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Epigraphical evidence for the cult of Mahāpratisarā in the Philippines

Roderick Orlina

1. Introduction

The systematic uprooting of local religious practices by various Catholic ecclesiastical orders from the 16th century right up to the end of Spanish rule has left little, if any, tangible evidence of their existence in Christianized areas of the Philippines. As a result, many historians, both local and foreign, have remained content with the idea that the Filipinos were either animist prior to contact with Catholicism and Islam, or at most experienced limited influence from neighboring ‘Indianized’ civilizations.¹ It is only in the past two decades that this view has come to be reevaluated, due to the discovery of the Laguna Copperplate Inscription of the year 822 Śaka (900 CE), acquired by the National Museum of the Philippines in 1990. Composed in Old Malay,² it contains a number of toponyms specific to the area, as well as titles, names, and concepts of Sanskrit origin.³ Not only did the find push back Philippine

¹ One oft-quoted researcher wrote in the 1960s, “In the Philippines there are some who still expect to find, in a dense, dark Philippine jungle, a Hindu temple or a Buddhist stūpa. To them sound history speaks sobering words about centuries spent on the outer rims of two mighty and successive Indonesian empires” (Rausa-Gomez 1967: 63).

² I believe that the assertion, common in some Filipino circles, that the Laguna Copperplate Inscription contains a mixture comprising not only elements of Old Malay and Old Javanese, but also of Old Tagalog, is due more to chauvinistic than to scholarly reasons, being based among other things on the failure to take into consideration vocabulary that is still present in Bornean or Sumatran dialects of Malay.

³ See Postma 1991, 1992 for detailed discussion of the find.

history more than six hundred years, it also forced scholars to acknowledge the existence of a system of governance based on an Indic model that existed locally around the turn of the 10th century.⁴

At about the same time that the Laguna copperplate was unearthed, another inscription, this one on gold sheet, was found in the town of Esperanza, about 33 km south of Butuan, Agusan del Sur in northeastern Mindanao. The text was recently identified as a variant of a mantra contained in the *Mahāpratisarāmahāvidyārājñī*, a Buddhist scripture devoted to the protective goddess Mahāpratisarā about whom the reader will find more details in the accompanying paper by Crujisen, Griffiths & Klokke. This paper will focus on the content of the Agusan gold sheet inscription, the function of the artefact itself, and situate it in its context of archaeological finds relevant to the presence of Buddhism in the ancient Philippines.⁵

2. Content and function

Soon after the publicity surrounding the Laguna Copperplate Inscription, a small gold inscription was brought to Ramon N. Villegas, a well-known jeweler and collector who has written extensively about gold found in the Philippines.⁶ He immediately saw the significance of the find since he had previously been offered the Laguna inscription before it was bought by the National Museum.⁷

⁴ After learning of the discovery of artefacts from the Philippines written in Kawi script, the influential historian of Southeast Asia O.W. Wolters (1999: 17) challenged earlier assumptions by admitting that “one still knows very little of the early history of the Philippines, but one should not conclude that these islands remained on the fringe of early Southeast Asia.”

⁵ I am grateful to Ramon N. Villegas and Antoon Postma, who have been very supportive of my research over the years. I also thank Arlo Griffiths, whose expertise in Sanskrit was indispensable to the decipherment of the inscription under study here. Thanks also to Gergely Hidas, Paul Copp, and Shanker Thapa for sharing their knowledge of the Mahāpratisarā cult.

⁶ See Villegas 1983, 2004, and Capistrano-Baker (ed.) 2011 for surveys of Philippine archaeological gold.

⁷ In 1976, two inscriptions surfaced, allegedly inside coffin burials.

After he purchased it in 1991, he asked Antoon Postma, the resident Dutch (now Filipino) missionary scholar responsible for deciphering the Laguna Copperplate Inscription, to try to decipher it. Being unable to make progress with the inscription, Postma brought a drawing made by Mr. Villegas to a conference also attended by the Dutch epigraphist J.G. de Casparis, who identified it as a Sanskrit protective mantra (Patanñe 1996: 116).⁸ In the intervening years, no further work was done on the inscription until July 2010, when a successful attempt was made at deciphering the text in collaboration with Dutch Sanskritist Arlo Griffiths.

