

Diverse Scripts, Same Mistakes: Identifying Common Pitfalls in the Typographic Designs of Indonesian Traditional Scripts

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Abstract

The writing traditions of Indonesia are characterized by scriptural diversity, although today most of the traditional scripts have been supplanted by Latin in everyday use. There are revitalization efforts and design attempts to use these scripts in more contemporary settings. However, many efforts suffered from substandard typographic quality that does not represent the inherent nature or design spirit of authentic materials. To better understand and problematize this phenomenon, this study conducts historical and literature review using qualitative methods. The typographic quality of some key materials is described and presented in chronological order to show how flawed representation in some materials seem to be perpetuated into contemporary design. A review of archival materials from the 20th century onward reveals that a drop in typographic quality happens concurrently with the disappearance of traditional script from everyday use. The public's unfamiliarity with traditional scripts was then exacerbated by flawed representation in secondary material references published privately and by the government alike throughout the 1980s to the early 2000s. Notwithstanding their scholarly content, their representation of traditional scripts often shows typographic sloppiness that poorly represent normative and variant letterforms found in primary materials. Some contemporary designs pitfalls of traditional scripts can be traced to the uncritical over-reliance to these secondary materials, such as diacritic miniaturization and graphic stereotyping. There are some indications that typographic awareness and quality is improving in some communities in conjunction with increase of digital use and better access to primary materials. But whether this improvement proved sustainable in the long run remains to be seen. The author hopes that by identifying these pitfalls, future designers will pay more attention to typographic issues in Indonesian traditional scripts and can apply more informed design decisions that contribute to the revitalization of this heritage.

Keywords: typographic design, Indonesian traditional scripts, contemporary usage.

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Introduction

Historically, the writing traditions of Indonesia are characterized by scriptural diversity (Figure 1), in which several distinct scripts saw overlapping use across places, periods, and people (Casparis, 1975; Holle, 1999; Kumar et al, 1996: 104). However today, the Latin alphabet has supplanted the use of various Indonesian traditional scripts in everyday life, as lamented in various publications such as Florida (1995: 37 footnote 71), Gandhawangi (2021), Jukes (2014: 16-17), Kozok (2009: 19-20), Macknight (2016: 66), Pudjiastuti (1996: 77-78), Rahman (2012: 124), Robson (2011: 27-28), SKA (2021), and Wahab (2003: 2-9) among many. As part of a larger narrative in preserving cultural identity, regions with attested use of traditional scripts have undertaken efforts to revitalize their respective region's script. None of these efforts can be acknowledged as successful in achieving their goals as they face challenges and problems from multiple aspects, one of which is design.

As the author has argued elsewhere (Perdana, 2020; 2021; 2022), Indonesian traditional scripts today are often misrepresented by poorly designed typography. Briefly, typography is the design of verbal signs or letterforms within a writing system.

Purposeful selection of typographic elements can add layers of meaning to a written text beyond its literal content (Dabner, 2014: 62-67; Rustan, 2011: 8-13), and this is especially important in design as it can be used to create more efficient communication while forging unique identities with subtle shades of meaning. In a visually complex modern world, what typeface is used in an advertisement, for instance, is just as important as the wording of the message. But in order to craft letterforms that responded to a particular design context, it is essential for designers to understand inherent characteristics and historic forms of a writing system to know which conventions can be followed, modified, or broken, along with their significances (Dabner, 2014: 66; Haley, 2012: 47-49; Mitchell, 2016). Indonesian script design today often lacked consideration into these issues, which in turn results in rigid forms that lack contextual range or blind exploration that ignore historical forms and their inherent qualities. Ultimately, inattention to these issues hinder revitalization efforts and threaten the integrity of the already endangered scripts themselves. This research attempt to highlight some of the recurring problems that are often seen in contemporary design attempts of Indonesian traditional scripts and identify some underlying cause in the recent past which contribute to these problems.

Method

This research is primarily a historical and literature review using qualitative methods. Historic typographic materials of traditional Indonesian scripts are collected and critically compared with more recent materials postdating Indonesian independence. The typographic quality of some key materials is described and presented in chronological order to show how flawed representation in some materials seem to be perpetuated into contemporary design attempts. The author also discusses some cases where an increase of design awareness has started to address these flaws. The description and analysis in this study is meant to be a general, preliminary overview that problematize the phenomenon, potentially for more comprehensive and in-depth studies in the future.

In this study, the author uses the term “traditional scripts” mostly to refer Brāhmī script descendants in Indonesia such as Balinese, Batak, Javanese, Lampung, and Lontara’, which share an underlying structure of Indic alpha-syllabic writing systems (Bright, 2000: 65-66). The abjad writing system of Arabic and its regional derivations such as Jawi, Pegon, and Serang also played important role in historical writing practices of Indonesia and may equally be considered “traditional”. But these are outside the main scope of this study.

