Lekwaikaw: A new "ancient" writing system of Karen

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Lekwaikaw (/lèʔkwɛ̀kɔ̀/ or /lìʔkwɛ̀kɔ̀/ in Sgaw Karen) is a script of Karen that began to be known around the year 2000. It is believed by some Karens to be the ancient script of the Karen people. The purpose of this presentation is the following two points.

(1) To show the correspondence between the system of Lekwaikaw and the phonological system of Sgaw Karen (the Hpa-an dialect).

(2) To examine whether Lekwaikaw is truly an ancient script.

Three most commonly used Karen scripts

ဖျုံၣ်ဆိုၣ်ဒ်ဖော်ဟ်သယ်ယိုၣ် ဟွ့မာသာမၢ်မ့ၣ် ဖၢ်ၣ်ဆုံ
ယၢ်ၣ်ချါသိုၣ်လှ့။ စးလဲစ်ဖိုၣ် ကၢင်းထၢင်းသာ လုံ့ဆိုၣ်ဒ်ဆဖၢ်ၣ့
ခေါဟ်ကှ့ၣ် အှ်ၣ်လုံ့ကၢၣ်၊ မ့ိမးလုံ့ကၢၣ်းသာလိုၣ်စးကှ့ၣ် အၢးဝေ့
လှ့။ ဆုံယၢ်ၣ်ချါ ပုဂ်ထၢၣ်း လိက်ဖျုံ့ၣ်ဆွှၢၣ်းဖၢ်စ်ဖိုၣ် သေ့ၣ်ယၢ့ၣ်
လေၣ်မာလောၣ်ဟ်ကြောၣ်၊ လိက်ဖျုံ့ကှ့ၣ် အှ်ၣ်ယၢၢ်လှ့။ မၢ
လောၣ်ဟ် ကြောၣ်ဟှုံၣ်ယုဂ်သီး ကြ့ၣ်စိုၣ်ဒ်ကေၣ် ကြ့ၣ်စိုၣ်ဒ်ပၢ်ၣ်
လၢၣ်မာယှု့ၣ်ယၢၣ်ကြောၣ်သာလုံ့ကဲ့ ဆုံမ့ၣ်အၢၣ်းမိုၣ့ ချုဂ်မၢ
လောၣ်ဟ်ထၢၣ် ဖျုံ့သယ်ၣ်သုၣ် မၢသေ့ၣ်အၢၣ်း။ မၢသေ့ၣ်ယုဂ်သီး
မၢကဲ့အၢၣ်း။ ဆိုၣ်ဒ်လိက်လၢဲၣ်ဖၢၣ့ခေါဟ် သုၣ်းဆၢၣ်း သာ
ဆၢၣ်း၊ သုၣ်းၣိုၣ်သာၣိုၣ် သာဟျၢၣ်ၣ်ဖၢၣ်ၣ်လုံ့အှ်ၣ်စး သာမိုၣ့
အှ်ၣ်လၢၣ်ကၢၣ့သီး သှ့ၣ်ဒ္ုၣ်းဆုံလှ့။

Buddhist Pwo Karen Script (created by Karen Buddhist monks probably during the period between the late 18c and the first half of the 19c.)
Generally known as Eastern Pwo Karen Script (see Kato 2021a)

ပှၩဖျိၭၣ်ၡ်အဆၩချ့ၭဖျိၩၖ့အကဲ့ၭၩၥၼ အီၩဝ့ၢဘဲၢ
နီၩအၪ်ၭ လၩဆၩချ့ၭၩၥၼအဖၩၭ့ၣ်ၭၩလီၢ. ဆၩချ့ၭၩၥၼ
ထီၭအလူ့ၣ်အဖၩၭ့ၣ်ၭ အီၩဒဲအခီၢ်ၭပၩဲ့ၢၩၥၼ ဒဲဆၩချ့ၭၖ့ၭ
အကဲ့ၭၩၥၼဆ္ အီၩဒဲအခီၢ်ၭပၩဲ့ၢဒဲ ထီၭအထီၭၣ်ဘ့ၭထဲ့ၣ်
ဆၩချ့ၭဖျိၭၣ်အကဲ့ၭဂ့ၢဝ့ၩၥၼၣ်ၭ အခီၢ်ၭပၩဲ့ၢအီၩထ့ၭထဲ့ၣ်
ဝ့ၢမ့ဲၣ်ဂ့ၢၭ, အခီၢ်ၭပၩဲ့ၢအၭၣ်လဲၭၣ်ထဲ့ၣ်အၩၭမ့ဲၣ်ဂ့ၢနီၩၭလီၢ.
ထီၭယီၭၣ်ၭပမီဆီ့ၣ်ၡ်မီၩၭၣ်ဆၩချ့ၭဒ့ၭၣ်ဒၩၣ်စံၭၣ်ဆၩယီၭၣ် ဘဲၢယီၭၣ်
အၪ်ၭၣ်လီၢ.

