant 12- to 14-inch cooking banana (*tindok*) to the sweet finger-sized *yakyakaw*. As each family group must clear, burn, fence, plant, guard, and harvest annually two or three of these frequently tremendous upland plots (sometimes covering upwards of 15 acres each), most of the men, women, and children find continual year-round employ-

ment in one activity or another related to the maintenance of productive *kaingins*. This is not to say that the Hanunoo are 100 per cent vegetarians nor that they ignore the many natural food products which their jungle habitat affords. Wild pigs, deer, and wild fowl are trapped or hunted with spear or bow and arrow. Streams furnish shrimps, fish, and crabs. Domestic Asiatic cattle (*Bos indicus*), pigs, and chickens are kept in most communities; and mushrooms, wild roots, berries, fruits, and bee honey supplement the food staples already mentioned. Beyond their immediate needs the Hanunoo usually manage to produce enough surplus crops to purchase, by trade with marginal Christians, the few luxuries and some necessities—



Grain storage hut built on the bole of a lopped tree, 10 or 12 feet above ground. Short bamboo pole slanting against doorway is the "ladder." For some reason the Hanunoo do not use the type of ladder we know.

such as scrap iron and needles—which must come from the outside world.

Hanunóo men fashion their own bolo blades, knives, spear points, and weapons, using a piston-bellows type of Malayan forge. The women, during the long evenings and by the light of pitch candles, card, spin, and weave their home-grown cotton into blankets and clothing. Even their main source of dye, indigo, is of their own cultivation. Baskets of more than fifteen distinct weaves are also the work of women, while the men excel in the carving and incising of tubular bamboo containers (usually for areca nut and other "betel" ingredients) and in the manufacture of bamboo zithers, and combs, scabbards, and other utensils from wood and coconut shell. Abacá and various bast fibers are twisted into strong ropes and cord, while human hair suffices for the strings of several types of musical instruments.

The Hanunóo lack a rigid clan or tribal organization and are actually without any central political figures such as chiefs or appointed head men; the basic social and economic unit is the local family group which respects as advisers its eldest male members, and consists usually of a man and his wife, or wives, their unmarried children, and the families of their married daughters. By the custom of matrilocality a man loses his own sons at the time of their marriage, but gains productive sons-in-law as his own daughters are espoused. The apparent lack of a powerful leader demonstrates well the Hanunóo passion for self-sufficiency and non-aggressive living. They tend to fear controls of any kind other than the adherence to customary law and tradition. They also fear conflict and are most unwarlike, retreating farther into the mountains rather than cause any disturbance of local peaceful conditions. During the recent war they had virtually no contact with either Japanese or American troops. When an occasional dog-fight took place over their territory they ran to the family burial caves for safety and to be near their ancestors. Their long arrows, almost always tipped with deadly poison, might suggest a more combative spirit, but actually these and other Hanunóo weapons are never used except in hunting forest game.

Some degree of social distinction may be gained by an individual who becomes a skilful blacksmith, a successful herder, or an expert basket weaver—but it is very slight. Perhaps the most respected members of Hanunóo society are the med-



Hanunóo man dressed for the panlúdan. He wears a white cotton loincloth and shirt, heavy necklaces of beads, coiled wire, and plaited fern stems, a red cloth headband, cotton ligatures below the knees, and numerous metal finger rings. His pouch of black fern stems and buri palm leaves contains the ingredients for betel chewing in bamboo tubes, as well as sundry personal items. The bolo is in constant use around home and in field or jungle.

icine men who are capable of chanting to the benign deities, the *dániw*, and compelling them to fight off the perpetual enemies of the Hanunóo, the invisible, superhuman *labáng*. Even such persons are hard to distinguish from the average Hanunóo farmer except while practicing their supernatural rites in the event of illness or crop failure. The only material possessions which are highly valued are the strings of small white and red trade beads used for religious offerings, as payment for the services of a shaman, and for personal adornment.

Most Hanunóo men present a very striking appearance, with their long, white, homespun loincloths and tight-fitting shirts of the same material.

bead pendant earrings, red head cloths, up to several pounds of neck beads, brass anklets and brilliant arm bands. The women dress in dark blue cotton skirts, breast bands of woven fern stems,



A young man combing his hair is a familiar sight. A man with short hair evokes expressions of disgust.

anklets, armlets, metal finger rings, about twice the poundage of neck beads commonly worn by a man, and occasionally a loose cotton blouse. Both sexes carry long bush knives in carved wooden scabbards at their waists, and smaller knives stuck in wide, all-purpose, woven, rattan pocket belts which also serve to protect the "mana-charged" bezoar stones one may be fortunate enough to own, which assure success in hunting, courting, and the like. Both sexes also file their teeth flat and chew certain ferns which coat the teeth with a shiny, black substance. Their lips are vermilion most of the time from the constant chewing of the *úpat-ka-patar-ári* ("four brothers": areca nut, tobacco leaf, betel pepper leaf, and slaked lime). In dress and personal habits the Hanunóo are most conservative. The men, for instance, do not cut their long, flowing hair, which they believe pro-

fects them from the heat and incidentally supplies the essential raw material for repairing broken guitar strings. Men frequently keep their hair done up in a bun, but cutting it is quite another matter. Once when I was traveling with a Hanunóo hunter we happened to meet another pagan on the trail who had cut his hair. Even though he was clad in a loin cloth and was obviously not a Christian, my companion later remarked disapprovingly, "*Damóong yi ngáni túnda pag táwo túnda, daót!*" (That fellow's already a lowlander; how disgusting!)

