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## Comments

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Ricardo M. Duran Nolasco

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# Comments

RICARDO MA. DURAN NOLASCO

## **The Continuing Saga of the Mysterious Letter “J” in the First Katipunan Document**

The “usual suspects” in this linguistic thriller are Andres Bonifacio, Teodoro Plata, and Ladislao Diwa, whom historians point to as the founders of the Katipunan. The “who done it” mystery begins with the discovery of an unsigned document (hereinafter referred to as the CPDMC) dated January 1892, showing that the Katipunan was conceived during this period and not six months afterwards (in July 1892) as commonly believed. The issue of who wrote this document is what Ramon Guillermo in his research note has attempted to shed light on.

Bonifacio is immediately ruled out. Why? His writings do not show a distinctive feature contained in the CPDMC—the prevalent use of the grapheme <j> to represent the glottal fricative /h/ consistent with conventional Spanish orthography. Bonifacio uses a modern Tagalog version in which the letter “h” has only one phonetic value in common words (i.e., non-names), which is with a voiceless throat fricative articulation.

The situation for standard Spanish is completely different: speakers of some dialects drop their pronunciation of “h” but others retain it. Furthermore, phonetic [h] in Spanish is written as <g> as in *gente* or <j> as in *jefe*.

The investigation now shifts to the remaining members of the Katipunan triumvirate: Plata and Diwa. Little is written about Plata, and he is referred

to in the research note as the “unknown quantity.” What is known about him (although this is not mentioned by Guillermo) is that he was a Tondo resident who married Bonifacio’s sister, Esperidion. For his part Diwa reportedly took up law and served as an *escribano* (notary) in Cavite.

More information is available about Diwa’s personal circumstances. Diwa was born and raised in San Roque, Cavite. Why is this fact important? San Roque is recognized as the cradle of Caviteño Chavacano, a Philippine Spanish creole.

John Lipski (2001, 130) cites Martinez de Zuñiga’s (1973) 1893 account of the Philippines, in which the country is described as having few Filipinos speaking Spanish, with the exception of the San Roque barrio of Cavite where “they speak a kind of Spanish which has been corrupted and whose phraseology is entirely taken from the dialect of the country.”

Guillermo describes Diwa’s “educational background” as more intensive than that of most members of the Katipunan. Guillermo adds that it would not have been difficult for him to undertake the drafting of a document such as the CPMD C.

Although his daughter claims that Diwa spoke only Tagalog and Spanish, the inference that he also knew and spoke Caviteño is a reasonable and realistic one. It is conjectured that the spelling system of this Philippine creole is similar to that employed in the document, especially in the use of the “aberrant” <j>. After connecting the dots, Guillermo finds Diwa to be the most probable source of the <j> convention, among the three “suspects.”

Could this be the smoking gun that historians are looking for to resolve the issue about the CPMD C’s authorship?

Several linguistic considerations can inform and add to Guillermo’s imaginative (not imaginary) analysis.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caviteño was most likely a predominantly oral language. Like many developing creole languages, it did not and could not have evolved a standard orthographic system at that time. Why? There was no need for such orthography because the official language then in education and governance was Spanish.

But assuming for the sake of argument that some Caviteño speakers were already writing to each other in this patois, it would have been impossible for them *not* to rely on the conventions of the dominant superstrate language, which in this case was Spanish (and partly Portuguese). Written transcriptions of Caviteño, including those made by Rizal, reflected approximations of the

prevailing Spanish spelling conventions. In fact, past and present speakers of Philippine Spanish creoles consider their speech variety as dialects of Spanish.

Ergo, the use of the “j” in the CPDMC could have easily come from a patriot who was fluent in Tagalog, who spoke and wrote in Spanish as a second language, but who was inexperienced or not familiar with the emerging Tagalog orthography system employed by Bonifacio. The inexperience or non-familiarity is shown by the alternating use of the “j” and the “h” in words such as *jindi* vs. *hindi*, *aapijan* vs. *kaapihan*, and *jarap* vs. *harap*. The (reported) absence of the lexical item *jindi* in Caviteño provides supplemental evidence of a simpler, more direct explanation for the abovementioned linguistic quirk.

These facts, however, do not necessarily conflict with Guillermo’s forensic linguistic investigation that Diwa is the most likely author of the CPDMC.

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