For three decades now, the cultural and historical status of the Eskaya minority of southeast Bohol has been in dispute. From early 1980, enthusiasts have claimed that the 3,000 or so individuals who comprise this community practice an indigenous way of life and speak a distinctive language with its own writing system. Critics from the press and in government institutions — including the National Museum — have argued alternatively that the Eskaya community is a cult and its language a crude fabrication. Rather than seeking to resolve the debate in favor of one side or another I take an historical-ethnographic approach to examine how the debate has been constructed, contrasting media narratives on the group’s origins, with traditional Eskaya perspectives, and an historical-linguistic analysis of the Eskayan language. Media reactions to the Eskaya have echoed responses to the Tasaday Affair of the 1970s, in which a presumably uncontacted community of Mindanao was later characterized as a hoax, bringing to the fore mainstream stereotypes of Filipino indigeneity that were at odds with lived realities. Today in Bohol, many Eskaya people have embraced the politics of indigeneity but done so on their own terms, and the friction between incommensurate notions of authenticity will remain a challenge for social scientists and policy-makers for many years to come.

INTRODUCTION
The ‘discovery’ of the Eskaya community in January 1980 was heralded with sensational news reports of a lost tribe in Bohol, speaking a mysterious language and practicing a pre-Hispanic way of life. But the exciting possibility that an uncontacted group was living a traditional lifestyle in the southern Philippines...
was quickly dampened by a feature article published shortly after. Its self-explanatory title reads: "Eskaya cult: Children of a Lost Language" (Logarta, 1981) and the author's central claim was that the so-called 'lost tribe' was simply an unorthodox religious community with its own fabricated language and script. The cultural and historical status of the Eskaya community of southeast Bohol has been a simmering local issue ever since, but rarely has it attracted any serious anthropological or linguistic investigation beyond the province. I propose four related explanations for why the Eskaya community has remained a site of controversy and largely failed to attract serious scholarly engagement, namely: the political circumstances of the community's public emergence in the post-Tasaday Philippines; the esoteric narratives imposed on the community by its 'discoverers' and ventriloquizers; the bold strategies adopted by Eskaya people themselves in pursuit of institutional recognition; and conflicting ideologies of cultural and linguistic 'authenticity'.

BEFORE THE ESKAYA: 'RAIN FOREST WATERGATE'

The Tasaday Affair, or 'Rain forest Watergate', as one critic labeled it (Berreman, 1992), remains the most informative precedent to the contemporary Eskaya situation. A version of the story goes like this: in June 1971, a millionaire-playboy and high-ranking government advisor announced the discovery of an uncontacted 'Stone Age' tribe deep in the impenetrable jungles of Mindanao. The territory that these people occupied in the South Cotabato province could only be accessed by a vertiginous rappel through high jungle canopy from a hovering helicopter - a fact which did nothing to dissuade visits from gung-ho international journalists, and celebrities such as Charles Lindbergh and Gina Lollobrigida. Extraordinary images of the Tasaday, as the group

Figure 1. The Tasaday people photographed by National Geographic in 1972. The original caption reads, 'Perched in the Stone Age, the Tasadays stare down from the tribe's main cave at their Space Age visitors'. Photograph: John Launois.

came to be known, were soon published in the pages of National Geographic (Fig. 1) and elsewhere, enchanting a public weary of the daily traumas of the Vietnam War. Wearing only banana leaves and using hafted stone tools, the tiny community of less than thirty individuals was depicted in a state of harmony with the environment. For sustenance they harvested insects, lizards and frogs, and were ignorant of the world beyond their jungle domain. Trained linguists did not interview the Tasaday but it was nonetheless reported that their language had 'no words for war' (MacLeish, 1972, pp. 226, 242; Nance, 1975, p. 75).

The media love affair was cut short in 1976 when the Marcos regime closed the Tasaday territory to outsiders by presidential fiat. Although researchers had had less than six months to observe and comment on the community, the anomaly of the group as a remnant pre-contact society was abruptly called into question. There were accusations of unscrupulous anthropological practices and high-level meddling. Critics declared the Tasaday to be a government-sponsored hoax - an elaborate and bizarre contrivance whose only purpose was window-dressing for an unpopular regime. It was alleged that local Manobo farmers had been paid to present themselves as tribespeople and perform for the cameras. Those who had researched the group were characterized as unwitting dupes at best and conspirators at worst. The ensuing debate over the anthropological status of the Tasaday continued to bubble long after the coupal dictators were deposed, and taking 'sides' became less about the most satisfactory interpretation of the limited data than it was a matter of political allegiance.

Later investigations have problematized the 'real' versus 'fake' binary that continues to dominate the Tasaday debate. Linguist Lawrence Reid analyzed tapes of spontaneous Tasaday speech and his evaluation of the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that the Tasaday community had split from Manobo speakers and remained in isolation for around 100-150 years (Reid, 1992, 1996), a view supported by genealogical evidence (Nabayra & Rogel-Kara, 1992). In other words, the Tasaday really were an isolated community and could not have simply been staged for a gullible audience. Robin Hemley's (2004) compelling book about the affair brought to light the complex and often confused motives of early Tasaday critics, as much as it questioned the idealized representation of the Tasaday to a public that was all too eager to indulge in romantic fantasies of pre-modern innocence.

These important counter-criticisms to the standard 'hoax' narrative have permitted a degree of complexity to enter the Tasaday debate. For many social scientists, the locus of enquiry has, by way of consequence, shifted away from the Tasaday and back onto their would-be ethnographers. Who exactly was it that we needed the Tasaday to be? And why were we so disappointed when they failed to occupy the cherished categories we had assigned for them? In addressing these questions anthropologist Jean-Paul Dumont went so far as to declare that 'there are no Tasaday per se, but only a social and symbolic
relationship, and it is the only analysable reality here', urging an exploration of 'the semiotic conditions that lead to the inevitability of such a "discovery"'. Regardless of where you stand – he thus argued – the Tasaday remains a discursive construct of our own making.

