

THE LAST LANGUAGE ON EARTH

*Linguistic Utopianism
in the Philippines*

PIERS KELLY



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DISCLAIMER

This book brings together a diversity of views and interpretations. For this reason, it cannot, by itself, serve as evidence in support or opposition to applications for rights or recognition under Philippine law. I defer to the authority and expert testimony of Eskaya people and their chosen representatives in all legal matters.

It is nonetheless my sincere desire that this book serve to demonstrate the significance, longevity, and continuity of Eskayan cultural expressions. I hope, especially, that it will be of practical benefit to the Eskaya community and to all who are interested in understanding more about this important aspect of Bohol's heritage.

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MAPS

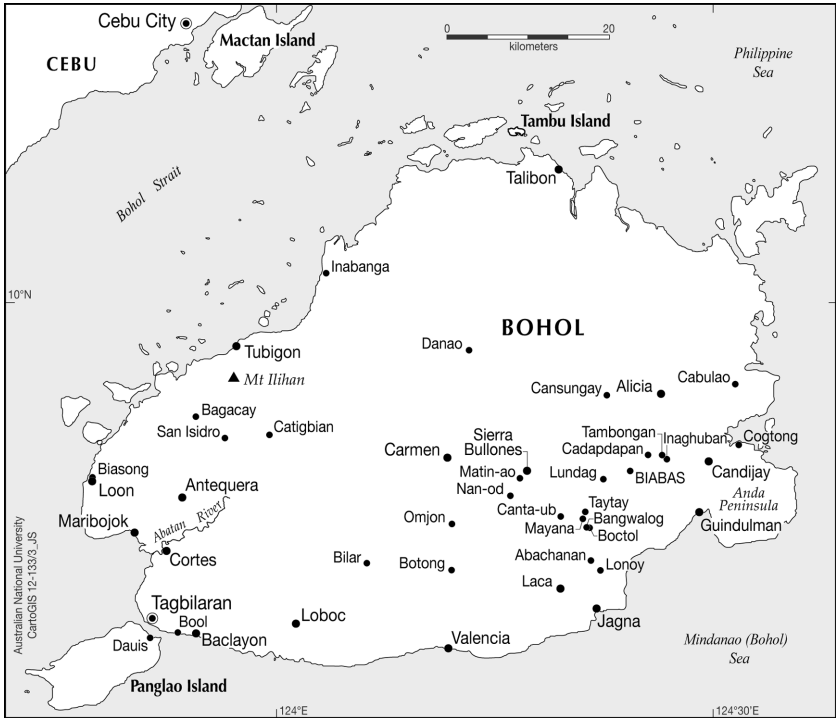
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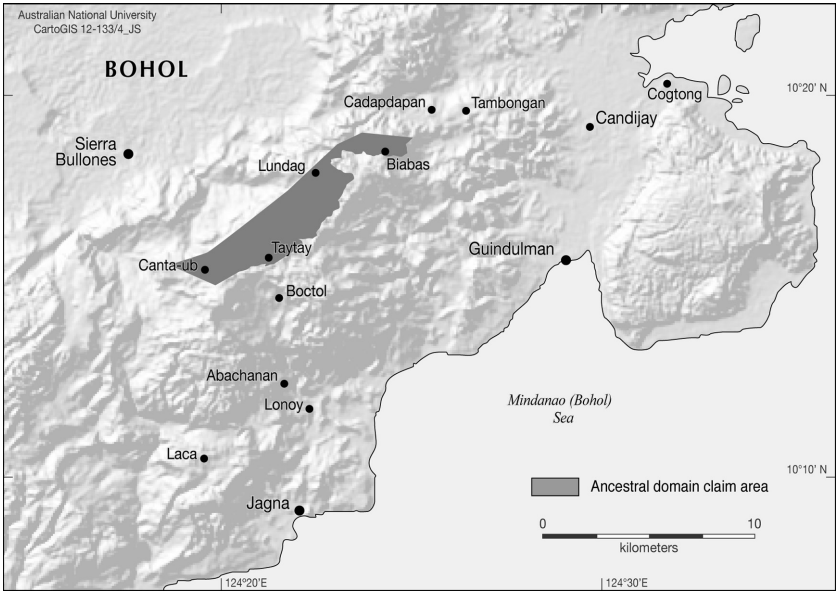
MAP 1. Regions where Visayan is spoken as a home language (dark gray) and as a second language (pale gray)



