

# Evolution of the Filipino alphabet

Before using the current alphabet that has 28 letters, the Philippines had 4 sets of letters since the pre-colonial times

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MANILA, Philippines – Like many nations colonized by westerners, the Philippines eventually adopted the Latin alphabet for its national language, Filipino.

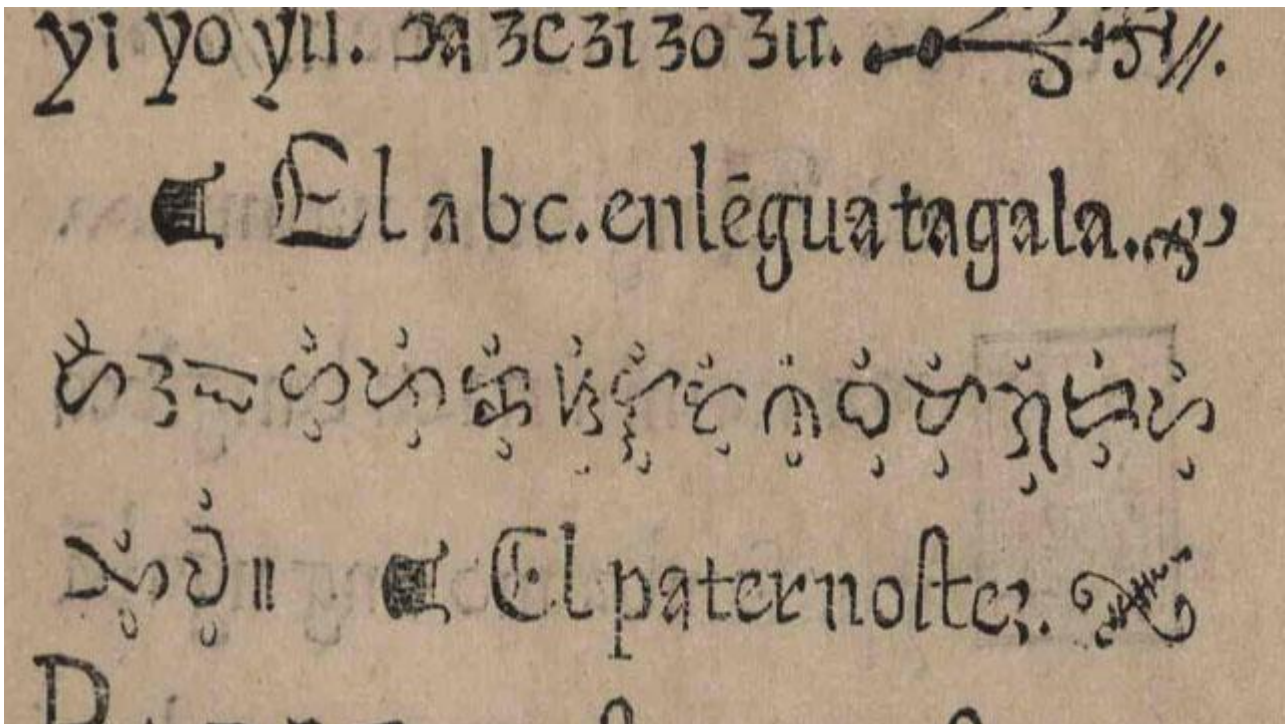
Currently, the Filipino alphabet has 28 letters:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, Ñ, NG O, P ,Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z

Before today, the number of letters in the Filipino alphabet varied, given that we first had the pre-Hispanic *baybayin*, then 400 years of using the Latin alphabet, and with many regional languages influencing the way Filipinos write.

On National Language Month, Rappler traces the development of the Filipino alphabet.

Pre-colonial to early colonial period: *Baybayin*



NATIVE SCRIPT. "The ABC's in the Tagalog Language" outlining the baybayin script as used by early colonial-period Tagalogs. From the Doctrina Christiana. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Early in the pre-colonial period, the ancient peoples of the Philippines did not have any writing system, and so they relied on oral tradition in recording folklore and folk history.

Sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, writing systems derived from the Indian-influenced cultures of Indonesia and Malaysia came to the islands, leading to the emergence of native writing systems called *baybayin*, primarily used by certain inhabitants of Luzon and the Visayas.