ENTER THE ESKAYA

If, for Dumont, the discovery of the Tasaday was a semiotic inevitability it would seem only natural for similar revelations to recur in related guises. As we will see, the discovery of the Eskaya of Bohol, though less sensational, recapitulated the Tasaday narrative in miniature. Many of the same postcolonial anxieties about authenticity were played out in local polemics. Just as it had happened for the Tasaday, a tendency amongst pundits to frame the events in a binary mode and to speak on behalf of Eskaya people, whether 'for' or 'against', undermined the authority of Eskaya voices and restricted the scope of meaningful scholarly inquiry. Indeed, those who first commented on the group generally ignored the speakers' accounts of the community and its origins, or they overstated elements of the local narratives to bolster individual agendas. In turn, Eskaya people have rejected, absorbed or reframed various elements of out-group perspectives of their history in informative ways.

According to one account (Abregana, 1984), the 'discovery' of the Eskaya in Bohol was made by government advisers who were touring the province to implement and review policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In a mountainous and densely forested corner of the island they had encountered an isolated community speaking a peculiar language altogether unlike Visayan – the language of the region – which was represented in an unrecognized script. Soon after, word of the 'lost tribe' reached the National Museum of the Philippines which was about to send an archeological team to Bohol to excavate prehistoric sites on the Anda peninsula. Incidentally, one of the leaders of the team was Jesus Peralta who only a few years earlier had visited Mindanao to observe and evaluate the Tasaday. Taking advantage of the fact that the excavations were to take place near where the Eskaya were presumed to be living, the team decided to visit the area and make observations. The 'Eskaya' (sic) of Bohol were described as a 'cultural community' inhabiting the village of Biabas in upland Guindulman and maintained an agricultural economy based on rice, corn and kamútì (a variety of sweet potato). During their stay the museum team made an annotated copy of the complex writing system in use by the group, described their system of numerals and compiled a short word list of the Eskayan language. Only six non-contiguous and barely illuminating pages of this report have survived.

At the time that Jesus Peralta and the National Museum were doing their fieldwork, the stories of an isolated tribe in Bohol inspired a local librarian by the name of Brenda Abregana to make a personal expedition to the Eskaya community. Abregana was not aware of the Museum's interest and her investigation took place in the neighboring village of Tiytay, some 13 kilometers to the southwest of Biabas. The first impressions of what she observed there were aired, months later, in the form of a grant application to the Fund for Assistance to Private Education in Manila (FAPE). Submitted under the name of her supervisor, Salome Ramos, the 11-page funding proposal explained that the lost 'Eskayan Eskaya' people of Bohol were the indigenous custodians of ancient texts written in a forgotten language and script (Ramos, 1980). In her assessment, the five 'Old Books' of the Eskaya, alleged to have been large and leather-bound with a thick, shiny material for paper, had not been seen since 1932, but faithful copies of their contents were still extant.

According to Abregana, the unusual language of the documents was 'supposedly of the Pre-Spanish Boholanos' and until World War II it was actively used throughout the upland region of southeast Bohol. After this time, the original native speakers had all dispersed to Mindanao, and today only three Eskaya villages still remained. She related that in the 1920s a leader by the name of Mariano Datahan established a school in Biabas for the ongoing preservation of the language, and a series of carved wooden boards attested to his invitation to President Quezon to observe the classes there. It was imperative, Abregana concluded, for a properly resource'd expedition to be launched in order to make formal contact with the long-estranged Eskaya people, and to document their records. Despite having their own writing system, literary tradition, school institutions and presidential correspondence, her starting point, from Abregana's perspective the Eskaya way of life was hopelessly primitive. Remarkably, no actual details of the tribal lifestyle were mentioned but an important additional benefit of the proposed project was the improvement of general living standards towards a 'new progressive condition' (Ramos, 1980, p6). The research team would be tasked with introducing the Eskaya to modern tools and know-how: the ancient library was to be 'updated' with the latest information technology, and the community given instruction in painting, sculpture and the culinary arts. Agriculture was also on the agenda, with suggestions that included education in cotton-growing techniques and a system of producing a petrol substitute from cassava oil.

Ramos and Abregana's application was submitted on Monday 10 November 1980, and by Friday of the same week the governor of Bohol, Rolando Butalid, issued a letter to the Director of the Institute of Philippine Culture at Ateneo de Manila requesting further financial and technical assistance for the expedition (R. Butalid, unpublished data). According to the governor, the lost library of the Eskaya 'yielded fragments of significant historical accounts of the founding of the islands of the Bisayas some 2,000 (7 years ago)' (question mark in original). A copy of the FAPE project proposal was appended to the letter:

**MEDIA**

Even with the notional backing of Bohol's governor, universities and
government departments did not respond and the field was left open to the tabloid press. The early reports, and the controversies they engendered, would have lasting consequences for the upland people of southeast Bohol. Ensuing media interest cycled through lulls and intensities, but with few exceptions journalists and commentators romanticized the Eskaya, either by elaborating fanciful histories for the people and their language, or by reproducing prior speculations as accepted fact. Interest from universities did not take hold until the 1990s, and even then the research was done entirely by graduate students of varied experience. These early media responses established the terms by which the Eskaya community were to be viewed, shaping public attitudes to the group and contributing, in no small measure, to a problematic dynamic that would later emerge between the Eskaya community and government agencies.

The month following Governor Butalid’s appeal to Ateneo de Manila, a short article in a nationally distributed magazine gave a more coherent picture of the Eskaya situation. According to its author, Erma Cuizon, the people of Taytay held in their possession a number of wooden tablets inscribed with origin myths, as well as books containing the same narratives (Cuizon, 1980). One of the stories recorded in the tablets was an epic account of an individual known as Pinay who lived in the year 500 (either BCE or CE) and who had received a visitation from Jesus in the town of Dauis. Another was a version of a well-known Boholano tale of a silver bell hidden in the depths of the Kamayaan river, near the town of Cortes. As for the script and language in which the stories were written, Cuizon stated that there were those who believed it was an ancestral form of Boholano–Visayan and showed traces of Greek.