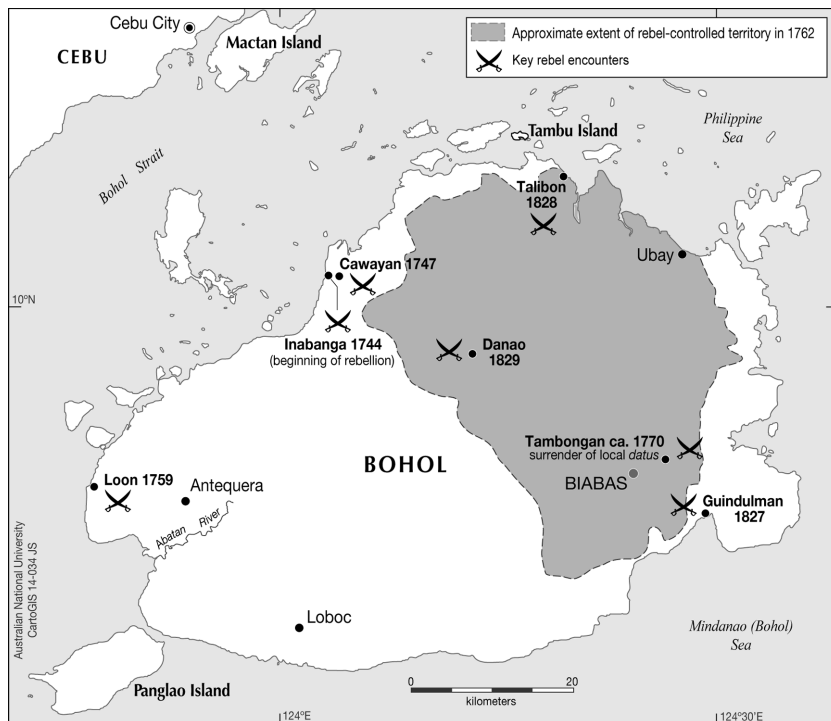
MAP 2. The dialects of Visayan



MAP 3. Map of Bohol indicating places mentioned in this book



MAP 4. Borders of the Ancestral Domain Claim area



MAP 5. The Dagohoy rebellion

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My interest in Eskayan began long before I knew anything substantial about either linguistics or the history of Bohol. From that time numerous people have enlarged my understanding of both.

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All translations of Spanish and Visayan sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated. With few modifications, almost all glosses and definitions of Visayan words have come from John U. Wolff’s monumental dictionary of 1972. Wherever Eskayan lexemes clearly occupy the same semantic space as their Visayan counterparts, the definitions are modeled on Wolff’s.

In the course of writing this book, earlier and less complete versions of my research were published elsewhere. This work is cited in the text and reused with permission. I am thankful to all those who have given feedback on this material in the intervening years. Lastly, I want to thank Alessandro Duranti for his brilliant guidance, and Meredith Keffer for maintaining a steady editorial hand through some of the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ABBREVIATIONS

AV	actor voice
DEM	demonstrative
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
DMN	demonymic
EXCL	exclusive
F	feminine
GEN	genitive
INCL	inclusive
lit.	literal
LK	linker
LOC	locative
M	masculine
MED	medial
NEG	negative
NSPC	nonspecific marker
OSCC	Office for Southern Cultural Communities
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
PV	patient voice
Q	question particle/marker
RE	realis
<i>RPC</i>	<i>Report of the Philippine Commission</i>
SBJ	subject
SG	singular
Sp.	Spanish
SPEC	specific marker
syn.	synonym
Tag.	Tagalog
Vis.	Visayan

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Visayan or Bisaya' or Cebuano

The term 'Visayan' is used as a generic label to denote the totality of mutually intelligible dialects of the central Visayan region (Map 2), of which Cebuano is the prestige variety. This is a conventional English counterpart to the word *Bisaya'*, which carries the same meaning. 'Boholano-Visayan' denotes the varieties spoken on Bohol, while 'East Boholano-Visayan' specifies the eastern dialect spoken in the field site. Differences among all Visayan varieties are slight, to the extent that linguists do not typically distinguish them at all and tend to use 'Cebuano' as the generic term for the language as a whole. However, speakers (particularly those outside Cebu) readily identify certain marked differences in lexicon and accent as representative of geographically circumscribed lects.