Christian Pwo Karen Script (created by American Baptist missionaries in 1840s)
Generally known as Western Pwo Karen Script (see Kato 2021a, 2022)

စးထီၣ်ဖဲ ဟီၣ်ခိၣ်ဖိ အတၢ်စံၣ်စိၤတဲစိၤ ဘၣ်တၢ်
သ့ၣ်ညါထီၣ်ဝဲ ဒီးတူၤလီၤလၢ စိၤခဲအံၤဒၣ်လဲ�ာ် ပှၤပိာ်မုၣ် တဖၣ်
ပှၤပာ်ပနီၣ်အီၤ ဒ်အမ့ၢ်ဝဲ ပှၤကလုာ်ခံပတီၢ်တပတီၢ် တကး
ဒံးဘၣ် မ့ၢ်စ့ၢ်ကီး ပှၤကလုာ်တကလုာ်လၢ ဘၣ်တၢ်စိာ်မၢ
ကဲကုၢ်တကလုာ် အသိးန့ၣ်လီၤ.

တၢ်ပာ်သူၣ်ပာ်သးတကလုာ်အံၤ ပထံၣ်အီၤသ့
တမ့ၢ်ထဲလၢ ပှၤပိာ်ခွါဘၣ် ဒီးအိၣ်ဝဲလၢ ပှၤပိာ်မုၣ်တဖၣ်
အတၢ်ပာ်သးအပူစ့ၢ်ကီးလီၤ. မ့မ့ၢ်ယၤ ယထံၣ်လၢ ပိာ်မုၣ်ဒီး
ပိာ်ခွါအနုဆၢၣ် တၢ်အိၣ်သး မ့ၢ်လီၤဆီဘၣ်ဆၣ် အတီၤဖုၣ်
အတီၤထီ တအိၣ်ဘၣ်န့ၣ်လီၤ.

Christian Sgaw Karen Script (created by an American Baptist missionary
   Jonathan Wade in 1830s)
Generally known as Sgaw Karen Script

Other Karen scripts used within limited communities

Taj av kwauj meij wai **"taj luj taj laj"** le av hpla geiz t'miz, muj bau cauz paz av hkai iz Taj kwauj le av kai hti kauj le av co dof k'mauz dof seif t'hpaf maz lauz biv lauz be kwix kwauj hpo kwauj paiv seif t'hpaf meij geiz, pgaz k'lux av hpuf av hsiv seif t'hpaf av kwauj meij geiz. Div le pgaz qukwaj seif nya taj baf qav dauv taj av kwauj seif t'hpaf tai hpla htauf wai daf le *"pgaz k'lux av hsiv av kwauj lauz maj kwix kauv muj niz, av cgaz k'tej t'niz niz t'kwauj kwauj neif lauz."* Av qo neif, Dictionary Romei Pgaz K'Nyau kai wai taj maz gej klez keiz Pgaz K'Nyau av kwauj le av lof dof dauv luj dof pgeiz kaz t'miz neif lauz. Y'seif nya le lix t'beif iz t'meij pgaz soo auf auz div Pgaz K'Nyau baf, baf hsaf k'neij baf taj soo auf auz s'kuz hauf hkof hkle. Le av cgaz k'tej k'baf taj pax lauz auz le lix tef pooz (library) le av dof seif t'hpaf kauv tauz daiv s'kuz hauf hkof hkle, div sauv pgaz cohpo le av sav lau qu seif nya naj pej taj av kwauj seif t'hpaf k'maz lo qukwaj seif nya wai dauv soo auf caij auf wai neif lauz.