Bisaya magazine took up the story with great enthusiasm the following year. “Iniskaya”: Karang Pinulongan sa Bohol, (“Eskaya: Ancient Language of Bohol”), was a feature headline in the magazine’s April edition for an article that reproduced most of Abregana’s earlier claims (Amparado, 1981). Here the journalist provided an exciting eyewitness account of his visit to Taytay’s school where 150 students were taught subjects such as history and mathematics in five classrooms with Eskayan as the primary medium of instruction. Fabian Baja, who was reported to have founded the school in 1963, informed Bisaya magazine that Eskayan was the first language of the Boholano people and had been brought to the island by the ancestor Pinay in about 600 CE. The language declined to a great extent at the hands of later-migrating Visayan speakers and was further threatened by the arrival of the Spanish and American colonizers. Yet the precious linguistic and literary legacy was carefully protected and handed down in an unbroken line from Pinay to the late Mariano Datahan. The celebrated Boholano rebel leader Francisco Dagohoy was said to be a native speaker of Eskayan, and the Visayan sentence Malubha ang pinulungan ni Dagohoy ug ang nga Bisaya (“Long live the language of Dagohoy and the Visayan people”) was duly translated into Eskayan, on behalf of the eager reporter, as Liberwi esto badaryo kon Dagohoy chedas esto may Bisaya. The author concluded with yet another appeal to send qualified researchers from Manila, specifically experts from the Philippine National Library and the Ministry of Education and Culture, on the grounds that the ancient materials here are related to our former culture and these should be made known to the present generation.

Two months later Bisaya published a much longer and even more sensationalizing article on the same topic, penned by Alberto Payot (Payot, 1981). Added to the fantastical claims about the esoteric powers of Mariano Datahan was an ability to make objects materialize at will and his clairvoyant prediction of the moon landing. In Payot’s account, the natives of Taytay and Babas were secretive in their use of Eskayan: for fear of persecution they spoke only Visayan in public. They were also afraid that the government would pursue the schools for operating without a license but recently, under the New Society of President Ferdinand Marcos they were emboldened to reveal their school to the public.

‘DEBUNKING’

It was not long after that the Eskaya community was ‘debunked’ in a Manila-based magazine (Logarta, 1981). After a brief sojourn in Taytay and consultation with a high-profile linguist at the University of the Philippines, investigative reporter Margarita Logarta concluded that the Eskaya were little more than a rural cult. Their language, moreover, was invented. The piece itself was not a wholesale vilification of the community, nor did it paint the Eskaya as the perpetrators of an elaborate hoax. Indeed, Logarta openly admired the tenacity of the Taytay community whose members subsisted in a virtually inaccessible part of the island, and commended their commitment to maintaining their own cultural education without any government support. She

Figure 2. Eskaya girls in traditional headwear reciting a lesson in Taytay, 1981 (Photograph: Tito Gomez)

Figure 3. Eskaya men standing for the national anthem, Taytay, 1981 (Photograph: Tito Gomez)
noted that the Eskaya students attended a community school where they learned the writing system, language and folklore, and the article was interspersed with color pictures of Eskaya men and women in traditional dress (Figs. 2 and 3).

But the mystical claims of previous journalists were roundly rejected and she took issue with the presumed indigeneity of the Eskayan language. After bringing samples of Eskayan text to the linguist Ernesto Constantino he commented, 'It might be an artificial language invented by one person or a group of persons. Like disguised speech when you don't want people to know what you're saying. Actually, you are using your own native language with some distortions and additions' (see also Kelly, 2012b). Her concluding explanation of the Eskaya phenomenon was permeated with an odd mixture of condescension, mockery, and sympathy:

[...] Baja and his followers continue to dream in their mountain aerie. That one day the government...the Ministry of Education...whoever will take heed and give them the roads they need to reach the flourishing lowland towns, repair their flimsy social hall so they can expand classes, shoulder the printing of Eskaya textbooks so no one will have to share, listen and encourage them for their puny efforts forging a language which they earnestly believe is 'sariling atin' [Tagalog: 'our own']. If not, well they are content to live again as they have for over 30 years. For people like them, accustomed to deprivation and neglect, there seems to be no other choice. (Logarta, 1981)

Brenda Abregana, whose earlier foray into Taytay had drawn attention to the group, was greatly dismayed by Logarta's feature. Now curator of the recently opened Bohol provincial museum, Abregana responded to Logarta's feature in an outraged letter to the editor of Who (Brenda Abregana to Cielo B. Buenaventura, 7 September, 1981). She forcefully objected to the label 'cult' as the misinterpretation of a 'mediocre mind'. The people of Taytay were, at most, 'cultists to the Eskaya legacy' but a careful investigation by school supervisors, teachers and government employees, had she explained already ascertained that they were an ordinary Christian community. But she went on to outline a 'tentative' theory that a form of Christianity existed in the Philippines prior to Spanish contact, citing a reference to the 'treasure island of Solomon' in the 'Spanish' writings of Pigafetta, a theory that could also be inferred 'with some evidence from the Eskaya script'. The Christianity of the Eskaya, she implied, was perhaps more genuine than that of mainstream Filipinos. As for the authenticity of their language, this too had been resolved with the aid of testimony from 'older persons of authority like priests', who had confirmed that the language was still used in the forested interior of Bohol prior to World War II.

There would be no more commentary on the Eskaya communities of Taytay and Biaabas until the middle of 1984 when Abregana drafted a detailed press release that would later be published with minimal editorial intervention under the headlines "Eskaya: The Living Fossil Language in Bohol" (Abregana, 1984) and "Eskaya, the living fossil language in Bohol - a legacy from the Etruscans" (Abregana, ca. 1984). Written for a nationwide audience, the article introduced the Eskaya as a mystical, secretive society descended from 'Semitic' Etruscans.

In March of the following year, Abregana made another fieldtrip to Taytay on her own initiative. The results were detailed in a letter to Governor Rolando Butalid and represented the last of her musings on the Eskaya before she suffered a stroke and passed away in 1986. Though her previous writings certainly reflected a fascination with the arcane, this letter marked a distinct shift towards fanaticism. In it she reported that she had managed to pass through a restricted area infiltrated by communist guerrillas to acquire three important Eskaya documents in Taytay. The first of these was a notebook dated 1908 and written in English, Spanish and Eskayan. It is still in the possession of the museum (see Fig. 4). The others comprised a blue notebook containing the Eskaya alphabet, and a photocopy of prayers in Eskayan. These last texts have not been seen since 1993 but it was reported to me that they were retrieved by Fabian Baja and returned to Taytay (A. Galambao, pers. comm.).