*Baybayin* is an alpha-syllabic script, meaning certain characters in *baybayin* can stand for either a single consonant or vowel, while some characters stand for an entire syllable.

According to Antonio de Morga's *Events in the Philippine Islands* (1609), and the *Doctrina Christiana*, a catechism and one of the first books ever printed in the Philippines (1593), *baybayin* had 3 alphabet characters representing vowels (A, E/I, and O/U), while there were 14 characters representing syllables that begin with the consonants (B, C/K, D/R, G, H, L, M, N, NG, P, S, T, W, and Y).

## Vocales.

ⓐ      ⓑ      ⓓ

a,      e, i,      o, u,

## Las consonantes.

ⓐ   ⓑ   ⓓ   ⓔ   ⓕ   ⓖ   ⓗ   ⓘ   ⓙ   ⓚ

ba, ca, da ra, ga, n̄ga, ha, la, ma, na,

ⓛ   ⓜ   ⓝ   ⓞ   ⓟ

pa fa, sa, ta, va, ya.

BAYBAYIN BASICS. The basics of baybayin script as used by Tagalogs, according to Fr. De San Agustin's "Compendio Del Arte De La Lengua Tagala" (1703), outlining the 3 vowels and 14 syllabic consonant characters.

In the Tagalog version of *baybayin*, syllabic characters in themselves consist of a consonant followed by the vowel A (i.e. ba, ca, da/ra). In order to change the vowel of the syllable, a mark – called a *kudlit* – is added. Adding a kudlit above syllabic character changes the vowel sound from A to E/I."

be, que, de re, gue, n̄ge, he, le, me, ne,

ⓐ   ⓑ   ⓓ   ⓔ   ⓕ   ⓖ   ⓗ   ⓘ   ⓙ   ⓚ

bi, ki, di ri, gui, n̄gi, hi, li, mi, ni,

pe fe, se, te, ve, ye.