Romanized Sgaw Karen Alphabet (created by a Protestant missionary around 1930, and developed by a French Roman Catholic missionary Joseph Seguinotte, around 1950; see Seguinotte [2007])
It is mainly used by the Roman Catholic Karens living in Thailand.

Letalanyah: Buddhist Sgaw Karen Script (created by a Sgaw Karen monk probably around 1960) It is used by Buddhist Sgaw Karens in Karen State, Myanmar. It will be often referred to in this presentation because this script seems to have been consulted in the creation of Lekwaikaw. This writing system will be discussed in Kato (forthcoming) "Letalanyah: A Buddhist writing system of Sgaw Karen." *Reports of the Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies* 54.
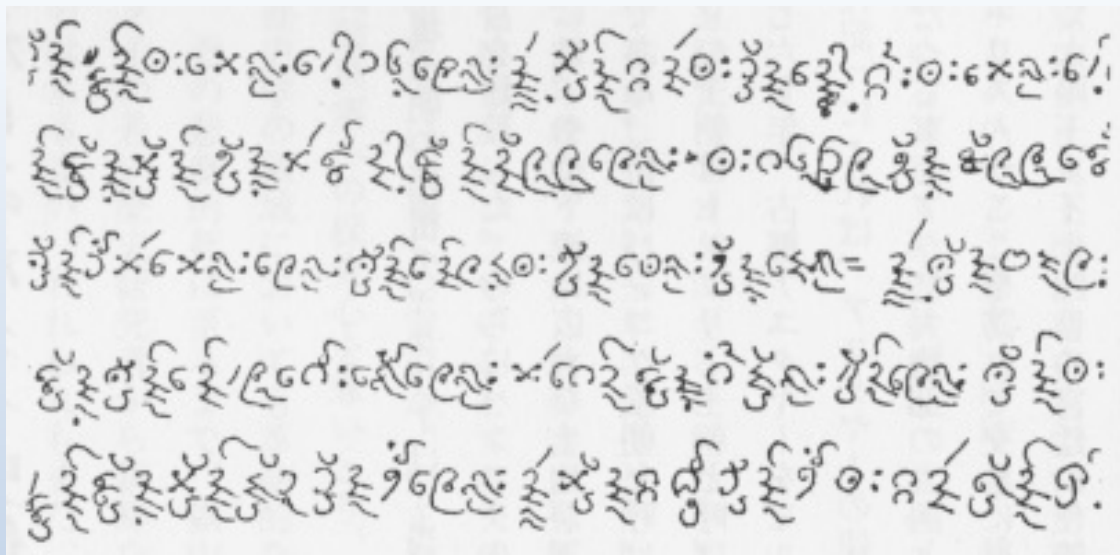
The Leke script used by followers of the Leke religion, which worships Maitreya. It is one of the Eastern Pwo Karen writing systems (cf. Stern 1968; Kato 2021a, 2022). It was created in the 1840s (Kelly 2018).

The Leke altar (left) and a Leke priest (right). (Photos taken by Kato in 1994)

Thus, Karen has a wide variety of scripts.

Womack (2005: 3) points out:
"Karen scripts have served as markers of difference—regional, linguistic, sectarian, and political—between disparate, and sometimes antagonistic, Karen groups."