In any event, the documents bequeathed to the museum were relatively trivial artifacts in Abregana's view. The Eskaya, she maintained, were the likely guardians of the lost Book of Enoch, and another text that spoke of the past and future entitled Ang Sagbut ni Marilen Kinadakan ug Kinaagayan sa yuta ('Grass of Marilen, The Biggest and the Smallest in the Land'). In her presence the Eskaya revealed ancient carvings that proved that unicorns existed and had once been used by humans for finding water. Another artefact depicted a creature known as a salinao 'smaller than a lion with a snout like a pig which possessed wings like the bat'. She went on to reveal a deep secret intimated to her by the head Eskaya teacher which she had promised to conceal under solemn oath, an oath she would not 'have to violate for the sake of Science'. Somewhere in the mountains of Bohol was the lost City of the Sun where the world's destiny was controlled by three judges, and goods could be obtained cheaply by all. The site of the city could not yet be disclosed since the world was about to be renewed. Far from merely reporting ethnographic details from local folklore, Abregana presented this information as a series of stand-alone facts for the urgent attention of the governor:

Talk of unicorns and winged pigs may not necessarily have been beyond the pale for the fantastical realm of Visayan tabloids, but some of those who knew her recall that in this period her grasp of reality was increasingly tenuous. A 15-year-old who did not discuss her research openly, she sometimes failed to recognize her children (F. Licong, pers. comm.) and under her curatorship the provincial museum began to include mystical exhibits of doubtful historical worth (M. Luspo, pers. comm.). After reading this letter Governor Butalid might well have been reconsidering the wisdom of having appointed her to the cura-
torship when the small museum opened in 1981.

After Abregana passed away, the esoteric narrative of the Eskaya was pursued by Jes Tirol, a columnist for The Bohol Chronicle, whose father had been the personal attorney to Mariano Datahan. As a child Jes had visited Biabas with his father and recalled hearing the language spoken spontaneously but was dismayed at its rapid decline (J. Tirol, pers. comm.). The earliest of his columns to address the Eskaya question bore the provocative title 'Bohol: a New Jerusalem?' (Tirol, 1989), and for the most part, Tirol's insistence on the antiquity of Eskaya culture and its Semitic origins rested on the results a cave expedition he undertook in 1985, in which he claimed to have discovered ancient Eskaya writings.

INSTITUTIONAL TRIBEHOO

The Eskaya were not recognized by agencies of the national government until the Office of Southern Cultural Communities (OSCC) was formed in 1987. In this year, the University of Bohol presented the new body with 'write ups' about the Eskaya, which became the basis of approved development projects for the group. Until this time, the Eskaya, among other lately registered Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs), had not necessarily used the term 'tribe' (or tribal) to define themselves but the new bureaucracy obliged them to form an official 'tribal council'. One of Mariano Datahan's surviving sons, Juan, became chief of Biabas and neighboring Lundok. Fabian Baja was chief of Taytay and Julio Sajol was made chief of nearby Canta-ub (S. Am-playo, pers. comm.).

Shortly after this new terminology was introduced, the legal status of the Eskaya as an Indigenous Cultural Community was disputed by the National Museum prompting the editor of the Bohol Chronicle to commission a series of articles on the subject from Jes Tirol. For Tirol, the term 'tribe' in particular required defense and elaboration. In the first of these articles, "Eskaya of Bohol: Is It a Tribe?" (Tirol, 1993) he argued that the National Museum had questioned the legitimacy of the Eskaya as a tribe simply because, in his words, they were 'practically indistinguishable' from other Boholanos in appearance. Instead, the community were members of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente even if they practiced an 'early revolutionary form of that church'.

Prior to this 1993 article, Tirol had never used the term 'tribe' to describe the Eskaya. Here, however, he was at pains to point out that the Eskaya were not 'a primitive tribe like the Aeta or Badjao but rather a highly developed tribe similar to the Biblical twelve tribes of Israel, which is practically the role model of the Eskaya'. Even so, he advised, the Eskaya did not accept the word 'tribe' at all, preferring instead to be understood as a 'cultural minority', and to be called 'Bisayan Declarado' instead of 'Visayan Eskaya' or any other term. In essence, the Eskaya viewed themselves primarily as Boholanos who continued to practice early Boholano culture. Indeed, it was Tirol's view that mainstream Boholanos had, in fact, simply deviated from these ancient indigenous traditions, even though the celebrated Boholano values of social unity and piety had been successfully passed forward from their Eskaya forebears.

Three days after the article was published, Zosimo Campos, the Regional Director of the OSCC, wrote a letter to Undersecretary Lorenzo Dimalayan at the Central Office of the OSCC in Manila (Campos unpublished data 23 June, 1993).
His aim was to clarify rumors that the Central Office had obtained an unofficial report suggesting that the Eskaya were ‘not true ICC’. Campos appealed to Dinlajan to intervene, drawing attention to the fact that if the Eskaya claim of indigeneity were proved untenable, resources directed towards their development could be more fairly allocated to other minorities in the region. The letter mentioned that a proposed development program from the local branch of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was now stalled and could not proceed without a formal resolution. According to Campos, the question of Eskaya authenticity had been raised by Bohol’s governor David Tirol in conversation with President Fidel Ramos, during the latter’s recent visit to the island. The status of the group needed to be determined quickly. Campos argued, as this had now become a question of national interest. To aid the process he appended a clipping of Jes Tirol’s “Eskaya of Bohol: Is it a Tribe?” for the purposes of ‘ready reference and information’.

The controversy ultimately failed to interfere with the fledgling partnership between the government and the Eskaya: in February of 1996 President Fidel Ramos himself formally presented the community with a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC), a document that granted negotiating rights over resources in 3,173 hectares of land in upland southeast Bohol. By the following year; the Congress of the Philippines passed the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), which mandated the merging of the OSCC into a new entity called the National Indigenous Peoples’ Organization (NIPAO). The Act formalized a process for cultural minorities to gain rights over their ancestral lands, not dissimilar to Australia’s Native Title Act. In essence, a group could make a claim over a territory on the basis of continued occupation, and this claim might subsequently progress to a determination of Title. The Act also stipulated that any claim area that had been delineated by the DENR prior to IPRA – as per the Eskaya claim – would remain in place and was exempt from satisfying the new provisions contained in the Act.