Discussion

Decline in Typographic Quality Post-Independent Indonesia

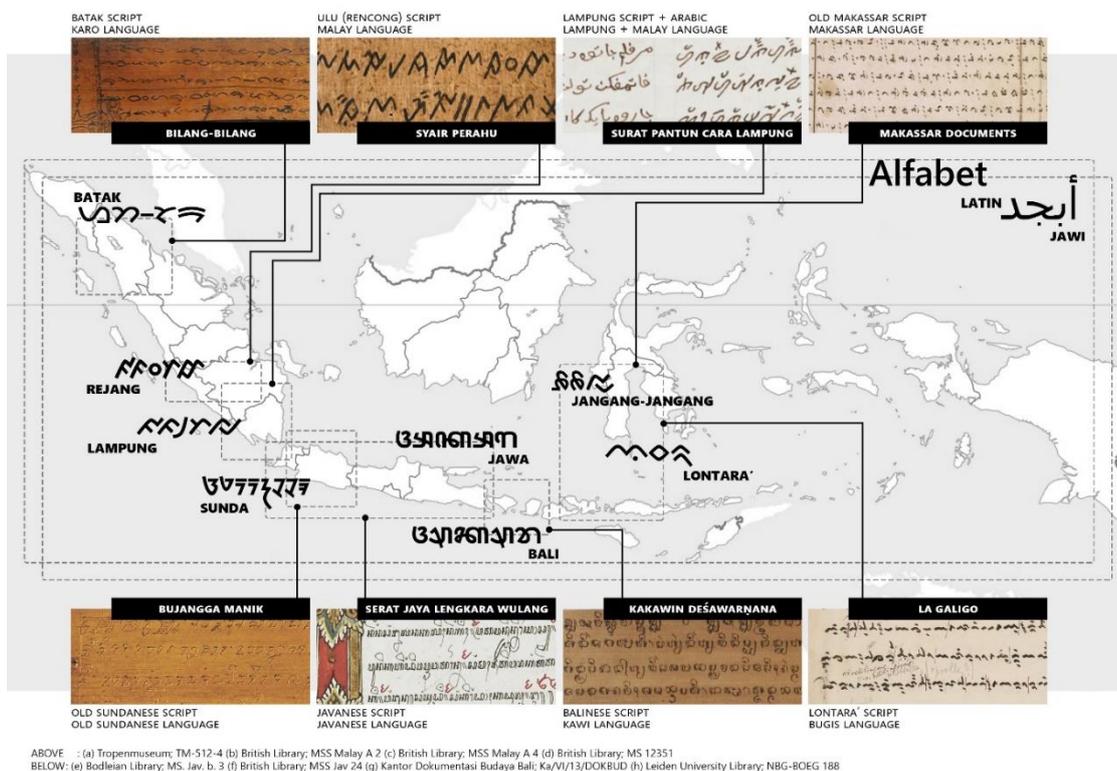


Figure 1. Various scripts of Indonesia and their approximate range of use, with example of manuscripts in respective scripts, by author. It should be noted that these scripts saw overlapping use across various places, periods, and people, and may not be entirely confined within the marked areas



Figure 2. Printed traditional scripts in 19th and 20th century publications: (a) Lampung in Lettergieterij van Joh. Enschedé en Zonen (1893: 154), (b) Batak Toba in Tuuk (1859), (c) Balinese in Brandes (1902), (d) Javanese in Gericke (1850), (e) Lontara' in Matthes (1875)

In early 20th century Indonesia (then Netherlands East Indies), materials written in traditional scripts are often found in diverse everyday contexts.¹ Traditional scripts were preferred by some users in correspondence as a sign of decorum,² printed books and periodicals in a variety of topics can be found in traditional scripts, while catalogues such as Lettergieterij van Joh. Enschedé en Zonen (1907) and Lettergieterij Amsterdam (1910) provided commercial typeface offerings for printing Balinese, Batak, Javanese, Lampung, and Lontara' scripts (Figure 2). However, Latin orthography for local languages saw steady gain due to several factors; including, colonial education system that normalizes Latin, aspiration of social mobility associated with learning Latin and Dutch, and ultimately economic pressure. Printing in traditional scripts required specialized equipment and typesetters, with production costs that were difficult to cut down (Moriyama, 2018). The state-run publisher *Balai Poestaka*, for example, prioritizes printing books in Latin alphabet over traditional scripts such as Javanese because the former books are cheaper to produce and more affordable to the mass (Molen, 1993: 83; Robson: 2011: 25). The colonial Dutch government however did not pursue an active policy to eradicate traditional script. In fact, a number of European designers have worked together with native collaborators since the 19th century to create traditional script publications with sophisticated typography.³

It was only in the period of Japanese occupation between 1942-1945 that official excise of traditional scripts began to appear. In Java, the Japanese government allowed only Latin or Japanese script in public sphere while discouraging the use of Javanese script (Florida, 1995: 37 footnote 71; Hadiwidjana, 1967: 9). In north Sumatra, the only printing press that was able to print Batak script in Laguboti was burned down (Simanjuntak, 2011: 148). It is unclear from the author's literature review what motivated the Japanese in pursuing such policies. When Indonesia proclaimed independence on August 17th, 1945, the young nation had to deal with armed conflicts, diplomatic struggles, and economic instabilities lasting several decades. Public use of traditional scripts was retained in some regions, but ensuring their continual use understandably could not become a governmental priority. The newly established national education programs were geared towards literacy of Indonesian in the Latin alphabet (Lowenberg, 2000: 140). Thus, Latin has become the de-facto script of Indonesia ever since.

As Latin alphabet became entrenched in everyday life, the practical use of traditional scripts deteriorated. Handwritten materials ceased to be transmitted through traditional copying process. The few publications that still use traditional scripts relied mostly on lithograph, stencil, or photocopied handwriting instead of movable types which became either unusable due to neglect or lost completely. This deterioration can be illustrated by the phasing out of Bugis *kitab* publications discussed by Tol (2015). Bugis *kitab* were relatively cheap books or booklets on Islamic themes with Arabic,

¹ Though the common use of some scripts like Batak and Old Makassar have already declined significantly at this point in time.