There are several scripts in the Karenic languages that are believed to have existed in ancient times.
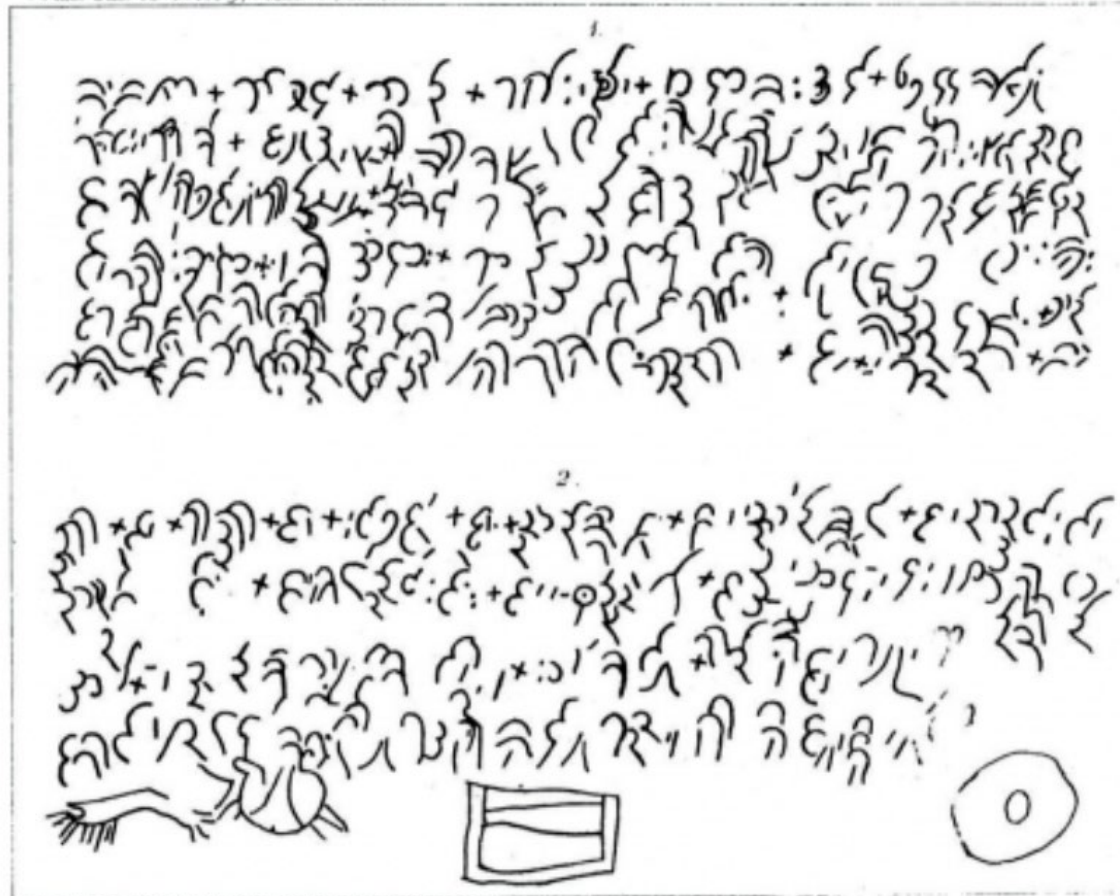
Karen plate found around 1870 in present-day Kayah State, Myanmar.
Cited from Kelly (2018).

The basic letter table of an "ancient" script of Sgaw Karen. I happened to get this copy around the year 2000. However, no details are available. The red circles indicate the basic letters of this script. Their phonetic values and letter names are indicated above and below each letter in Christian Sgaw Karen Script.

Lekwaikaw (Lae Kae Kaw, Lae Kwe Kaw, Lae Kwekor)

Lekwaikaw (/lɛ̀ʔkwɛ̀kɔ̀/ or /lìʔkwɛ̀kɔ̀/ in Sgaw Karen)
I became aware of the existence of this letter through this introductory
textbook given to me by Mr. Yuzo Uda, a Journalist, around 2000.

After realizing the existence of this script, I have asked some Karen intellectuals about it. And I got the following information from them: (1) It is a script which was once used by the Karen people in the past; (2) It has recently been used by the disciples of the Buddhist monk Myainggyingu Sayadaw (မြိုင်ကြီးငူဆရာတော် in Burmese; official name, U Thuzana ဦးသုဇန) (1947–2018); and (3) This script can be used to write both Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen.