Shortly before IPRA’s enactment in September of 1997, new Eskaya chieftains were appointed for villages beyond Biabas and Taytay that had mixed Eskaya and non-Eskaya populations. The OSCC service center in Bohol became the NCIP service center and business continued as usual. The damaging report that Zosimo Campos had referred to in 1993 never materialized, but the issue did not go away. In 2005, the new regional director for Region VII, Alfonso Catolin, wrote directly to the Anthropology Division of the National Museum, pressing for more details.

Jesus Peralta responded:

Dear Director Catolin:
The National Museum’s Anthropology Division did conduct a study on the Eskaya in Bohol some years back in which I was involved. The study was intensive and included documentation of whatever information and literature there are about the group. These materials are with the National Museum.

The general findings are that the Eskaya is a quasi-group/pseudo-group, more of a cult rather than a distinct ethnic group. What distinguishes an ethnic group primarily is the language they speak, since language is the culture bearer. The people in their daily conversation use Boholano and their general culture is in fact also Boholano with central Visayan characteristics.

The so-called Eskaya language is only taught in their schools, and not actually used domestically. All languages in the Philippines at present belong to the Austronesian family of languages, specifically the Malayo-Polynesian branch. The so-called Eskaya language has no relationship whatever with this family of languages. Strange enough even though the group is located in Bohol, their so-called language has no affinities with the surrounding languages – a situation that is rather incredible.

A lexico-statistical computer-generated modeling shows that Eskaya has an index of affinity with Boholano by only 0.1114865; and with Cebuano, only 0.0855019 – which shows practically zero affinity. A cross-check on the word list done on this group by Mr. Ederick Miano of the Cebu Branch of the National Museum showed that there are no words in the list of at least 70 words common to Philippine languages. The language, in effect, is artificially devised, like a secret code by the core of a group of people.

The Eskaya script also has no relationship with any of the ancient forms of writing in the Philippines, nor even with those existing in the rest of Asia – which again makes it incredible. This writing was devised by one man named Pinay, by their own admission, which makes it an invention rather than being one that is evolved by a culture. [...] Nothing of their claims to a distinct ethnicity like, for instance, the Ifugao, Maranao, Cebuano, etc. can be validated anthropologically. The people merely belongs to the Boholano ethnicity – a distinct segment of that due to their intimacy of contact with each other, and nothing more [Peralta’s emphasis]. The group can be regarded like the Moncao colony that existed formerly in Lanao del Sur: This is like saying that the Hangulu or Yattuka are not distinct ethnic groups but are merely members of the Ifugao ethnicity. [...] Best Regards.

Dr. Jesus T. Peralta
Consultant NCCA
(Peralta to Catolin, 23 February, 2005)
It appears extraordinary that the results of the National Museum survey – albeit in summarized form – took more than 20 years to be communicated from one government department to another. But despite Peralta’s insistence that the study was intensive, the fieldwork itself had occurred more as a consequence of favorable circumstances than any active charter on the part of the museum. In other words, there was no imperative to do the study in the first place, let alone publicize the conclusions. On top of this, no less than two national uprisings, in 1986 and 2001, had taken place in the intervening years, the first of which brought about significant upheavals within the government apparatus.

By the time I interviewed Peralta in February 2006 the report could no longer be found in the archives of the Anthropology Division. If this document had been archived by the OSCF prior to 1987, a Master’s dissertation between the Eskaya community and the Philippine government might well have followed a very different trajectory. Instead, Peralta’s letter and the summary it contained became a trick point of contention that developed between the Region VII office of the NCIP in Iloilo City, Panay, and the Eskaya Tribal Council in Bohol. Since a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim had already been issued by the DENR, the negotiating rights it entailed remained beyond dispute. But the Tribal Council’s application to progress to a determination of Title became mired in stalemate as the status of the group vis-a-vis IPRA was reduced to a matter of mixed interpretation. The deadlock is unresolved to this day despite House Resolution submitted by the Bayan Muna Party on 20 January, 2009. ‘Urging the Committee on National Cultural Minorities to conduct an investigation, in aid of legislation, on the various controversies, including the decline of their linguistic and cultural traditions, that hound the indigenous Eskaya tribe, the cultural minority on the island of Bohol’.

Within IPRA, Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) and Indigenous Peoples (IPs) were defined in any of three ways (see note 10 for the full definition): a) a group of people who recognized themselves as a group and had continuously occupied an area of land while sharing language, culture and traditions since time immemorial; or b) those who had culturally resisted colonization to the extent that they had become historically differentiated from other Filipinos; or c) those who were descended from pre-Hispanic populations and who had retained some of their social, economic, cultural and political institutions. As I will outline below, later research into the Eskaya was to confirm certain aspects of these definitions – especially b) – but contradict other elements.

**NEW RESEARCH AND ESKAYA RESPONSES**

What is of interest in Peralta’s summary of the missing report is his emphasis on language. As the ‘culture bearer’, Peralta saw language as carrying the burden of proof for ethnic identity and authenticity. Using computational comparative methods, he suggested, any language relationship could be statistically quantified and its speakers ‘validated anthropologically’. Whether lexicostatistical analysis could be treated as sufficient evidence for ethnolinguistic identity is arguably a long bow to draw. What is of significance, however, is that this was the first time that established methodologies from academic disciplines other than any active charter on the part of the Eskaya. Indeed, the failure of both the media and government to come to grips with the issue left the field open to a succession of Filipino graduate students.

The first of these was Milan Ted Torralba, a seminar at the time, who had assembled some preliminary descriptions of Eskayan. His motivation was to investigate the history of the language and in particular to address the hypothesis that Eskayan was related to languages outside the Philippines (Torralba, 1991a, 1991b). Keen to undertake a Masters dissertation in linguistics, he later submitted a thesis proposal under the title ‘A linguistic investigation into the origin and structure of the Eskaya-Bisayan ethnolanguage’ (Torralba, 1993). Sadly, his superiors urged him to abandon this work and pursue Canon law instead.

