

# Typography design in native (indigenous) Scripts

## Development of a typeface from the handwritten Sinhala *plakkatens* of Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** The catalogue of the Archives; of the Dutch central government of coastal Ceylon 1640-1796 is compiled by M.W. Jurriaanse that documents *plakkatens* of the 18th century. As an organized administration the central and local government of Ceylon issued proclamations, publications and orders to its people using *plakkatens* (affixed notices). These were initially handwritten and later printed with the start of the printing press in the Island.

The Initial handwritten *plakkatens* were inked on paper. A medium alien to the Sinhala calligrapher as the stylus was replaced with the pen/ quill. It is evident that by observing all the handwritten *plakkatens* in Jurriaanse catalogue two types of handwritten styles (Calligraphic style A and Calligraphic style B) stand out proving that two individuals were employed to pursue this task of writing. Out of 67 *plakkatens* 15 were handwritten among which four *plakkatens*; two of each calligraphic style were closely observed at the National Archives, Colombo. The stroke that starts and ends each letter is divided into ten categories proposed by Prof. J. B. Dissanayake in his book Sinhala Graphology (2006, 350-357). The flow of ink from dark to light, ink traps, ink blots; breaks of the strokes were closely examined with the use of a loupe (small magnification device used by current day printer) to identify the construction of the two calligraphic styles.

The letterforms of style A and B were further illustrated and studied to learn the thick and thin contrast of each letter and on how the pen/ quill was held by the scribe. The two styles varies immensely in shape and structure with two apparent differences in style: one with cursive yet a rectangular shape with large counter space, the other with control and care, density in colour, with defined forms and proportions. The latter has more prominence and was further analyzed to propose a digital letterform for contemporary use. Wotzkow states that

“During early letterpress printing, the most popular local handwritten books were used as a basis for type designs and the types cut by several of the new printing establishments were really nothing but carefully carved copies of contemporary

manuscript letters (Wotzkow 1952:134).

But in this case it is evident that the selected calligraphic style B had no significant influence towards the first Sinhala printed letter even though it is documented in the same catalogue of Jurriaanse's, Yet it is an example of the Sinhala characters, which are not of high-contrast but refined and readable to the general public. The calligraphic style's essence of scarcely controlled yet uniformed stroke works together to achieve the purpose of the document.

This research is a preliminary investigation of the Sinhala written forms as it interprets many of the early representations of the various characters and combinations, its styles and how the stroke of the letter start and end. It suggests the choices made in the construction of the Sinhala handwritten character and proposes a typeface for further development.

*Key words: plakkatens, Sinhala typeface, Sinhala calligraphy*

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