According to the YouTube Video titled "ประวัติอักษรกะเหรี่ยง - Kwekor Karen script Story", uploaded by the YouTube Channel "jolerhba jungmaipo", Lekwaikaw was the writing system that was once used by Karen people prior to 2,300 BC, and it was recovered and revealed by Myainggyingu Sayadaw မြိုင်ကြီးငူဆရာတော်. (URL of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6pjJq1txXo)

The name of this script is spelled variously in Latin script as Lae Kae Kaw, Lae Kwe Kaw, Lae Kwekor, etc., but in this presentation it is spelled Lekwaikaw. In Sgaw Karen it is pronounced /lèʔkwèkò/ or /lìʔkwèkò/, which means "ancient primitive literature".

Method

I learned Lekwaikaw by watching videos from the following two channels:

(1) "jolerhba jungmaipo"
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4N6LetXptM4PMnHWt57yqA (Registered on Jul 30, 2012)

(2) "Phaw Lar Lar channel"
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZi9akDKSPUcJAS762cvhiw (Registered on Oct 01, 2020)

In the videos uploaded by the YouTube channel of (1), the example sentences from a textbook (Anonymous 1988; see Slide 17) of Letalanyah, i.e., Buddhist Sgaw Karen Script, which I also own, are written in Lekwaikaw, so I was able to easily grasp the relationship between the writing system and the pronunciation of Sgaw Karen.

Not only Sgaw Karen but also Pwo Karen can be written using Lekwaikaw. Since Lekwaikaw seems to have been first developed for writing Sgaw Karen, this presentation will discuss how to write Sgaw Karen.

Lekwaikaw, used to write Sgaw Karen, reflects the phonological system of the Hpa-an dialect. The Hpa-an dialect is a dialect spoken in the area centered on Hpa-an (see Slide 18), the capital of Karen State, and including Hlaingbwe and Kawkareik.

A text of Letalanyah (လေလ်တလဒ်ည့်)

Burmese title: ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာစကောကရင် သူငယ်တန်းဖတ်စာ
Sgaw Karen title: ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာပကည်ဖိုလေလ်မယ်လို အခံတွှော်ဒ်
[Bhuddhist Sgaw Karen Primary Reader].
Publisher: ဦးစောသင်းလှိုင် (သထုံမြို့), Printing: ဒေါ် စိန်နဲ့ (တာမွေ ၊ ရင်ကုန်), 1988.