² As reported for early 20th century Javanese users later in Hadiwidjana (1967: 9).

³ See overview by Molen (2000) in the case of Javanese.

Lontara', and Latin texts produced by a handful of publishers in South Sulawesi. This was among the last kind of Bugis publications with substantial amount of Lontara' script texts, but (to paraphrase Tol) they give a very outdated impression to present readers due to their unattractive manufacture and general typographic sloppiness. Further demonstrating the declining relevance of Lontara', later reprints of the same work are prone to replace Lontara' texts with transliteration exclusively in Latin (Tol, 2015: 71, 75, 77).

While the use of traditional scripts never died out completely in "Latinized" Indonesia, they came to be viewed as disconnected remnant of past traditions that needs revitalization, in order to stay relevant and ultimately persevere in contemporary society. Most efforts however seem to be concerned with revitalization for revitalization's sake, which led to many materials showing cursory research and little concern in practical application. This can be seen in an early (if naïve) revitalization scheme was proposed by Achmad Narod in a *Penelitian Sedjarah* magazine article published in June 1962. Narod outlined the idea of replacing Latin with a new national script cobbled together from existing traditional scripts (Figure 3). No background information is known about Narod, but judging from his typography it is doubtful that Narod knew beyond surface level knowledge to any of the scripts of he cited. Many glyphs are crude and misshapen. Some, like Batak letter [a], show complete unfamiliarity with attested forms in manuscripts or prints. No attempt is apparent in harmonizing the completely different letterform aesthetic between scripts, for example the rectilinear Lampung-Lontara' and the curvilinear Bali-Batak-Javanese, and so the resulting repertoire lacked any sort of visual coherence. Narod's diacritics behave rather like Latin alphabet, uniformly placed preceding the main letters in a linear fashion. They are not presented as having connection to existing scripts and strikes the author like an afterthought, which is most apparent in the treatment of the <e> diacritic. Most Indonesian traditional scripts have distinct diacritics for /e/ and /ə/ sounds that are not interchangeable.⁴ Rather than preserving this essential feature, Narod mirrored Indonesian Latin orthography by conflating both sounds into a single <e> diacritic without clear sound value.⁵ Narod's scheme, therefore, simply replaces prevalent Latin orthography with jumbled selection of exotic glyphs. It preserves very little distinctive features of the original scripts and arguably do not provide meaningful revitalization to their use. Such cursory scheme portrayed as 'revitalization' shows an inferiority complex with the dominant Latin that risks further alienation and discontinuity from actual tradition.⁶ In any case, his creation attracted little notice and did not prompt further discussion (Hanggoro, 2014).

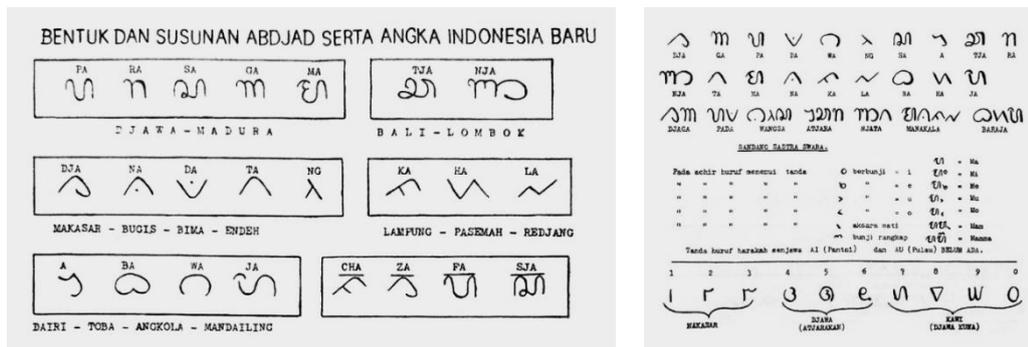


Figure 3. Table of Achmad Narod's proposed new national script for Indonesian, cobbled together from existing traditional scripts. Excerpt from Narod (1962: 5) held in Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia (B:- 3683)

Although his proposal attracted little notice, misshapen glyphs and crude typography became a recurring characteristic in subsequent materials associated with script revitalization. One example is a standardized Batak scheme produced by a governmental workshop held in Medan, 1988. The workshop's purpose was to combine several varieties of known Batak script into a single standardized set entitled *Surat Pustaka*,⁷ to be taught and used by all Batak communities in North Sumatra, apparently under legal endorsement from the central government in Jakarta.⁸ However, the hastily held workshop lacked any experts in Batak script and most workshop attendees were bureaucrats (Malau, 1994: 87; Kozok, 2009: 92).

⁴ This includes Balinese, (Karo) Batak, Javanese, Lampung, and (Bugis) Lontara'.

⁵ At Narod's time, the official Latin orthography for Indonesian was the Soewandi Spelling System, implemented since 1947. One of the orthography's features is the deprecation of the acute diacritic in <é> previously used to distinguish /e/ from /ə/ in the Van Ophuijsen Spelling System (Putra & Triyono, 2018: 67). The result of this deprecation, which is still in effect in contemporary *Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan* 'Perfected Spelling System,' is ambiguous reading for the letter <e> especially for nomenclatures derived from regional languages. The author have not find any contemporaneous document giving the reason behind this deprecation.