Eskaya or Eskayan

Throughout this book I have used the terms 'Eskaya,' for the people, and 'Eskayan' for the language. An appropriate comparison would be the conventional use of 'Maya' for people, and 'Mayan' for language in Mesoamerican studies. Occasionally I employ both words as modifiers: e.g., 'Eskayan classes' or 'Eskaya fiestas.'

These terms are not intended to be prescriptive. In reference to Eskayan, I often use the word 'language' to mean 'language and script,' as Eskaya people make no categorical distinction between the two.

Bisaya', Bisayan Diklaradu, or Bisaya'-Eskaya

In Biabas, the original settlement of the Eskaya, the people once referred to themselves and to their language as *Bisaya'* or *Bisayan Diklaradu* ('declared Visayan'). Recently, this term has begun to fall into disuse in favor of *Eskaya*

or the compromise term *Bisaya'-Eskaya*. At the time of my research, the Eskaya community of Cadapdapan, made up of migrants from Biabas and their descendants, had not accepted the labels *Eskaya* or *Bisaya'-Eskaya* and continued to refer to themselves as either *Bisayan Diklaradu* or just *Bisaya'*. In Cadapdapan, the Eskayan language was simply called *Bisaya'*, a term that most Boholanos apply exclusively to the Visayan language spoken throughout Bohol and its adjacent islands. This can be a source of confusion to outsiders, but by convention the Bisayan Diklaradu of Cadapdapan differentiate Visayan as 'Cebuano.'

Other conventions

For clarity, all romanized Eskayan words in this book are rendered in bold, while Visayan and Spanish glosses are in italics and English glosses are in quotation marks. In Part II I adopt a convention of using 'Pinay' to specify the creator of the Eskayan language and 'Anoy' to designate the putative author of Eskayan traditional literature. Pinay is the name Eskaya people give to the ancestral originator of their language, and Anoy is the affectionate name for the Eskaya patriarch Mariano Datahan, derived from the last two syllables of his first name. Both 'Pinay' and 'Anoy' are here applied as narrative constructs to avoid imposing concrete claims of origin and authorship. Lastly, even though the primary medium of Eskayan communication is writing, I refer to those who use the language as 'speakers' who form a 'speech community.'

PROLOGUE

When the isolated Eskaya people of the Philippines first entered into the media spotlight, their sudden presence on the national stage provoked wonder and debate. As observers came up with conflicting accounts of the hitherto unidentified group, the precise details of the earliest encounters with the public were lost. This is what I heard.

In 1980 a team from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food made a visit to the province of Bohol, a large and impoverished island in the south of the archipelago. Over the previous decade the conjugal dictators Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos had presided over increasing year-on-year surpluses in rice production, and now a burgeoning population, and a restive rural poor, made continual growth a matter of urgency. The agricultural advisors had an ambitious mission: to discourage slash-and-burn swidden agriculture in the highlands, open up wild areas to cultivation, and convince local farmers of the benefits of the so-named Green Revolution. When used correctly, they explained, pesticides, fertilizers, and new high-yield rice cultivars would increase their harvests significantly.

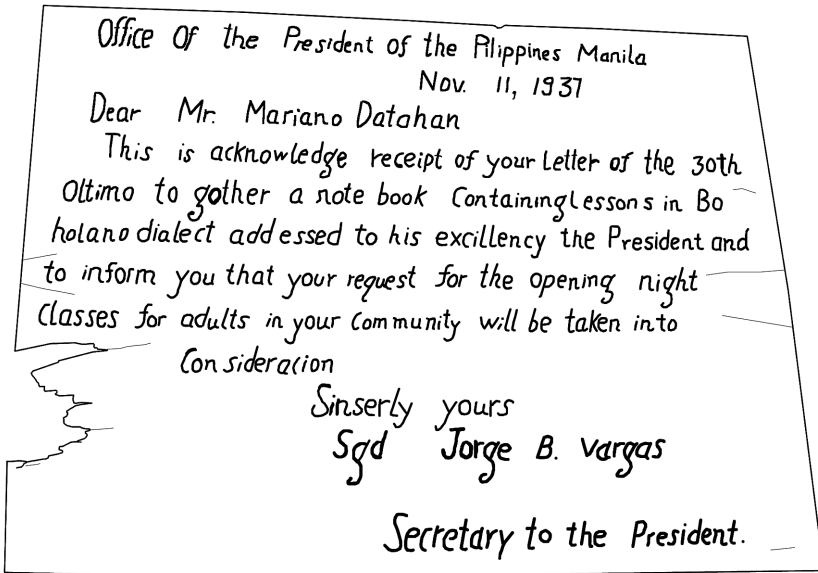
Moving from village to village, the officials delivered lectures, handed out freebies, and inspected equipment. Ascending at last to the southeast uplands, they enjoyed views across the sea to neighboring islands, and inland to a surreal interior of enormous conical mounds known as the Chocolate Hills. The majestic view belied a violent history. It was in this part of the island that the anti-colonial rebel Francisco Dagohoy and his descendants had maintained an eighty-five-year rebellion, taking advantage of the sheer hillsides, jungle canopy, and deep limestone caves to oppose Spanish rule until their defeat in 1829. The same strategic landscape protected Filipino guerrillas opposing the Japanese military in World War II, and by the 1970s it became a favored redoubt for communist insurgents. This was a landscape of resistance.