The following year, Cristina Martinez submitted a comparative literature thesis (1993) which remains the most sympathetic and well rounded study on the Eskaya available even though access to the document is hard to obtain for those living in Bohol. While she included some linguistic data, Martinez focused largely on Eskaya literature which she viewed as a unique postcolonial product. Nonetheless, she was prepared to hypothesize that ‘Inesekaya [Eskayan] is a highly acculturated linguistic phenomenon, probably overdetermined by an ideology of a single person, probable traces of some linguistic data that may have pre-Hispanic origins, and a communal response to a post-colonial situation’ (1993, pp. 145-146). The possibility of an ‘artificial’ origin for Eskayan was described in admiring terms: ‘If the language is a pure concoction, then the concoction is even more incredible. The highly consistent lexicon, the syntax, the tests. [...] The pure gustom that is involved in this highly elaborate, meticulously implemented agenda’ (68).

It wasn’t until 2005 that a clear grammatical sketch of Eskayan was produced by the honors student Stella Consul (2005). Of interest in Consul’s description was the fact that Eskayan syntax appeared to be virtually identical to that of Cebuano-Visayan although Consul did not suggest reasons for this correspondence.

Eskaya voices are conspicuously scarce in media bulletins and government documents. From my interviews with Eskaya teachers it is clear that they were neither oblivious nor indifferent to the attention surrounding their community and its language. Editions of magazines reporting on the Eskaya found their way to Taytay and Bilabas at the time of publication, and the coverage was generally regarded as positive. However, core elements of theories suggested by Abregana and Tirol, and reproduced by Amparado, Payot and Echeminada, ran counter to prevailing orthodox views within the community. Eskaya people
insist that their ancestors are traditionally understood to have arrived from western Sumatra and not from far-flung locations in Europe or the Middle East. The language meanwhile was quintessentially Boholano, having been divinely transmitted to the people through the vessel of Pinay, recognized as their first inumudikur (‘Popo’). However, the outsider views of Abregana and Tirol were never wholly rejected, and are still considered by many Eskaya leaders as acceptable expansions of a fluid historical consciousness. Indeed, a framed copy of Jes Tirol’s “Eskaya of Bohol: Is it a Tribe?” [Tirol, 1993] hangs in the schoolroom in Taytay to this day. For Hilario Galambao, current chief-tain of Taytay, the views expressed in that article were not entirely consonant with Eskaya positions although he was hesitant to be specific. The importance of the article, for Galambao, lay in the attention and recognition it brought to his community. On the other hand, Logarta’s article (Logarta, 1981) was experienced by many as a devastating betrayal, particularly her characterization of the Eskaya as a cult. Peralta’s provocative response to Catolin (above) was made available under the provisions of government transparency, prompting a lengthy response from Col. Databan and Elpidio Palaca, the ‘tribal bishop’ of the Eskaya. In their eight-page ‘Joint Manifestation’, sent to multiple branches of the NCIP (but not the museum), Databan and Palaca responded to Peralta’s arguments point-by-point. All available theories, no matter how disparate, were rallied to defend the language. As a result of the charge of being a cult, including new details not seen in earlier commentaries. In particular the two men advanced a theory that surviving shamanic practices in Bohol were evidence of an indigenous culture that had been protected from colonial authorities by the historical rebels Tamblot and Dagohoy.

WHAT THE ESKAYAN LANGUAGE REVEALS

In 2005 I began an internship at the NCIP to record and evaluate the Eskayan language. My early efforts were directed to compiling, summarizing and reviewing all existing commentaries on the Eskaya, which I gathered from archives in Bohol, Cebu and Manila (see Kelly, 2006a). I was later given unrestricted access to the Eskaya villages where I made recordings of Eskayan speech, photographed traditional literature and elicited core vocabulary for the purposes of a comparative cognate analysis. I found that Eskayan was not lexically related to other languages of the region (including the west of Sumatra from where the Eskaya are said to have migrated), nor was it at all likely to have a connection to Hebrew, Etruscan or Latin (Kelly, 2006b, p. 18). Later, as a PhD scholar I spent a further six months in southeast Bohol, over the dry periods of 2009 to 2011 researching the history of the language and its speakers. Contrary to the three origin stories offered by commentators – that the language is indigenous, displaced or fabricated – Eskaya tradition holds that the language was the creation of the heroic ancestor Pinay in the year AD 600. Taking the human body for inspiration, Pinay fashioned a unique and distinctly Boholano tongue for his people. Known simply as Bisaya’, Pinay’s creation is believed by its speakers to antedate the ‘imposter’ language of the same name (‘Visayan’ in English) that would later come to dominate the island, all but destroying Bohol’s true linguistic legacy. But Pinay’s Bisaya’, terminologically differentiated as Eskay in the 1950s, was encapsulated in a script, allowing it to be carved onto tablets and stored for posterity. Thus, it was that veteran soldier Mariano Databan (ca. 1875-1949) who was able retrieve Pinay’s suppressed language and breathe new life into it amongst his followers in Biabas.

It became obvious to me that both traditional and outsider narratives of the origins of Eskayan were not categorically distinct but turned on competing beliefs about the nature of indigeneity, of original creation versus ‘fabrication’, what language means and the degree of agency that a community is permitted to exert within and over its culture. But if the Eskayan language was, as some media pundits claimed, evidence of a ‘fossilized’ indigenous culture that had withstood the ravages of successive colonial occupations, this hypothesis deserves serious scrutiny. After all, a pre-Hispanic origin for Eskayan is still compatible with positions taken by its speakers, even if the language was, in the traditional account, created by an ancestral individual. In this scenario, Eskayan might well be comparable to Damin, an ancient engineered Australian language once used by initiated men on Mornington Island and attributed to the ancestor Klah (Hale & Nash, 1997). Alternatively, the account of Pinay’s creativity might simply be a post-hoc origin myth to explain the existence of a distinctive minority language in an area of relative linguistic homogeneity. Languages with well-established natural lineages have been associated in folklore with creative ancestors.

THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF INDIGENEITY

My final analysis of the grammar and lexicon of Eskayan tended, however, to broadly corroborate the traditional accounts. Eskayan morphosyntax is derived from that of Boholano-Visayan with a number of ingenious adaptations (Kelly, 2012a), while its lexicon of over 3,000 unique terms takes phonological and semantic inspiration from Visayan, Spanish and, to a lesser degree, English (Kelly, 2012b, 2012c). Like the baybayin writing systems of the pre-colonial Philippines, the complex Eskayan script makes use of an inherent vowel for certain characters, but its principle source of inspiration is quite clearly the Roman alphabet (Kelly, 2012c). Fixing a precise date on Pinay’s creation of Eskayan is a more challenging prospect, but patterns of borrowing provide some clues. For example, Spanish loans in Eskayan do not automatically cluster around terms for introduced items, as they do in other Philippine languages; e.g., Visayan tindigur (‘fork’) from the Spanish tenedor (‘fork’). Thus the Eskayan words for ‘bell tower’ (Eskayan: hontun), ‘factory’ (pulup) ‘metre’ (biril), ‘photograph’ (amisam) and Wednesday (mibul) are evidently not borrowed from Spanish as they are in Visayan and Tagalog, while more universal concepts
like 'sun' (astru) and 'skin' (piyil) are likely to have been inspired by the Spanish astro ('star') and piel ('skin'). Drawing on linguistic, historiographic and genealogical evidence I have proposed a scenario in which the notional entity Pinay created and transmitted Eskayan within a single generation. Although my scenario is too detailed to go into here I have ultimately suggested a twentieth-century origin for most of the vocabulary (see especially Kelly, 2012c).

Be that as it may, the fact that many Eskaya people have, in recent decades, chosen to identify as indigenous, is in my view, a legitimate discursive adaptation to changes in the political and legal landscape. Since the earliest years of Spanish occupation in the Philippines, a mostly arbitrary divide was established between Christianized lowlanders speaking major languages, and highland communities living beyond the reach of the state. As early as the colonial project as 1604, Pedro Chirino differentiated Aeta communities as antiguos ('ancient') or bárbaros ('wild') (Chirino, [1604] 1890, pp. 38-39) in direct contrast to the more modern and settled Visayans. As the Spanish began establishing more parishes in the lowlands, all highland linguistic minorities were to be lumped together as indígenas montesas ('mountain dwelling natives'), tingguianes ('savages'), remontados ('mountain fugitives') or rebeldes ('rebels'). As elsewhere in the Philippines, ethnomelodic differences, distance from governing institutions or a simple refusal to assimilate to orthodox Christianity were conflated and rebranded as barbarism and rebellion. This binary was given further theoretical impetus in the late nineteenth century when intellectuals such as Isabelo de los Reyes suggested that the ancestors of lowlander Filipinos had arrived from Sumatra or Borneo. Pursuing this narrative, H. Otley Beyer proposed that these immigrants had used their superior technology to colonize the coastal regions, pushing the original inhabitants into the mountains, a theory that is now well and truly discredited (Scott, 1982, 1992).

It was this artificial indigenous/non-indigenous dichotomy that the American authorities inherited. Fresh from experiences with native populations on the US frontier; American administrators referred to Filipino highland minorities as 'tribes' presided over by chiefs, and this terminology has more recently been transposed to the legal construct of Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICC) within IPRA. However, to recognize the historical fact that all ICCs are legal and lexical fictions does not necessarily invalidate the strategic use of this category as a mechanism for governance, development, or even social identity. Anthropologists in the post-structuralist paradigm have long argued that communities everywhere are imagined and that cultures are invented, even if the assertion of the integrity, tangibility and stability of 'culture' and 'community' may be paradoxically necessary for the purposes of political recognition. Vicente Rafael has pointed out that mainstream ethnomelodic categories such as Tagalog, 'ilocano' and 'visayan' were the inventions of Spanish writers, a fact which does not undermine the social density of these concepts today (Rafael, 1988, p. 16). Elsewhere, such a self-identification with constructed tribohood has been described as 'entification', the process by which a social-political entity comes into being (Ernth, 1999). In this context it is crucial to emphasize that the category 'Eskaya' is just as entified as 'Tagalog', 'Filipino' or 'American', and just as socially meaningful, too.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Publicity for the Eskaya could never hope to reach the same sensational heights as the Tasaday story. First championed by a reclusive mystic of limited means, the Eskaya failed to interest a wide audience; even within Bohol news of the community was poorly disseminated. Nevertheless, when the Eskaya of Tañay first became an object of 'admiration' in the early 1980s, the reaction, even if muted, popular responses of the Tasaday discovery. Disconnected from town centers and coastal networks, the isolationist community of southeast Bohol become a screen onto which lowlanders projected their fantasies of an uncolonized and uncorrupted Boholano society. As custodians of indigenous texts in an inscrutable language and script, the Eskaya were imagined as all things at once: they were backward and uncorrupted, innocent and wise, innately Boholano and exotic. Their language was alternatively Greek, Hebrew or indigenous, and their writings were both sacred scriptures and heretical fictions.

But just as the Tasaday had been 'outed' by critics, the Eskaya were very quickly accused of participating in an anthropological confidence trick, albeit on a smaller scale. Critically, both the Eskaya and the Tasaday communities came to light during the Martial Law period (1972-1985), at a time when the virtues of 'truth' and 'innocence' were in short supply. Anyone could be suspected of running an ulterior agenda and indeed, in the case of the Tasaday; both the supporters and detractors of the 'Stone Age' narrative overreached dramatically in their depictions of the situation. What all the various players had in common, however, was an uncritical notion of 'indigeneity' as an authentic mode of being, a much desired counterbalance to the perceived artifice of modernity. Ultimately, it was the failure of the Tasaday and the Eskaya to live up to the demands of indigenous authenticity, as defined by lowlanders, that provoked a crisis. To this day, the association of a counterfeit Tasaday tribe with an illegitimate regime remains dominant, and there is still widespread resistance throughout the Philippines to any alternatives to the hoax narrative. Similarly, the Eskaya controversy can be seen as a product of political disenchantment as much as it reflects a lingering anxiety that isolated mountain communities might disappoint the romantic expectations of lowlanders. Perhaps to their detriment, the Eskaya have always insisted that their language – if not their culture as a whole – is the product of the human creative intellect. If, ultimately, we accept this to be true of all languages and cultures, there can be nothing radical or disturbing in such a proposition.
What does all this mean for the future of research on the Eskaya? And what are the implications of this ever-expanding research for the political status of the Eskaya, especially with respect to the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act?