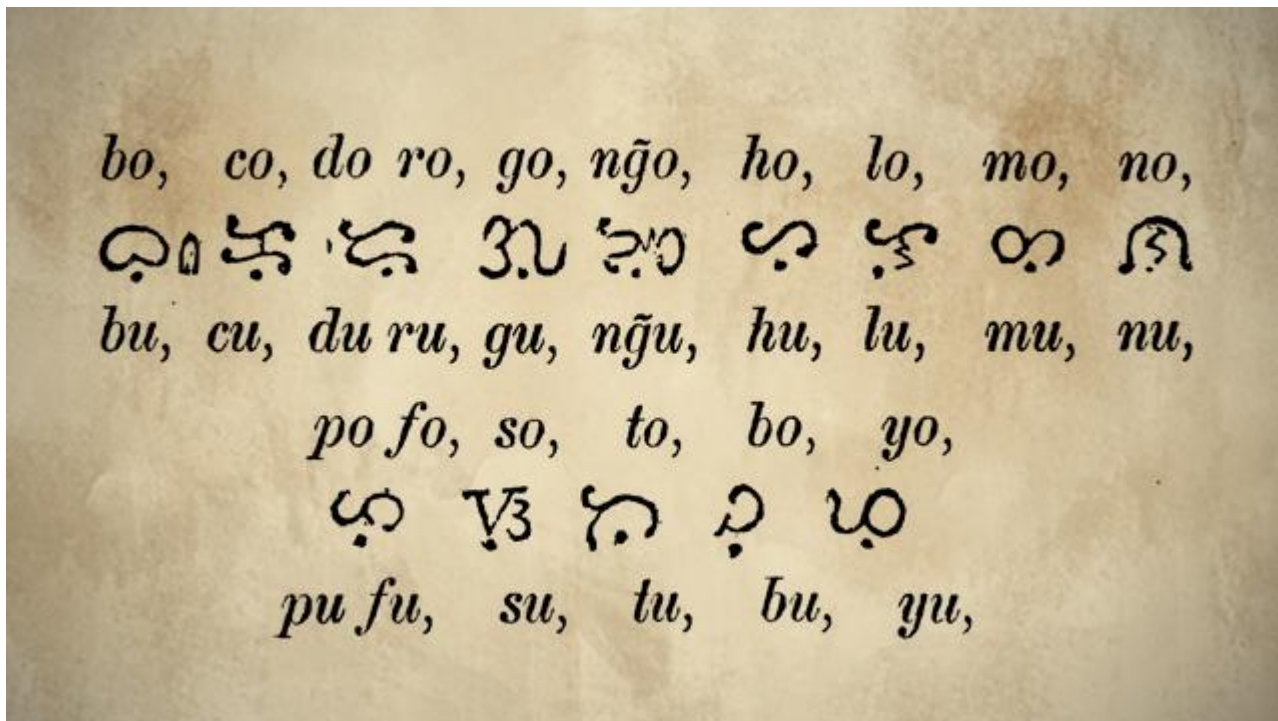
ⓛ   ⓜ   ⓝ   ⓞ   ⓟ

pi fi, si, ti, vi, yi.



Placing a kudlit above a syllabic character configures the syllable to represent a consonant+vowel "e/i" sound. From Fr. De San Agustin's "Compendio del Arte De La Lengua Tagala."

Placing a *kudlit* below a syllabic character modifies the vowel to an O/U sound.



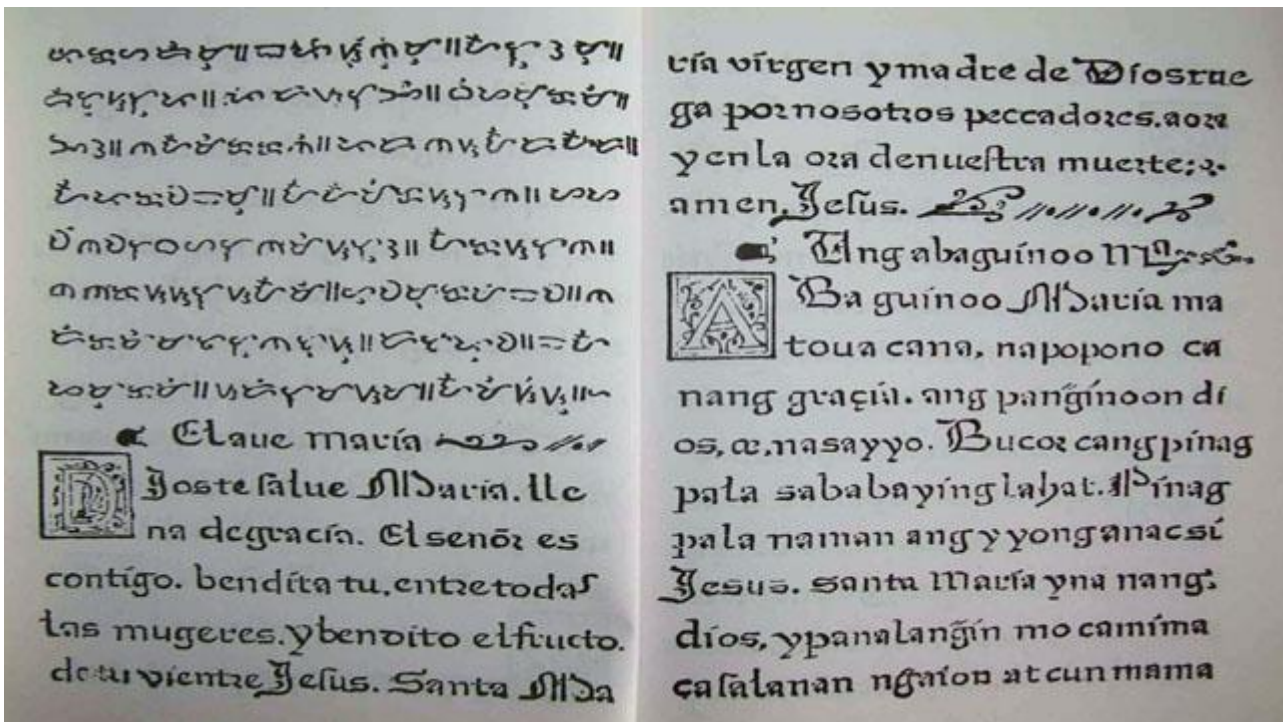
Placing a kudlit below a syllabic character configures the syllable to represent a consonant+vowel "o/u" sound. From Fr. De San Agustin's "Compendio del Arte De La Lengua Tagala."