The men from Manila eventually scaled a steep and slippery mountain track that led to one of the highest, and coldest, locations on the island. With the mountain mist now mostly beneath them, they arrived at the crown of a broad

ridge and looked down into a large depression that resembled the crater of an overgrown volcano. Perched around its circumference were dozens of bamboo and cinder block dwellings that were barely visible amid the greenery but whose presence was betrayed by the smoke from cooking fires. As they descended into the village, the impression of untamed wilderness resolved itself into order and cultivation. Well-swept paths traversed neat vegetable gardens that were interspersed with patches of pink anthurium flowers. There was a granary with a galvanized iron roof, and a large bore drew water into a brick reservoir. Unaccustomed to visitors, the villagers regarded the men with cautious curiosity. But the newcomers were just as intrigued by the strange appearance of the mountain people. Their raffia shirts and blouses were cut in an archaic style, and some wore unusual headdresses: the women's were similar to the habits of Catholic nuns, while the men wore pleated cloth caps that bulged to one side like berets. More surprises were in store. When the advisors began to introduce themselves and explain the purpose of their visit they were puzzled to discover that their hosts also spoke another language that was utterly unrecognizable. Yet these were not the illiterate highland natives they had learned about in their high school primers. A well-constructed two-story building stood in the center of the village where tribal scribes, men and women alike, maintained a vast library of native literature written in a florid and indecipherable writing system. Here, apparently, were epic narratives, long predating the arrival of Spanish colonizers, carefully preserved and recopied into hand-bound and beautifully illustrated codices.

The specific circumstances of this interaction are not recorded, but this is more or less the account that reached people living in the main township of Bohol, and that was passed on to me many years later. In another version, reported by a local journalist at around the time of this encounter, it was the mountain people themselves who decided to venture out of the wilderness. Under previous regimes, he claimed, they had lived as virtual outlaws, rejecting any integration with lowland Filipinos. It was only when they heard reports of the utopian "New Society" promoted by President Marcos that they were emboldened to make formal contact.

Whatever the case, news of a "lost tribe" who called themselves the "Eskaya" spread rapidly. In the short term, contact with the lowlands precipitated a flurry of speculation, fueled by tabloid stories that exoticized the group as the living ancestors of a surviving precolonial Philippine civilization. Their language was puzzled over, resulting in conflicting hypotheses: it was an ancient indigenous tongue; it was the result of a distant migration from long ago; it was a recent innovation. Eskaya voices were either ventriloquized in support of local agendas, or they were erased from the discussion altogether.



Office Of the President of the Philippines Manila
 Nov. 11, 1937
 Dear Mr. Mariano Datahan
 This is acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 30th
 Ottimo to gather a note book containing lessons in Bo
 holano dialect addressed to his excellency the President and
 to inform you that your request for the opening night
 classes for adults in your community will be taken into
 Consideration
 Sincerely yours
 Sgd Jorge B. Vargas
 Secretary to the President.

FIGURE P.1. Carved text in English with transliteration.