⁶ This comment was made by Rahman (2012:124) specifically about contemporary Lontara' reform schemes. They tend to portray the Lontara' inherent qualities as 'flaws' that should be compensated with artificial elements approximating Latin. In the author's opinion, this portrayal bears similarities to Narod's scheme.

⁷ *Pustaka* is a form of Batak manuscript made from tree barks, written and used primarily by magician-priest called *Datu* or *Guru*.

⁸ Reported by Malau (1994: 86) and Kozok (2009: 92) to be *Keputusan Presiden Nomor 116/B/1987*, dated December 16th, 1987. However, the author could not verify the decree number as the latest Presidential Decree of the year, *Keputusan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 53 Tahun 1987 Tentang Kantor Perwakilan Wilayah Perusahaan Asing*, was signed December 24th, 1987.

The result was a haphazard scheme published on June 17th, 1988. Many glyphs are misshapen, as if written by someone who never saw authentic manuscripts. Novel letters are prone to be displayed side by side attested letters without explanation or justification, which can easily misled readers into thinking recently invented letters are part of the established, historic repertoire. A perplexing set of invented numerals is included, some resembling tally marks and some merely stylized Arabic numbers, without any rationale for their forms. Official dissemination of *Surat Pustaha* was slow and uncoordinated; many of the target audience were either unaware or disinterested in the program (Malau, 1994: 96-97). Subsequent school textbooks did not teach this version,⁹ but the damage was already done, as derivation of the table inevitably found its way to the internet where it is endlessly copied.

This situation continued through the 1990s and the early 2000s. Publications of the time gave little typographic consideration in showcasing traditional scripts, with only miserly samples given after tedious descriptions. Notwithstanding their scholarly content, government-issued publications were especially prone to showcase scripts not by reproduction of genuine manuscripts but cramped tables with sloppily written glyphs. These are often marred with so much distortion from source materials that they make poor design reference, as can be seen in Jusuf (1983:15), Pudjiastuti (1996), Rochkyatmo (1996), and Rosyadi (1997) (Figure 4). In one publication where abundant photos of manuscripts are provided, by Yayasan Harapan Kita & BP3 Taman Mini Indah Indonesia (1997), a significant number of them are mirrored or upside down.¹⁰

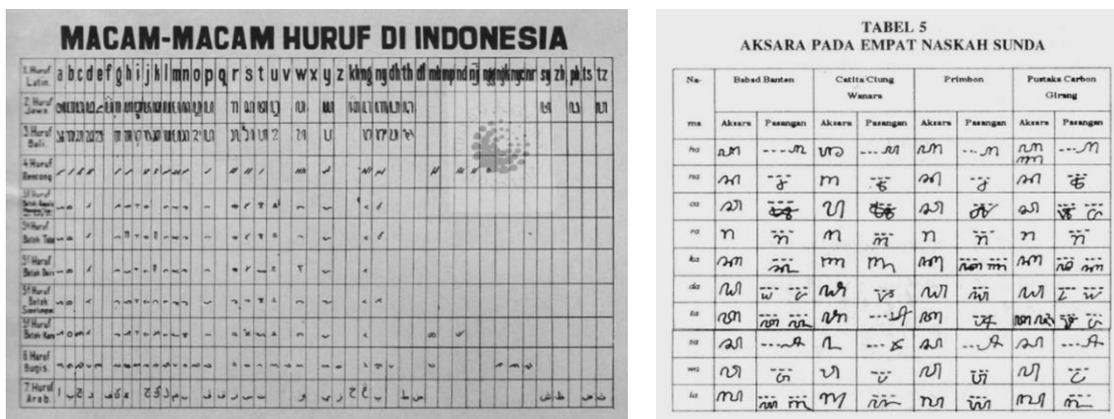


Figure 4. Cramped tables with distorted glyphs in Government-issued publications. Left: Jusuf (1983:15). Right: Rosyadi (1997:56, 59)



Figure 5. Signage in Makassar with miniscule Lontara' script (Gunarta, 2019). Note that the Lontara' text is mistyped

Further adding to the often-substandard typographic quality in secondary reference materials, there is little consideration in making engaging reading materials that could showcase traditional script capability in diverse, everyday use. As noted by Moegiadi & Jiyono (1994:145) regarding state efforts to increase Latin literacy in Indonesia, shortage of reading materials outside of the school system caused many people who have gained literacy skills in the beginning grades of elementary school to relapse into illiteracy. The same principle applies to non-Latin literacy, where pupils who have been briefly introduced to traditional scripts in *Muatan Lokal*¹¹ subsequently forgot how to use them in the absence of anything

⁹ According to Kozok (2009: 93). But it was reproduced in publications such as Malau (1994: 90-95) and Pudjiastuti (1997: 54-55).

¹⁰ Mirrored and upside-down samples in the publication include Balinese (pp. 86-87), Kawi (pp. 57, 88), Lampung (pp. 111), Lontara' (pp. 118-119, 123), and Old Sundanese (pp. 42, 93).