The extent to which early Filipinos were literate in the native script varied from region to region over the span of the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During Magellan's arrival in the Visayas in 1521, his chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta, noted that the Visayans were illiterate. The natives were amazed when he wrote down some of their words and repeated it to them. On the other hand, in the 1600's, Morga stated that the natives of Luzon and its surrounding Islands wrote excellently in the native script and that there were only very few who did not write it well.

Contrary to Morga's statement, however, American historian William Henry Scott found records in which even lordly *Datus* (chieftains), when asked to sign land titles, did not know how to write.

Spanish period: *Abecedario*



BILINGUAL EDUCATION. A copy of the *Doctrina Christiana*. Tagalog baybayin words occupy the upper left page while below it is the "Hail Mary" prayer in Spanish followed by its Tagalog translation, both in the Latin alphabet. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

With colonization under Spain came the Latin alphabet and the decline and eventual disuse of *baybayin*. Spanish missionaries, who served as the first teachers in the islands, taught converted Filipinos Catholicism, the Latin alphabet, and the Spanish language.

An evidence of this was the *Doctrina Christiana*, which was published in Tagalog and Spanish. The book outlines the basic beliefs of Christianity and Christian prayers in the Spanish using the Latin alphabet first, then translated into Tagalog in both *baybayin* and in the Latin alphabet.

The *Doctrina* does not begin with prayers but with a short instruction in the Latin alphabet, a syllabary, and its counterparts in the Tagalog *baybayin* script. The alphabet, as it appears in the *Doctrina*, consist of the following:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, IJ, L, M, N, O, P, Q, RR, S, T, U, V, X, Y, and Z

RR appeared in Spanish words like *barricada* (barricade).

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, colonized Filipinos followed the Spanish alphabet and its developments. Eventually, the number of letters in the alphabet used in the islands, called the *abecedario*, reached 32 letters:

Letter	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>CH</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
(Spanish) Pronunciation	<i>Ah</i>	<i>Be</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>Che/Se-hache</i>	<i>De</i>	<i>Eh</i>	<i>Efe</i>	<i>Ge/He</i>
Letter	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>LL</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>
Pronunciation	<i>Hache</i>	<i>Ih</i>	<i>Jota</i>	<i>Ka</i>	<i>Ele</i>	<i>Elye</i>	<i>Eme</i>	<i>Ene</i>
Letter	<b>Ñ</b>	<b>ÑG</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Q</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>RR</b>	<b>S</b>
Pronunciation	<i>Enye</i>	<i>Enye-ge</i>	<i>Oh</i>	<i>Pe</i>	<i>Cu</i>	<i>Ere</i>	<i>Er-re</i>	<i>Ese</i>
Letter	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>	
Pronunciation	<i>Te</i>	<i>Uh</i>	<i>Ve/Uve</i>	<i>Uve-Doble/Wa</i>	<i>ekis</i>	<i>I griega/Ye</i>	<i>Zeta</i>	

"LL" stood for an "elye" sound for Spanish words, like *caballo* (horse) or *relleno* (stuffed), while ÑG represented an "enye-ge" sound, found in names like *Zuñga*.

Today, the *abecedario* letters CH, LL, and RR are still used in the alphabet of the Chavacano language, a heavily Spanish-based *creole* (mixed Spanish/Native) language commonly spoken in Zamboanga City in Mindanao and some parts of Cavite City in Luzon.

**American to the Commonwealth eras: *Abakada***

The end of Spanish rule and the arrival of the American style public education in the Philippines introduced Filipinos to the English language and to its the 26-letter alphabet. Despite this, the *abecedario* remained in use by Philippine languages, as many words still used Spanish letters.

However, the use of *abecedario* was threatened by both the English-based education and Philippine nationalism. In 1937, following the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth, the government ordered for the adoption of a national language based on Tagalog, and for the preparation of a dictionary and a grammar book for the national language.