The text, comprising three lines on each side of the sheet, is composed in Later Kawi Script of the 10th–11th centuries,⁹ and is in a slightly more cursive style pointing to a later date of script than that of the Laguna Copperplate Inscription. Unlike the case of the copperplate, the *akṣaras* were here incised, rather than chiseled, on a thin 14K gold sheet measuring 1.85 × 10.05 cm. Script on the recto side fills up most of the available space (fig. 1), while the verso has a vertical line to create a right margin (fig. 2). The right edge is pointed in the form of a triangle rather than rectangular as on the left edge. The sheet seems to have been rolled up from the rectangular edge to the pointed one, as evidenced by scratches on the left side of the recto. For this and other reasons, I assume that the artefact was originally manufactured as an amulet. It was found in the vicinity of Esperanza, with the remains from a coffin-less primary burial, the skull of which was crowned with a diadem and

One, of a tin alloy and now kept in the National Museum in Manila, although unreadable, was deemed by Indonesian epigrapher Boechari to date from the 12th–15th centuries (see Peralta 1979: 32). Unfortunately, the pothunter who made the discovery refused to sell the other inscription and no pictures were taken of it. In 1990, an ivory seal-matrix surfaced bearing the name of Butuan (*butvan*), in script of a type closely related to East Javanese Kawi and datable to the 10th–11th centuries. This object is now also kept in the National Museum.

⁸ Note Tagalog *mantala*, ‘spells’ (Noceda & San Lucar 1860: 200).

⁹ See de Casparis 1975: 38–46 for a discussion of this stage of palaeographic development which he assigns to the period 925–1250 CE.

orifices of the face covered with cut gold sheet.¹⁰

Text

- Recto (1) // °om̐ °amṛtavare vara vara pravārabhisuddhe hūṃ
 (2) hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ rakṣa rakṣa °añai nāma sarīrara-
 (3) [kṣā]ñ kuru sāntiñ kuru svāhā // °om̐ °amṛtav(i)lo-
- Verso (1) kini garbhasamrakṣaṇi °ākarsa-
 (2) ni °āyusṣpālani hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ
 (3) phaṭ rakṣa rakṣa si °añai nāma¹¹

Translation

Om̐. O Excellent Nectar *vara vara* O Purest One *hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ*, protect protect the one named Añai, protect (his) body, provide peace (for him), *svāhā*. *Om̐.* O One with Nectar-eyes, O Protector of the Foetus, O One who Attracts, the Giver of Long Life, *hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ*, protect protect the one named (*si*) Añai!

The Agusan Mahāpratisarā amulet departs from the text contained in the *Mahāpratisarāmahāvidyārājñī* in two ways.

First, as regards spelling, three words show the apparent merger of *v* with *b* and *ś* with *s*: *viśuddhe*, *śarīra* and *śānti*.¹² Both phe-

¹⁰ At that time, Mr. Villegas was not aware that the inscription was found with a specific mask, so the latter was not acquired by him.

¹¹ Cf. the text of the two mantras transmitted in South Asian manuscripts:

om̐ amṛtavare vara vara pravāraviśuddhe hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ svāhā / om̐ amṛtavi lokini garbhasamrakṣaṇi ākarṣaṇi hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ svāhā /
 See also §2 in the accompanying article by Crujisen, Griffiths & Klokke. My translation below is based on a translation of the *Mahāpratisarāmahāvidyārājñī* in Hidas 2012: 228.

¹² These spelling features are also found in the Laguna Copperplate Inscription. See Postma 1991: 5.

nomena are also seen in the development of Malay loanwords from Sanskrit: e.g. *vaṃśa*, spelt locally as *vaṅśa* [*wangśa*] > *baṅsa* [*bangsa*]. The inscription also shows merger of *ṅ* with *n* in *saṃrakṣaṇi ākarṣaṇi*.