¹¹ *Muatan Lokal* 'regional content' is a school subject that is broadly designed to develop student competence in the culture and values of their immediate local environment. Its contents are made under the discretion of regional education boards with some oversight from central government (Sumiyati, 2010: 174).

interesting to read or write (Florida, 1995: 37; Macknight, 2016: 66; Malau, 1994: 97). For many areas, the most visible use of traditional scripts are token street signs (Figure 5), unremarkable in their design, barely legible from normal viewing distance due to their diminutive size, and frequently full of spelling mistakes. Some publications approve of their existence as symbolic gestures to assert cultural identity,¹² without acknowledging that many of them are typographically unappealing and effectively unreadable. It might be argued that such haphazard implementation might actually be counterproductive in revitalization efforts. Similar to late Bugis *kitab*, in an environment where the most visible script application is generally unattractive and monotonous, most readers would regard traditional scripts as hopelessly outdated and would not be convinced of their aesthetic capability for diverse use in everyday life.

Recent Developments

Since around 2010s, there are indications that design awareness for traditional scripts is slowly growing, in which digital media and the internet play important roles. Through the internet, contemporary users can now gain easier access to digital repositories of primary sources, increasing appreciation to diverse letterforms that have been left out in normative references. This is facilitated by script learning communities in various social media whose members include design-conscious millennials who not only seek functional typefaces that can be displayed in their mobile devices, but also diverse looking typefaces that can be aesthetically applied for a variety of purposes, from image posts to merchandise. Collaborations between these communities and local governments have sparked some more conscious efforts in selecting and curating traditional script materials for public use. This can be seen for example in recent efforts by the Culture Office (*Kundha Kabudayan*) of Yogyakarta.¹³ Another example can be seen in the social media posts of Wikimedia Indonesia, which often showcase the use of various traditional Indonesian scripts on equal footing with Latin through brief yet well-designed infographics (Figure 6).¹⁴

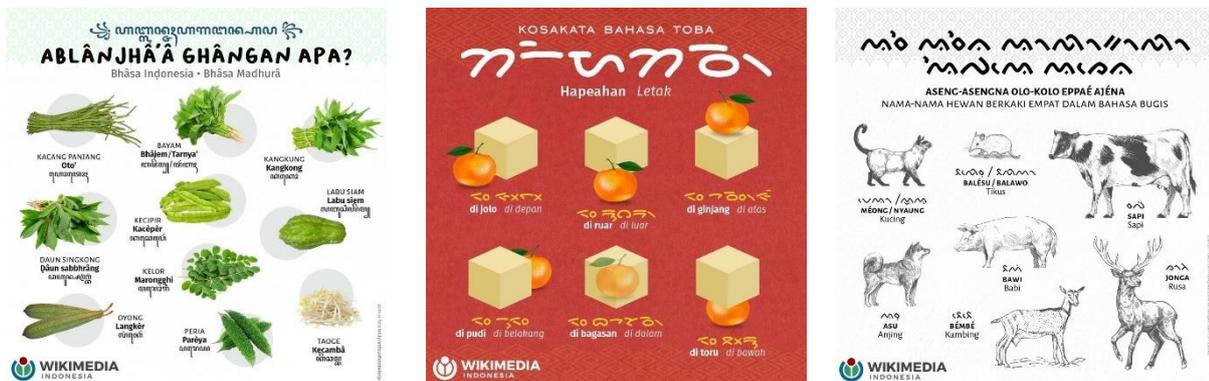


Figure 6. Infographics from the social media account of Wikimedia Indonesia, showcasing various traditional scripts. Left: Madura language with Javanese script. Center: Toba Batak language and script. Right: Bugis language with Lontara' script. With permission from Adien Gunarta, staff member of Wikimedia Indonesia

On the flipside, the internet also enabled easier proliferation of problematic secondary materials with misleading typography from prior decades. Links to proper primary materials are often buried under repetitive tables and dull examples that came up in cursory Google search. Designers with no contact to appropriate communities often use these easy-to-google materials as reference, and they perpetuate the view that traditional scripts are static relics without design principles. Further, in the absence of materials that discuss design particularities of a script, designers are prone to assume Latin typographic principles can be universally applied to traditional scripts (Haley, 2012: 47-49; Mitchell, 2016). In fact, undergraduate design programs in Indonesia are often dismissive towards explorations for traditional scripts due to this perceived lack of design, only approving of Latin typefaces emulating stereotypical elements of traditional scripts (faux-script typeface, see discussion below). As the result, incidental design projects incorporating traditional scripts often contained several misunderstandings or pitfalls that further perpetuated faulty typographic design.

One common pitfall is in the overall size of diacritics. This can be seen for example in a recent short study identifying typographic elements of Lampung script by Indrayati & Migotuwio (2020). The study assigned disproportionately tiny space for Lampung diacritics not seen in any attested Lampung samples before Indonesian independence (Figure 7d-f). This pitfall can be easily attributed to lack of study to primary sources, and indeed Indrayati & Migotuwio, (2020: 543-544) only cites two secondary sources in the form of tables from *Muatan Lokal* books published in the 1990s. Indonesian users without prior exposure to authentic text often assumed alpha-syllabic diacritics worked according to the same typographic principles as Latin or Arabic diacritics, which are indeed normatively smaller in size. Accordingly, too much attention is given to the base letters while diacritics are treated like an afterthought. The same trope can be observed in

¹² For example, Ahmad (2014:150), Erikha (2018).

¹³ Instagram account @dinaskebudayaandiy.