In 1939, Lope K. Santos developed *Ang Balarila ng Wikang Pambansa* (The Grammar of the National Language). Apart from rules on grammar, it contained the alphabet for the national language – the *abakada*, named after its first 3 letters. Following the advice of past scholars, Santos retained only one letter to represent a significant sound in the Tagalog language – since C, Q, and K often made the same sound in Tagalog, only one of was retained.

The resulting product of this logic reduced the 32 letter *abecedario* into 20 letters. Furthermore, the letters were to be read in an *abakada* manner as opposed to the English or Spanish pronunciation of the letters.

Letter	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>
Abakada Pronunciation	<i>Ah</i>	<i>Ba</i>	<i>Ka</i>	<i>Da</i>	<i>Eh</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ha</i>	<i>Ih</i>	<i>La</i>	<i>Ma</i>
Letter	<b>N</b>	<b>NG</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>Y</b>
Abakada Pronunciation	<i>Na</i>	<i>Nga</i>	<i>Oh</i>	<i>Pa</i>	<i>Ra</i>	<i>Sa</i>	<i>Ta</i>	<i>Uh</i>	<i>Wa</i>	<i>Ya</i>

### 1970's: Revised *abakada*

*Abakada* remained the national language's alphabet from 1940 to 1976. In that period, questions were raised about the validity of Tagalog as basis of the national language, as majority of Filipinos spoke other native Philippine languages, causing a debate in the definition of the national language.

The 1973 Constitution issued a new definition of the national language, renaming it as Filipino and stating that it is a language in the process of development. Based on this definition, a revision of the Filipino alphabet was needed, as *abakada* was a Tagalog alphabet.

This change in the alphabet followed the 1976 Filipino Orthography Reform approved by the Institute of the National Language. Under Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) memorandum order 194, 11 letters made a comeback in the revised Filipino alphabet – C, CH, F, J, LL, Ñ, Q, RR, V, X, and Z – reflecting the other Filipino languages that still used those letters.

With the 11 letters included, the 1976 alphabet became similar to the old *abecedario* with its 31 letters:

A, B, C, CH, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, LL, M, N, NG, Ñ, O, P, Q, R, RR, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z

However, the revised Filipino alphabet drew criticism due to the addition of more unnecessary letters.

## 1987: Present Filipino alphabet

The current 28 letter Filipino alphabet was established following the signing of the 1987 Constitution.

The new Constitution redefined the Philippine's national language and ordered for a commission to be established to conduct researches for its development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino and other native local language. This led to creation of the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (Commission of the Filipino Language).

Following the constitutional mandate of developing Filipino with the other non-Tagalog native languages in mind, the commission undertook a study on reforming yet again the Filipino alphabet and spelling rules of Filipino to reflect the alphabets and spelling methods of other Philippine languages.

In addition, the study factored in the Filipino-English Bilingual Education Policy in the Philippines.

The revisions were published in DECS Order No. 81 s, 1987, also known as "Alphabet and Spelling Guide of the Philippine Language."

In the DECS Order, the new alphabet retained the 20 letters of the *abakada*; retained the letters C, F, J, Ñ, Q, V, X, Z on account that these letters are commonly used in many regional languages; and removed the letters CH, LL, and RR. Furthermore, the letters are to be read in English as opposed to *abakada* pronunciation, in accordance with the Bilingual Education policy. – **Rappler.com**

*Sources: Blair and Robertson: The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898, Volume XXXIII, 1519-1522, Doctrina Christiana, Calderon: Dating Pilipinas, Antonio De Morga: Sucesos De Los Islas Filipinas, Bright, William: A Matter of Typology, Alphasyllabaries and Abugidas, Barrios: Austronesian Elements in Philippine Creole Spanish, National Commission for Culture and Arts: Balanghay: The Filipino Language, NCCA: Orthography (Evolution), Yap: A Look @ Global Filipino Orthography, Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino: Kasaysayan, DECS Order No. 81 s, 1987, Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino: Manwal sa Masinop ng Pagsulat. Chavacano de Zamboanga, Sawyer: Inhabitants of the Philippines, Gomez: Evolution of the Native Tagalog Alphabet, Fr. De San Agustin, Compendio Del Arte De La Lengua Tagala, Filipino Cultural Heritage in the UST Archives: Baybayin Script in 17th Century Land Deeds.*

Ref.: <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/66819-evolution-filipino-alphabet>

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