Known as Taytay, the picturesque settlement that was “discovered” by the agricultural advisors was not quite as isolated or timeless as it first seemed. In fact, its inhabitants were to point out that it had existed for a mere thirty years, having been established as a satellite colony of an older village called Biabas that stood further downhill on the same ridgeline, below the mist. Later visitors noticed that the tribal lifestyle on full display in Taytay persisted in a more muted form in Biabas even if many of its inhabitants could still speak, read, and write in the Eskayan language. A small team from the National Museum of the Philippines made a whistle-stop tour to Biabas, but their recorded observations were never disseminated. Yet in both villages there was written evidence that the Eskaya people had not, in fact, cloistered themselves from the outside world but had made an effort to be recognized at the highest level of government. In the center of each settlement a series of inscribed boards gave testimony of a 1937 correspondence with the president of the Philippines. Etched on rare molave timber, the first of these large tablets (Fig. P.1) was a transcription of a formal response from Manila, acknowledging receipt of “a notebook containing lessons in Boholano dialect addressed to his Excellency the President.” It remains on display to this day. By its side are a series of carved translations into both the regional Visayan language (Fig. P.2) and the mysterious “Boholano dialect,” (Figs. P.3–4) a language that is now known as Eskayan (*P. 187 A.*) and that is the subject of this book.

Ofisina Sa Presidente Sa Pilipinas Manila
 Novembre 11, 1937
 Minahal Cong Señor Datahan
 Kini Osa ka ilhanan Sa pag Ca matuod Sa imong Sulat
 Sa 30 Ultimo, ug inobandan sa osa ca note book nga mga
 lecion Sa niletocang Binolanon, destino Sa eyang Ca mahalan
 Ang presidente ug naga^{engon} Canimo Sa imong hangyo
 Sa pag abre ug clase Sa gabi-i Sa mga tigulang
 Sa imong Barrio adunay cosideracion

 Canimo daghang Salamat
 Jorge B. Vargas
 Secretario Sa Presidente

FIGURE P.2. Carved text in Visayan.

O B C A P D u C h e t P 8 F 8 A n g n i
 O V ! B e P P P H

 K A A G i C o h A A A
 h p O P t l o A A n n P z e t g h O O o P l O
 d z P 7 c O l t u d e l O V A A n n P O P t
 O V O f i n g i n g P c l e P h F O t O M A P O u
 h o t O V P l e a t g h A l A t D e C h e t u A h A
 l u o t h o P l O A e l o P z e A w J d V G P
 A O l P g e i n h o o g e P l O A l A O l A s
 C C h i C e

 t h o A A P q g e
 P e B A p e
 C J Q l P D e C h e t u

FIGURE P.3. Carved text in the Eskaya script.

Where might this Eskayan writing have originated? Although Spanish chroniclers described and often reproduced scripts from many parts of the Philippines, there is nothing that points to the prior existence of an indigenous writing system on Bohol. Curiously too, the form of the Eskayan script, with its elegant loops

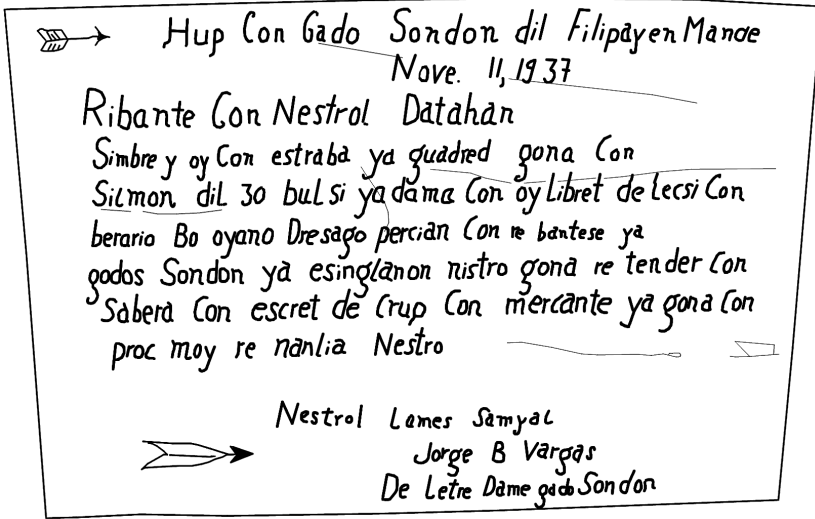


FIGURE P.4. Carved text in romanized Eskayan ('Boholano dialect').

and ornamentations, bears a closer resemblance to Roman copperplate handwriting than it does to the compact Indic scripts of island Southeast Asia.