¹⁴ Instagram and Twitter account @wikimediaid.

other scripts such as Javanese (Figure 8). For Javanese, reduced proportion of diacritics and below-base conjuncts did occur in some historic display types but were compensated by the size of the text itself. Meanwhile, contemporary samples are prone to reduce them to a point that it is no longer respectful to the natural proportions of the script. The result is an unpleasant text to be read. In normal reading distance, upper or lower diacritics with distinct shapes became indistinguishable specks. Reduced inline diacritics also introduced distracting white spaces that intermittently break the flow of reading.¹⁵

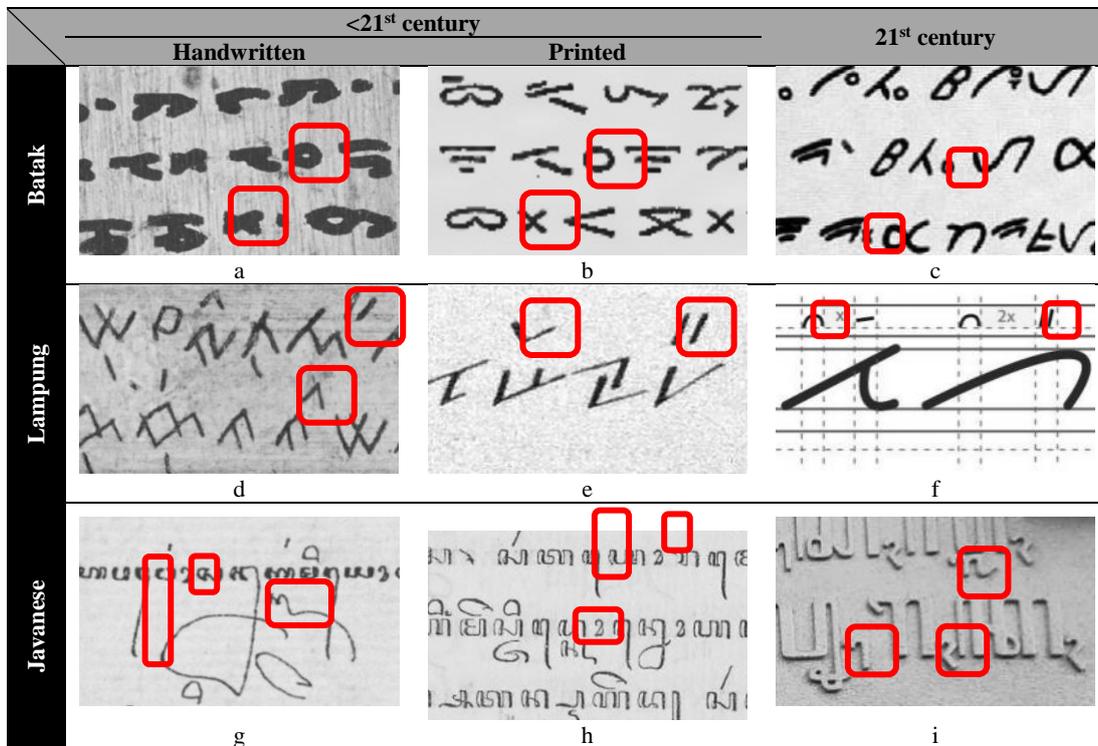


Figure 7. Diacritic miniaturization in 21st century samples of traditional scripts, compared with handwritten and printed samples from preceding centuries. Sources: (a) *Pustaka Panampuhi*, British Library (Add MS 4726), (b) Tuuk (1859), (c) Tim Penyusun Kamus Pusat Bahasa (2002: 1341), (d) *Seribu Maksa*, British Library (Or. 12986), (e) Lettergieterij van Joh. Enschedé en Zonen (1893: 154), (f) Indrayati & Migotuwio (2020), (g) *Raffles Paper* vol. III, British Library (Add MS 45273), (h) Gericke (1850), (i) Aris riyanto (2021)

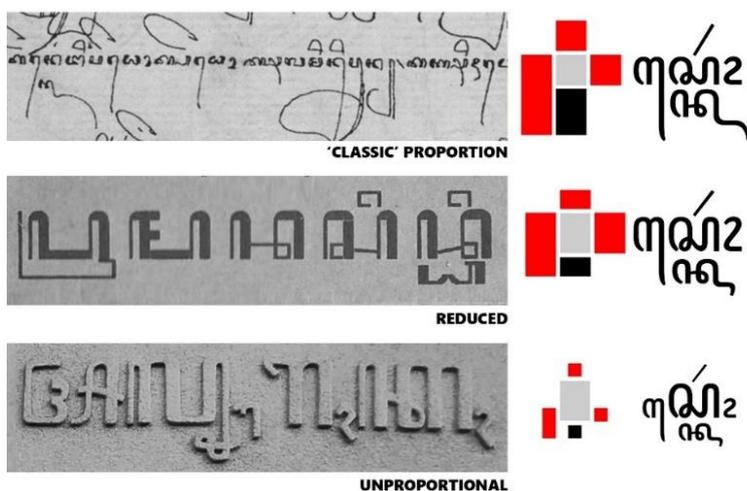


Figure 8. The proportion of Javanese base letters compared with diacritic and below-base conjunct, by author. Contemporary samples are prone to overemphasize base letter to the point it is no longer respectful to the natural proportions seen in primary sources

Another common pitfall is what the author calls ‘graphic stereotyping’, in which a script is perceived as only having a single ‘correct’ form derived from fixed representations from later secondary sources rather than context. As an analogy, this would be equivalent to asserting that all subsequent Latin typefaces should look like Helvetica, regardless of purpose.