Second, the mantra has been adapted for the protection of a specific person. We know that Angai (spelled *aṅai*) can only be a name since its second occurrence is preceded by the personal article *si*.¹³ The meaning of *angay* in Manobo (the most populous non-Muslim tribal group of the Agusan River Valley), as well as in Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray and Bikolano is ‘suitable, fitting, appropriate.’ In any case, since it was listed in the *Catálogo alfabético de apellidos* [*Alphabetical catalog of Surnames*]¹⁴ as a possible surname to choose under the Spanish Government’s Decree of Nov. 21, 1849, the apparent existence to the present of the name ‘Angay’ as a family name in the Agusan region and elsewhere in the Philippines strongly suggests a local person.¹⁵

In addition, the word *āyuspālani*, ‘giver of long life,’ was appended before the second sequence of magical syllables on the verso along with the following two invocations to petition the goddess for protection:

*rakṣa rakṣa °aṅai nāma sarīrara[kṣā]ṅ kuru sāntiṅ kuru
rakṣa rakṣa si °aṅai nāma*

Protect protect the one named Aṅai, protect (his) body, provide peace (for him), protect protect the one named (*si*) Aṅai!

The bracketed [*kṣā*] is inferred from the sequence,¹⁶ though the ligature representing *kṣā* is illegible/invisible to the naked eye, since this portion of the leftmost part of the recto is the only part with

¹³ The personal article *si* is common in Philippine and other Austronesian languages.

¹⁴ See Clavería 1973: 6.

¹⁵ For a discussion on Philippine onomastics, see Gealogo 2009.

¹⁶ The word *rakṣāṅ* is a sandhi-form for underlying *rakṣām* (accusative singular of the noun *rakṣā*, ‘protection’), and comes before *sānti* in similar sequences in the *Mahāpratisarāvidyāvidhi* (Hidas 2010). This makes sense taking into consideration the protective nature of this amulet.

scratches from an unknown instrument, presumably the one used to unroll it. The adaptations, both in phonological terms as well as in content, suggest that the mantras were not simply copied down from an identical exemplar, but were written down on behalf of a local person, or for self-use, by someone who was knowledgeable to some extent in Sanskrit grammar. Although there is no way to prove this, the scribe may well have been a Buddhist monk (*bhikṣu*).

In view of the high volume of gold that was mined in the past, as well as the archaeological attestation of gold crucibles found in Butuan,¹⁷ it is possible that gold was the prestige material for such amulets. Gold was also an ideal material for the visualization of deities. Paul Copp, writing on the use of Buddhist amulets in China, suggests a scriptural basis for the use of gold for *dhāraṇīs*, citing Bodhiruci's Chinese translation of the *Amoghapāśadhāraṇīsūtra*:

In the midst of imagining the visual form of the Buddha Mahāvairocana, one is to perceive (*guan* 观) above the deity's heart (a standard site for the visualization of the discs) a 'great moon disc, brilliant and utterly pure. At its round edge are arrayed a hundred shimmering syllables (*zi* 字) of burning gold, each moving along [the edge of the disc]. This spinning wheel of syllables then becomes the site of more elaborate perceptions/imaginings, but the basic form of the wheel and its characters – which in many cases are explicitly said to form incantations – makes clear, I think, the connection with the amulets. (Copp 2008: 260)

The *Mahāpratisarādhāraṇī* could be used by anyone, monastic and lay people alike (Hidas 2007: 196, n. 51). Among the most popular uses of the *Mahāpratisarā* amulets is facilitating the birth of a son, and for that purpose the amulet should be worn around the neck (Copp, in press, chapter 2). Hidas notes that besides the placing of such amulets in *stūpas*, devotees in China also placed them in tombs, although these traditions are not specified in the *Mahāpratisarāmahāvīdyārājñī*, nor is there evidence that this was practiced in South Asia (Hidas 2012: 31, n. 26).

¹⁷ Ronquillo (1989: 65) reports that more than 100 intact clay crucibles and other metalworking tools were recovered in 1986.

Put to such uses, the *dhāraṇī* of Mahāpratisarā became very widespread throughout Buddhist Asia. Among the numerous tantric masters to have visited Indonesia, Amoghavajra was one of the key figures in the spread of Vajrayāna Buddhism in China and translated the *Mahāpratisarāmahāvidyārājñī* into Chinese (*Great Wish-Fulfilling Spell, Da suiqiu tuoluoni* 大随求陀罗尼).¹⁸ He made two visits to Java (in 718 CE and between 741–746 CE), and since Java was a center of trade and political power in the sphere of insular Southeast Asia to which the Philippine islands integrally belonged, such foreign tantric masters will have propagated the *dhāraṇī* to monks as well as kings along the different trade routes. Butuan, once the location of the largest sources for gold in the Philippines, would most likely have been one of the stops made by ships traversing the Java-China route. Although Java was a market for gold and slaves from the Philippines for much of its history, the earliest Chinese ceramics found in Butuan (and the Philippines as a whole) appear to be 9th century Tang ware (Tan 1989: 29). Thus, it is likely that the cult of Mahāpratisarā spread from Java not long after Amoghavajra's missions.