Beyond questions of the script and its genealogy, the Eskayan *language* is deeply puzzling in its own right. Of the varieties of Visayan spoken today on Bohol, none can be said to show even the remotest relationship with "Boholano dialect" as romanized in the translation above (Fig P.4). A closer inspection raises troubling questions. There appears to be a virtual word-for-word relationship between the Visayan and Eskayan texts while many of the Eskayan lexemes are highly atypical for the region. Words like *proc* and *crup*, for example, display consonant sequences that are rare in languages of the Philippines, while others such as *con*, *nestrol*, and *berario* are strongly reminiscent of Spanish. That the English word 'office' has been translated as *hup* rather than an expected loan such as *ufisina* or *ufis* is intriguing, but the fact that the long-established place name 'Manila' is rendered as *Mande* is entirely remarkable.

Eskayan is still used for limited purposes by around 550 people in Biabas and a cluster of small villages that radiate from it in southeast Bohol. For four decades, discussion of Eskayan has reeled between characterizations of the language as a hoax or crude fabrication of marginal sociological interest, to equally reductive

accounts that romanticize it as a lost sacred tongue of exotic origin. While these commentaries have brought to the fore folk-linguistic assumptions about the essential nature of language, and its intrinsic power to constitute and circumscribe communities and histories, they have tended to overlook the Eskayan language itself, not to mention those who speak it, as a valid source of historical knowledge.

I was first introduced to Eskaya people in late 2005 when I began a ten-month internship at a service center of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in Bohol, sponsored by the Australian government. Two earlier studies (Bedford 2004; Orcullo 2004) had underscored the indigeneity of the Eskaya through ethnographic descriptions of distinctive cultural practices, including the intergenerational transmission of native literature, but had dealt with the Eskayan language and script in only a cursory way, a fact readily admitted by their authors. My task, therefore, would be to evaluate Eskayan as a language, and to locate its speakers within the broader ethnolinguistic context of the Philippines.

Before I accepted the position several linguists advised me to be skeptical of the outlandish claims that Eskaya people were said to be making about themselves and that due to the avowed secrecy of the community I should make contingency plans if fieldwork were to prove impossible. I was also to learn that the National Museum of the Philippines had raised serious questions about an ongoing Eskaya petition for legal recognition under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) and had brought its concerns to the attention of the national government. In fact, not long after I had settled into the NCIP office in Tagbilaran, rival interest groups claimed exclusive stewardship of the project, each presenting me with contrary demands on my role as a linguistic adjudicator. This state of affairs, I would learn, was merely the backwash from a low-intensity conflict that had been seething for some time. When I consulted archived newspaper and magazine reports I learned that the controversies I was now confronting could be traced all the way back to those earliest encounters when local commentators first presented divergent accounts of the language and its speakers.

After acclimatizing at the NCIP office in Tagbilaran I began regular fieldwork in the two principle Eskaya villages of Biabas and Taytay. The Eskaya, it transpired, were neither hostile to my presence nor particularly concerned with my opinion of them. Far from the clandestine agendas and rash claims I'd been led to expect, I witnessed from Eskaya people a modesty about their culture and history, and a genuine intellectual pleasure in their language, a pleasure that I would soon experience for myself.

Wedge between competing interests in the lowlands and benign indifference in the highlands, I felt the need to emphasize my neutrality and focus as much as possible on quantifiable data. Thus, my internship resulted in two deliberately dry

government reports comprising a review of existing commentaries on Eskayan and a test of prior claims about the language's origin and type through a basic lexicostatistical analysis.

This work did little to assuage my curiosity, and a few years later I had the opportunity to make more in-depth investigations, returning to southeast Bohol over the dry months of 2009 to 2011. I attended the Eskayan language schools, first as an observer and later as a student, where I was instructed by teachers in rough shirts of pineapple leaf fiber and embroidered berets. On some days, village life bewildered me with its serene strangeness. At other times I was struck by its globalized homogeneity as the one-hour morning ration of electricity brought every dormant television and karaoke machine to life at once.

Released from the constraints of government report writing, I resolved to produce a thick linguistic description of the Eskayan language and its script. Decoding the Eskaya puzzle became a real obsession, and I have no doubt that there would have been more forgiving languages on which to cut my teeth as a linguist. I was doubtful that such a complete set of social and linguistic facts could be so audaciously manufactured yet also thrilled by that same possibility. Over my several visits to the field site, which now extended further downhill into the village of Cadapdapan, I began to believe that the single most interesting aspect of the language was not so much its material and analyzable form but its extraordinary history, a history that nevertheless resounded throughout its grammar, lexicon, and literature.