¹⁵ Interestingly, diacritic miniaturization is also reported in mainland Southeast Asian fonts (such as Khmer, Myanmar, and Thai) made by non-native designers who have not familiarized themselves with the script (pers. comm. with Ben Mitchell, 2021). In those cases, however, native users could point at this issue and can easily give everyday sample texts as reference of appropriate proportions.

Another way of looking at this is that designers and users are unable to distinguish which part of a script is essential and which is variable, concluding that all graphical parts of a typeface in a table are “traditional” and therefore unchangeable. This treatment usually can be traced to overreliance on monotonous secondary sources and lack of exposure to diverse primary sources.

An example of this can be seen in some contemporary treatment of Lontara', in which designers analyse strict, rectilinear letterforms as the unchangeable essence of Lontara' script typography. This imply that Lontara' lacked historic visual variants, which is simply not true. This analysis can be traced to one of the early European scholars to Bugis and Makassar culture in the 19th century, Benjamin Frederik Matthes (1818-1908). He created a Lontara' typeface based on rectilinear handwriting, which he considered (rather arbitrarily) as the normative form of the script (Noorduyn, 1993: 539-541). Later, an interpretation put forth by Mattulada (1985:8-10) posits that the geometrically precise rhombus (called *sulapa' eppa' walasuji* in Buginese) of the letter sa <◊> is the proto inspiration of Lontara' glyphs. This further added to the notion that rigid rectilinearity is the sole appropriate style of Lontara'. Other scholars such as Noorduyn (1993: 556-557) and Rahman (2014: 4, 19-20) have demonstrated that many historical documents do not show geometrically precise rhombuses that Mattulada suggested, making his view untenable.¹⁶ Curvilinear Lontara' for example can be found in many documents written up to the early 20th century, where the letter <◊> may even be written as a circle.¹⁷ Matthes was aware of curved Lontara' but called it a 'slipshod' writing. Later scholars however ascribed the style to fluency as it can be found in significant documents like professional correspondence and sea charts (Perdana & Buana, 2023: 552). Nevertheless, Matthes' typeface and Mattulada's mystical interpretation is often referenced uncritically in many contemporary media. The paucity of diverse digital typefaces inevitably reinforces this stereotypic analysis which is only ever used to make Latin typeface in faux-Lontara' style (Figure 9).¹⁸

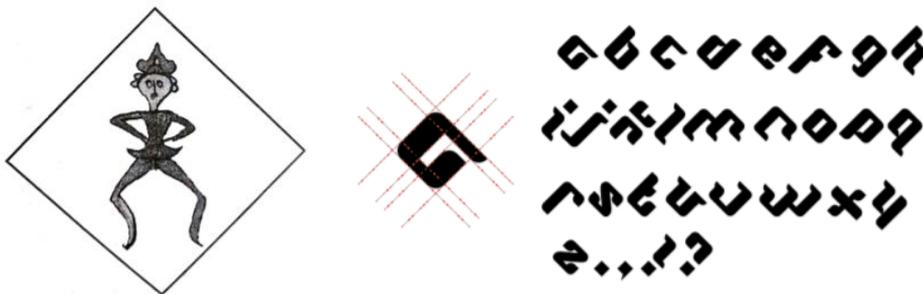


Figure 9. Graphic stereotyping of Lontara' in Brahma (2014). Citing Mattulada's mystical interpretation without consulting any attested variants or historical samples, the study only gave stereotypic analysis to Lontara' letterforms

The use of Balinese script, relatively well maintained today compared to other traditional Indonesian scripts,¹⁹ did not escape the pitfalls outline above. Contemporary use of Balinese script has benefitted immensely from the work of I Made Suatjana in laying the foundation of digital use. Suatjana was involved in writing the Unicode proposal of Balinese (Everson & Suatjana, 2005), created Balinese-Latin converter programs, keyboard layouts, and perhaps most importantly, the first digital typeface for the Balinese script, Bali Simbar, which was released in 1996. Suatjana's design is a pleasing digital reproduction of Dutch-era movable type first released in 1897 by *Landsdrukkerij* (Figure 10) (Kumar et al, 1993: 152). It has a fairly extensive glyph coverage capable of writing complicated conjunct stacks common in Balinese literature, as its ability to render existing writing tradition was a crucial consideration since its inception (Suatjana, 2021: minute mark 4:49:10 to 5:04:45).

At the release of Bali Simbar, Suatjana (2021: minute mark 5:32:30 to 5:37:45) has encouraged the general public to increase the availability and choice of Balinese script in the digital medium by making more typefaces. But at the time digital literacy in Indonesia was still in its infancy. The notion that a script may have multiple computer typefaces with intentionally different design seem not to have been well understood. Suatjana's foresighted encouragement did not generate typefaces from other designers. In fact, selection of Balinese typefaces did not expand much beyond Bali Simbar for almost 20 years after its initial release, with almost identical derivations used wholesale for all purposes regardless of context. In the latest effort by the Balinese government to increase public use of the Balinese script, mandating that all commercial signage must include Balinese transliteration,²⁰ most talked about issues revolve around spelling errors and possible legal issues in prioritizing Balinese (with Balinese script) over Indonesian (with Latin alphabet) (Mulyawan, 2021). The issue whether the Balinese script can have different typefaces or lettering styles that are contextually designed

¹⁶ It is possible that Mattulada based his mystical Lontara' interpretation solely by looking at printed materials and some manuscripts that confirmed his already made conclusion, an act known in Indonesia as *cocoklogi* 'match-ology' (Hoogervorst, 2021)

¹⁷ For example, an inscription in a silver *sirih* box shown in Macknight (2016: 65).