Unlike the Tasaday, the Eskaya escaped the fate of becoming an international sensation and scandal, but the lack of attention has also resulted in a paucity of reliable ethnographic and linguistic research. With a few exceptions, such as the work of Martinez (1993), researchers were distracted by fanciful ideas that do not coincide with the orthodox views of Eskaya people. To begin with, my article has advocated a community-centric approach to defining 'community' itself, accepting that all such categories are historically contingent. Nations are rarely obliged to defend their own inherent artificiality – the burden of authenticity always appears to lie with those who seek protection and concessions from them. In any event, no serious analysis of the Eskaya has yet emerged to unequivocally contradict all three definitions of 'indigenous' within IPRA summarized earlier. Taking for granted that all nation states have a legal duty to protect and recognize cultural minorities, whatever their status may be, the Eskaya of Bohol provide a rich case study for examining the inevitable complexities that arise when any group is forced to adapt to pre-fabricated and ill-fitting categories. If the answer to the question is neither 'true' nor 'false', neither 'indigenous' nor 'hoax', then the question itself needs to be revised. Or as Eric Wittersheim asked provocatively, 'Does the native cease to become "authentic" the moment he departs from the classical grids of ethnoology? [...] shouldn't it be up to the ethnographer to revise his own categories?' (Wittersheim, 1999, p. 190). The concept of indigeneity (and non-indigeneity) is still new to the Philippines and remains ambiguous in its application; useful legislation will need to reflect this complexity.

With respect to the future of research into the Eskaya, I share the optimism of Federated Provincial Tribal Chieflain Col. Roberto Datanah who has made every effort to shine a light on his people in southeast Bohol. What has been revealed so far is a rich literature, a proud history that echoes the anti-colonial Dagohoy insurgency, a unique culture and a sophisticated linguistic artefact that is more art than engineering. In short, this so-called 'primitive' highland people have made an extraordinary contribution to Bohol's cultural heritage and much more remains for outsiders to learn from them. Whether such a research leads to a re-categorization of the Eskaya or a salutary revision of our own ethnological and juridical grids, remains to be seen.

ENDNOTES

1 These were made available to me by Col. Roberto Datanah.

2 Salome Ramos has informed me that the application was written by Brenda Abregana.

3 "[..] kay ang mga butang nga kanaan diin nahlambigat ang atong kultura sa kanhiay, aangay mang masayran sa mga ultahing kaliwatan.'

4 No such reference exists in Pigafetta's journal. Abregana was probably referring to the voyages of Alvaro de Mendaña who sailed to the Pacific from Peru in an effort to find the biblical land of Ophir from whence King Solomon sourced his gold. Mendaña came across the Solomon Islands which he named in honor of this mission.

5 Cristina Martinez described her as 'a quaint old lady who has devoted almost an entire lifetime curating for a museum which contains artifacts with no "national museum value"' (1993, p. 229).


7 In 'Traces of Hebrew Influence' (1991) Tirol wrote that the Eskaya are 'recognized by the government as a tribal group or cultural minority' but chose to focus on proving that the community was a displaced Hebrew clan as opposed to an indigenous Filipino tribe.

8 The actual date of the report is unknown. In the interview, Peralta told me he thought it was compiled some time in the 1970s. This was also the recollection of Artemio Barbosa, curator of the Anthropology Division. Hector Santos is believed to have obtained a copy but could not be contacted. Of the six pages in the possession of Col. Roberto Datanah, none are dated, but there is mention of a 71-year-old man from Biabas referred to as 'Mang Masyong'. If his identity and birth year can be found, this would clarify the age of the report.

9 From House Resolution 943 introduced on 20 January 2009 by Bayan Muna representatives Satur C Ocampo, Tiendoro A Casiño, Anaipawis representative Rafael V Mariano and Gabriela representatives Luzviminda C Ilagan and Liza Maza. The text of the house resolution was copied almost entirely from a Wikipedia entry on the Eskaya, largely written by me.

10 ‘Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples refer to a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, nonindigenous religions and cultures, became historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. ICSS/IPs shall likewise include peoples who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, at the time of conquest or colonization, or at the time of inroads of nonindigenous religions and cultures, or the establishment of present state boundaries, who retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, but who may have been displaced from their traditional domains or who may have resettled outside their ancestral domains [...]’ (Congress of the Philippines, 1997, section 3h, p.4)
One copy is available for review by appointment at the Gubiano Studies Center at the University of San Carlos, Cebu City. Another is available in the thesis section of the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

In their rebuttal Datahan and Palaca argued the following: that Eskaya were the original settlers of Bohol from whom 'mainstream' Boholanos had later split; that the Eskayan script bore similarities to Egyptian, Phoenician, Arabic, Javanese and Hebrew writing systems, as well as the script found on the Butuan silver strip; that Tirol’s 1985 exploration of the Inambakan cave bore out these connections; that the language itself was connected to Sanskrit, and a short comparative table of Eskayan and Sanskrit numbers was provided to illustrate this; that the 'great leader' Mariano Datahan secured permission to teach in Eskayan from President Manuel Quezon in 1937; that during the Spanish era, the authorities had a policy of arresting any practitioner of Eskaya culture as insuritaks (rebels), leading both Tamblot and Dagohoy to fight back and protect the native babaylan (shamanic) religion; that thanks to the Dagohoy rebellion the territorial integrity of the present Eskaya Ancestral Domain survived intact; further, this babaylan religion was still present in other parts of Bohol and witnessed in beliefs concerning the tambalan ('medicine men') and diwatahan ('nature spirits'); that babaylan chapels could still be found in Fatima, Timawa and Balingsaso, though many Eskaya had now converted to the Philippine Independent Church; that artefacts were held in the Museo Nacional in Madrid, proving that Boholanos had a distinct language and alphabet, and that they possessed ancient documents prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

No response from the regional office of the NCIP was forthcoming.

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