I soon realized that, whatever its origins, Eskayan could hardly be dismissed as a naive fabrication. In Eskaya manuscripts meanings are doubly encrypted under layers of opaque script and rare combinations of sounds. A single syllable might have multiple symbols to represent it, while other symbols stand for sounds that are never used in the language at all. Eskayan vocabulary is riddled with false friends, or words that seem to mean one thing but stand for something else entirely. And after mapping the maze of diversions and blind trails the would-be interpreter of traditional texts is sometimes left with phrases that are fragmentary and often nonsensical even to the most competent Eskayan speakers and teachers. Adding to the mystery, the lexicon encodes glosses for archaic Visayan words whose meanings cannot be recalled by any in living memory, or that were last recorded in nineteenth-century Spanish wordlists.

In the course of my field research I was frequently asked by people in Bohol's capital if I considered the Eskayan language to be "real." Understood literally, the question can have no satisfying answer: Eskayan is self-evidently spoken and written by a community of people who live in the southeast interior of the island, even though I continue to encounter Boholanos who still doubt this. But I came to understand that, like minoritized languages elsewhere, it is not so much the

existence of the language that is questioned but its *right* to exist, a right that is almost always contested in historical terms. In response, Eskaya people regularly invoked history as a means of defending and authenticating their linguistic subjecthood. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Eskaya are themselves self-confident local historians, producing and reproducing a lively body of hand-written historiography. Language and writing surface throughout these texts as palpable historical entities, capable of transforming reality but also subject to inexorable forces of change. In short it is history, as much as language, that has come to delineate the primary site of cultural validation and contestation.

Contrary to the three origin stories offered by outsiders—that the language is indigenous, displaced, or recently invented—Eskaya people told me that their language was the inspired creation of the heroic ancestor Pinay in the year 600 CE. Taking the human body for inspiration, Pinay fashioned a unique and distinctly Boholano tongue for his people. At first known simply as *Bisaya'*, Pinay's creation is believed to antedate the imposter language of the same name that would later come to dominate the island, all but destroying Bohol's true linguistic legacy. Pinay's authentic *Bisaya'*, sometimes differentiated as *Bisayan Declarado* (meaning 'declared' or 'stated' Visayan), was encapsulated in a script, allowing it to be carved onto tablets and stored for posterity. Thus it was that a veteran rebel soldier by the name of Mariano 'Anoy' Datahan (ca. 1875–1949) was able to retrieve Pinay's suppressed language and breathe new life into it among his followers in Biabas.

It is clear, then, that all these contemporary narratives of the origins of Eskayan are not categorically distinct but turn on competing beliefs about the nature of indigeneity, of creation versus fabrication, of what 'language' means, and of the degree of agency that a community is permitted to exert within and over its cultural heritage. Yet if Eskayan really was, as certain media pundits were later to claim, evidence of a fossilized indigenous community that had withstood the ravages of successive colonial occupations, this hypothesis deserves serious scrutiny. After all, an ancient or precolonial origin for Eskayan is still compatible with positions taken by its speakers, even if the language was, in the traditional account, artificially created by an ancestral individual. In this scenario, Eskayan might sit in the same category as Damin, an engineered Australian register once used by initiated men on Mornington Island and attributed to an ingenious ancestor. Alternatively, Pinay's supposed creativity might serve as a vivid just-so story accounting for the presence of a distinctive minority language in an area of relative linguistic homogeneity. Consider too that natural languages with well-established lineages have also been associated with creative ancestors. The Yuki language of California was said to have been devised by a wandering creator, while Shiva and his son taught Tamil language and writing to the sage Agastya.

In Abrahamic traditions, God left it up Adam, the first man, to coin words for all living things. Evidently then, origin myths that credit ancestral individuals with original linguistic knowledge cannot, by themselves, corroborate the true ancestry of a language.

This book is the result of my search for the identity of Pinay, however conceived, and of the rich linguistic legacy that he or she brought to an unmapped corner of the southern Philippines. It is a complicated account, marked by controversy and lingering uncertainty. But in an age when it has become a journalistic cliché that a language is lost every two weeks, and with it a unique understanding of the world, the birth and continued survival of Eskayan is a life-affirming event, dramatizing raw human ingenuity amid relentless linguistic decline.