¹⁸ For example, Ahmad (2019) and Brahma (2014).

¹⁹ See overview in Kurnia B & Sudarma (2017)

²⁰ As stipulated under *Peraturan Gubernur Bali* (Bali Governor Regulation) 2018. No. 80 § IV.6

does not seem to be addressed; businesses simply used Bali Simbar or an old version of Noto Sans Balinese to accomplish the most basic demands of the mandate. Many still are simply illegible in normal viewing distance due to their small size (Figure 11). In a way, the mandate reflects an outdated assumption from governmental bureaucracies that mere inclusion in signage, without due consideration in typographic quality and the design context, will automatically translate to increased interest among younger generations of users.

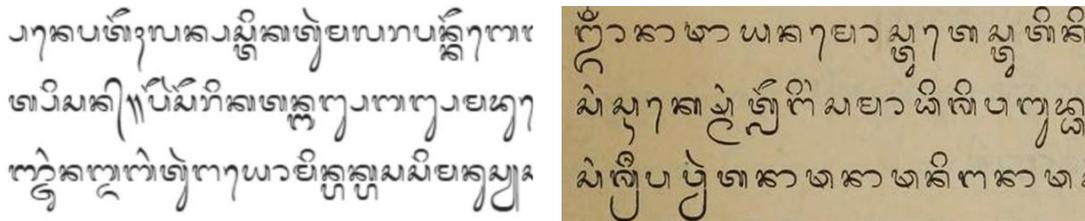


Figure 10. Left: I Made Suatjana’s digital typeface, Bali Simbar (first released in 1996). Right: movable Balinese type in Brandes (1902)



Figure 11. Example of signage in Bali before (left) and after (right) the implementation 2018 Governor Regulation on Balinese script usage, from Google Streetview. This sign, and many others in Bali, use Bali Simbar typeface set in comparatively miniscule size that are illegible at normal viewing distance

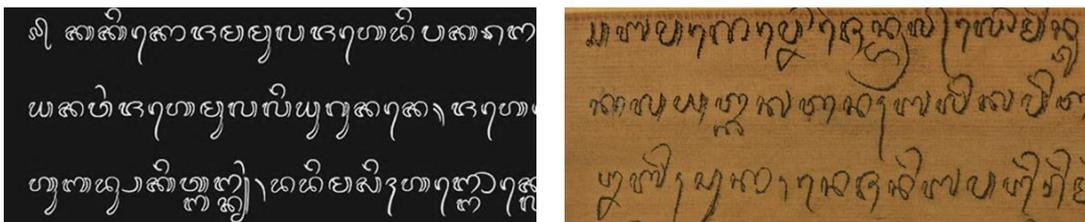


Figure 12. Left: I Wayan Sukanta’s digital typeface, Bali Gerip (first released in 2020). Right: handwritten Balinese in *lontar*, from British Library (Mss Eur D742-1, f.168v)

The paucity of diverse typefaces made some Balinese equate the letterform of Bali Simbar to the only appropriate form of Balinese script. Ironically, some even regard stylistic differences from Bali Simbar as wrongful deviations from “handwriting heritage,”²¹ even though Bali Simbar was based on European-developed printed type rather than handwriting tradition. While this attitude is not shared by Balinese who are accustomed to variations through regular contact with authentic *lontar* references, the limited range of styles in the public imagination caused designers difficulty in creating varied forms and sowed disinterest among some younger users.

It is only more recently that Balinese users became more interested in using wider range of typefaces, such as those made by Ida Bagus Komang Sudarma (Putra, 2016), I Wayan Sukanta,²² or Balibilly Design.²³ This shift of interest however is still in its infancy. I Wayan Sukanta for example reported (Pers. comm. 2021) that users who accessed his library tend to choose something similar to Bali Simbar, indicating the still limited recognition of design varieties. However, at least one of his typefaces which emulate handwritten Balinese and has clear visual difference from Bali Simbar (named Bali Gerip, Figure 12, is also a popular choice. Its use can be seen for example in various images posts created by Instagram user @mlajahbasabali to promote popular use of Balinese script and language. Only time will tell whether this shift will generate sustained interest in exploring traditional scripts and their typographic design.

Conclusion

Many Indonesian traditional script materials today suffered from unfortunate typographic representation brought by cursory design research. A review of archival materials from the 20th century onward reveals that a drop in typographic

²¹ As reported by Cokorda Rai Adi Pramatha (pers. comm.) regarding Vimala, one of the author’s Balinese fonts made in collaboration with David Kamholz and Ben Yang from PanLex. The author also received similar comment during a commission to make Balinese transliteration for a hotel signage. The client has been led to believe that Balinese script may only use Bali Simbar typeface.

²² His works can be seen in <https://takepanbali.blogspot.com/2020/07/katalog-font-aksara-bali.html>.

²³ Their works can be seen in Instagram, username @ balibilly_design

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