3. Archaeological context

Although Chinese records do not say anything about the religious practices of the Butuan people, *Śrī Pāda Haji* (*Xi-li Ba-da Xia-zhi* 悉离琶大遐至) is mentioned as the title of the ruler who presented a gold plate memorial to the Zhenzong emperor of the Song Dynasty in 1011 CE (Wolters 1983: 59, n. 46).¹⁹

Among the most famous finds from the Agusan region is a 4 lb, 21 carat gold Vajralāsyā²⁰ image discovered in 1917 in Esperanza,

¹⁸ For a biography of Amoghavajra and other tantric masters who made the voyage to China, see Chou 1945.

¹⁹ The Sanskrit title *Śrī Pāda* (rather than *Śrī Pāduka*) is attested in the family name 'Saripada' as well as in Spanish records as the same or 'Sipad.' Note that Malay *haji*, 'king,' is cognate with Tagalog *hari*, which has the same meaning.

²⁰ This image was previously thought to be a distorted Tārā, but was recently correctly identified as a Vajralāsyā ('Bodhisattva of amorous

dating to the 9th–10th centuries.²¹ In 1981, a spectacular hoard of approximately 25–30 kg of gold items was unearthed 53 km east of Butuan in the neighboring province of Surigao del Sur. As a whole, this hoard clearly speaks of highly developed local craftsmanship of ‘Indianized’ inspiration (Legeza 1988: 131–36; Capistrano-Baker 2011: 154–156).

The Boxer Codex, a work thought to have been commissioned by governor-general Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas after 1590, details one of the first attempts by Spaniards to understand the customs and religion of the people they encountered in the Philippines and other countries in East and Southeast Asia.²² This document records the worship of Buddha Vairocana, the creator Bhaṭāra, and other deities of the Indian pantheon by the non-Muslim inhabitants of Luzon and the Visayas.²³ At present, the only known physical evidence of a specifically Buddhist artifact from this area comes from Calatagan, not far from Manila, which is in the form of a clay Avalokiteśvara tablet of local manufacture measuring 6.6 × 4.8 cm now kept in the National Museum (Francisco 1963a, 1971: 47–53).

dance’), one of the four deities associated with providing offerings to the Buddha Vairocana and located in the southeast corner of a Vajradhātumaṇḍala. See Capistrano-Baker (ed.) 2011: 253–4 for further discussion. This dispels the notion that “Javanese miners, not necessarily expert in their own artistic traditions” could have produced it or that “the statue is atypical in style because it was made by native Filipinos” (Bronson 1975: 5).

²¹ Francisco (1963b: 32, 1963c: 393) notes that bronze Śaivite and Buddhist images were found by early Jesuit fathers among the Mandaya people of Mindanao. See also Francisco 1971 for more on Hindu/Buddhist sculpture from the Philippines.

²² Bloomington, Indiana: Library, Boxer MSS. II, PDF available at <http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/general/VAB8326>. For detailed analysis of the Boxer Codex, see Boxer 1950 and Crossley 2013.

²³ The names of Vairocana and Bhaṭāra are represented as *Oinonsana* and *Bachtala/Bathala/Batala* in the text (Quirino & Garcia 1958: 419, 421, 428, 434).

4. Conclusion

The existence of Buddhism in the Philippines is repeatedly mentioned in Chinese sources, and its practice is confirmed in the writings of Spanish chroniclers. However, the archaeological evidence so far remains extremely scant. Against this background, the Agusan Mahāpratisarā Amulet is no doubt the single most important written evidence we have to date of a local Buddhist cult, and indeed probably the oldest amulet in Southeast Asia to be associated with the cult of Mahāpratisarā.

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Figure 1: Agusan Mahāpratisarā Amulet (recto).
Photo by Leigh Halud (2010).



Figure 2: Agusan Mahāpratisarā Amulet (verso).
Photo by Leigh Halud (2010).