As indicated by some of the foregoing remarks, Hanunóo religious beliefs center around a fear of evil spirits who must be propitiated or repulsed through the services of a shaman, and by ancestor worship. The *kalág*, spirits of the dead, may, like the *labáng*, cause sickness and misfortune, should they be forgotten or neglected at certain feasts, dances, and rituals. The most important of these rites and also the biggest socio-religious event of the year is known as *panlúdan*. At this time, usually following the rice harvest, the bones of those relatives who have been dead and buried for at least a year are exhumed, attired in the most elegant of Hanunóo dress, placed in special houses, and offered special food daily. After a week of these preliminaries, hundreds of previously notified Hanunóo tribesmen gather in the huge dance pavilion erected specifically for this purpose, and for two or three days the sponsor must slaughter sufficient head of cattle and numerous pigs, pound rice, and cook to feed the hungry crowd until he has completely exhausted his own food supply. Although the main reason for holding the *panlúdan* is to please the spirits of the deceased (whose bone bundles are carefully weighed at the end of the ceremonies to determine whether or not they have been satisfied—if they have, it is believed that the bones will have become appreciably lighter and should then be placed with other bundles in the family burial cave), the occasion calls for great feasting, dancing, courting, singing, and merrymaking on the part of all visitors. The ceaseless serenading continues from dusk to dawn, the girls responding with songs and flute music or by playing on bamboo Jew's-harps. All the finery possessed by the young dandies and maidens—most of it especially prepared for the occasion—will be worn, and lovers will exchange token gifts such as fancy knife sheathes and finely woven utility baskets of palm leaves and rattan.

It is this highly stylized method of courting and serenading witnessed during a panludan which brings us back to the subject of bamboo literacy, since the popularity of both men and women dur-

formal instruction in the use of this script. There is not even a definite order, comparable to that of our alphabet, for memorizing the forty-eight basic and derived characters. We may get some idea,



LEFT: A Hanunóo farmer. He has just put down a heavy load—note marks of a shoulder strap across his chest. RIGHT: Hanunóo man showing the usual method of doing up the hair, and a common style of pendant earring. Lower necklace is author's dog-tag chain!

ing these get-togethers is largely determined by the number of traditional love songs they are capable of singing and their ability to fit every occasion with a suitable chant. To collect and learn a large number of these chants it is most essential that one be able to read. In other words, the incentive to learn the use of their ancient syllabary does not stem from a desire merely to preserve the old form of writing so much as it does from the interest taken by young people of both sexes in building up a repertoire of as many of the traditional love songs as possible.

Some Hanunóo communities in the central area are more than 60 per cent literate! This includes women as well as men. In one family I lived with for several months, all of the adults except one were literate. And yet there is a surprising lack of

however, of the procedure for learning how to read and write among the Hanunóo from the following typical example:

A young lad has begun to take a serious interest in the girls of several neighboring communities. Thus, following custom, he also spends considerable time with those of his older male relatives who are good singers, trying always to pick up additional verses which may be of use in serenading. On hearing his uncle sing a long and particularly pleasing song, he asks him to write down the words on a lime tube made from an internode of bamboo. His uncle obligingly unsheathes his small knife and with the sharp point inscribes the entire song, syllable by syllable, on the hard, shiny surface of the bamboo, holding one end of the tube close to his body, writing in the direction away

RIGHT: Left-handed Hanunóo man writing on bamboo in "mirror script." Plaited fern stem arm bands hold sweet-smelling herbs to add to his charms during the *panlúdan*. His bracelets are open copper rings.

BELOW: Young Hanunóo man in everyday dress, showing the normal, right-handed use of the small belt-knife to incise the syllabic script on a section of a bamboo tube. The typical pocket-belt is visible above his loin cloth. His squat is common among native Filipinos.



from himself in columns which follow to the right. (In other words, we can say that the script proceeds from bottom to top and from left to right.) While the boy's uncle is finishing the inscription he explains that each character stands for only one syllable. Then, while repeating the song aloud, they both go over the writing carefully, following with a finger each of the incised marks. The boy then does this by himself, becoming more and more familiar with the different character elements and checking with his uncle when in doubt. Since a lime tube is an indispensable personal item and is always carried in one's shoulder pouch, the boy is able to review the characters contained in this song every time he prepares a chew of betel. After a few days he has learned them perfectly and begins to practice writing by copying the same inscription on the back of his bamboo self-bow, gradually developing the proper technique of inscribing each of the characters with his own knife. Soon he returns to his elders for criticism, other songs, and additional characters. In this way, and partly because of the amazing simplicity of