Locations of Hpa-an and Myainggyingu
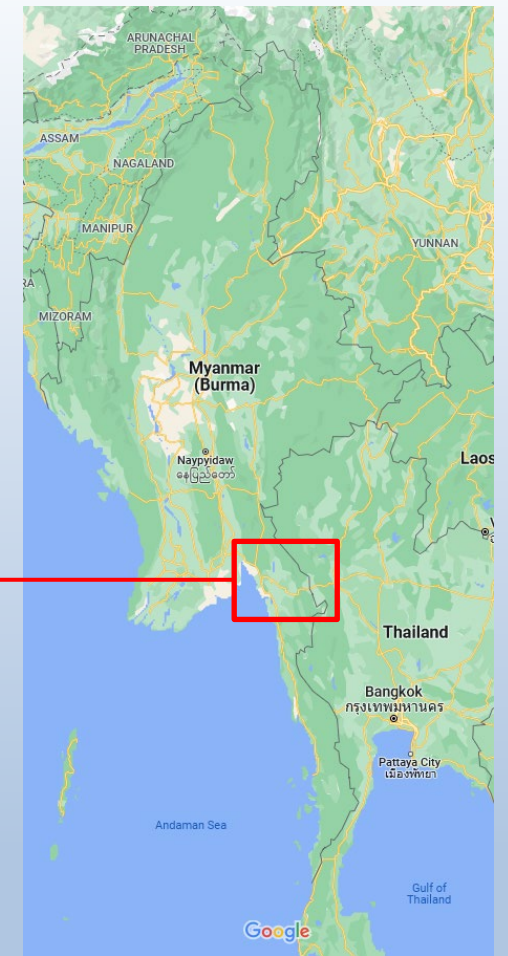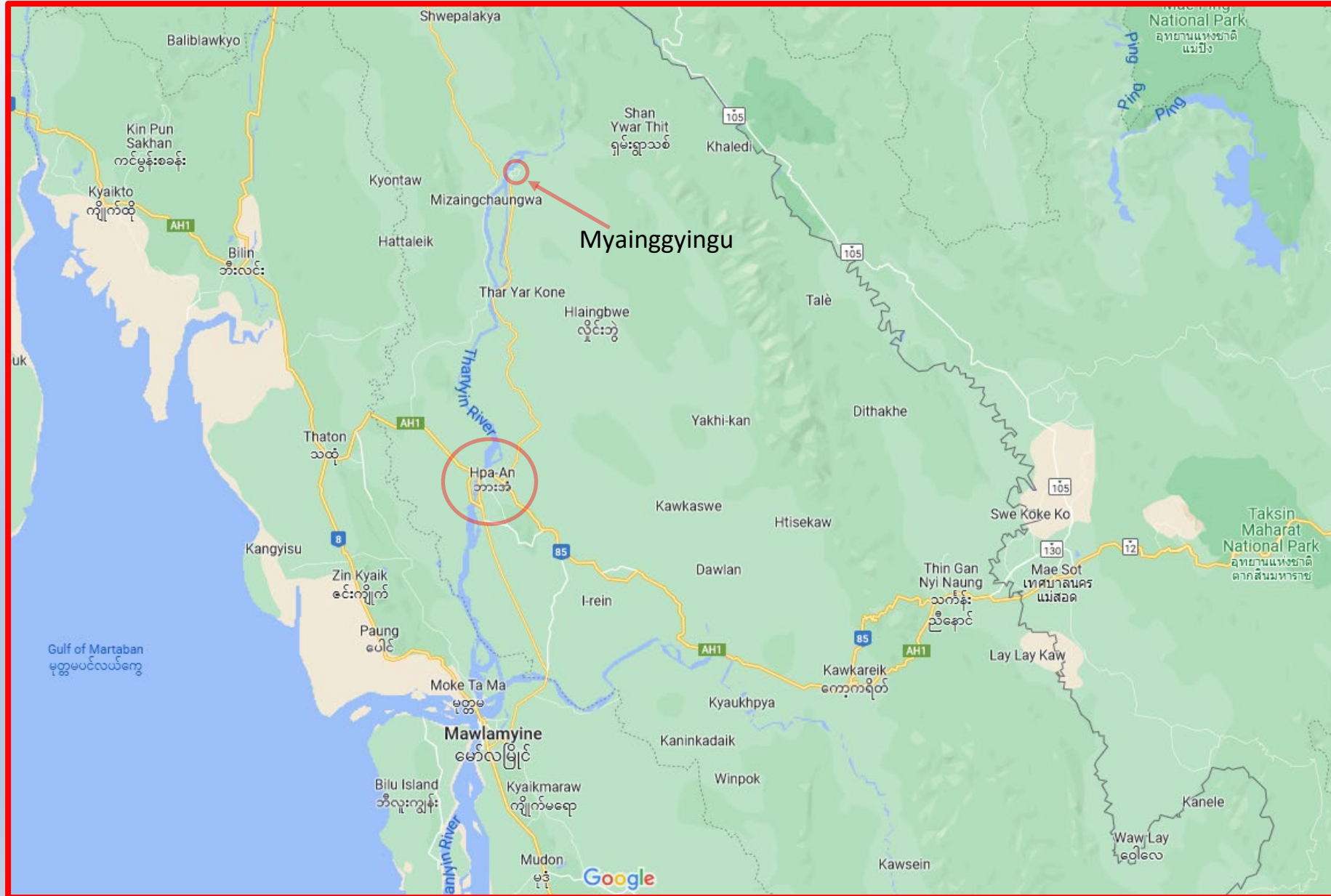
Myainggyingu Sayadaw မြိုင်ကြီးငူဆရာတော် (U Thuzana ဦးသုဇန), who is believed to have recovered and revealed Lekwaikaw.

Scanned from a video uploaded by the YouTube channel "Kloh Htoo Baw Channel"
URL of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmBQRfKQdRI

Inscriptions have been made using Lekwaikaw:
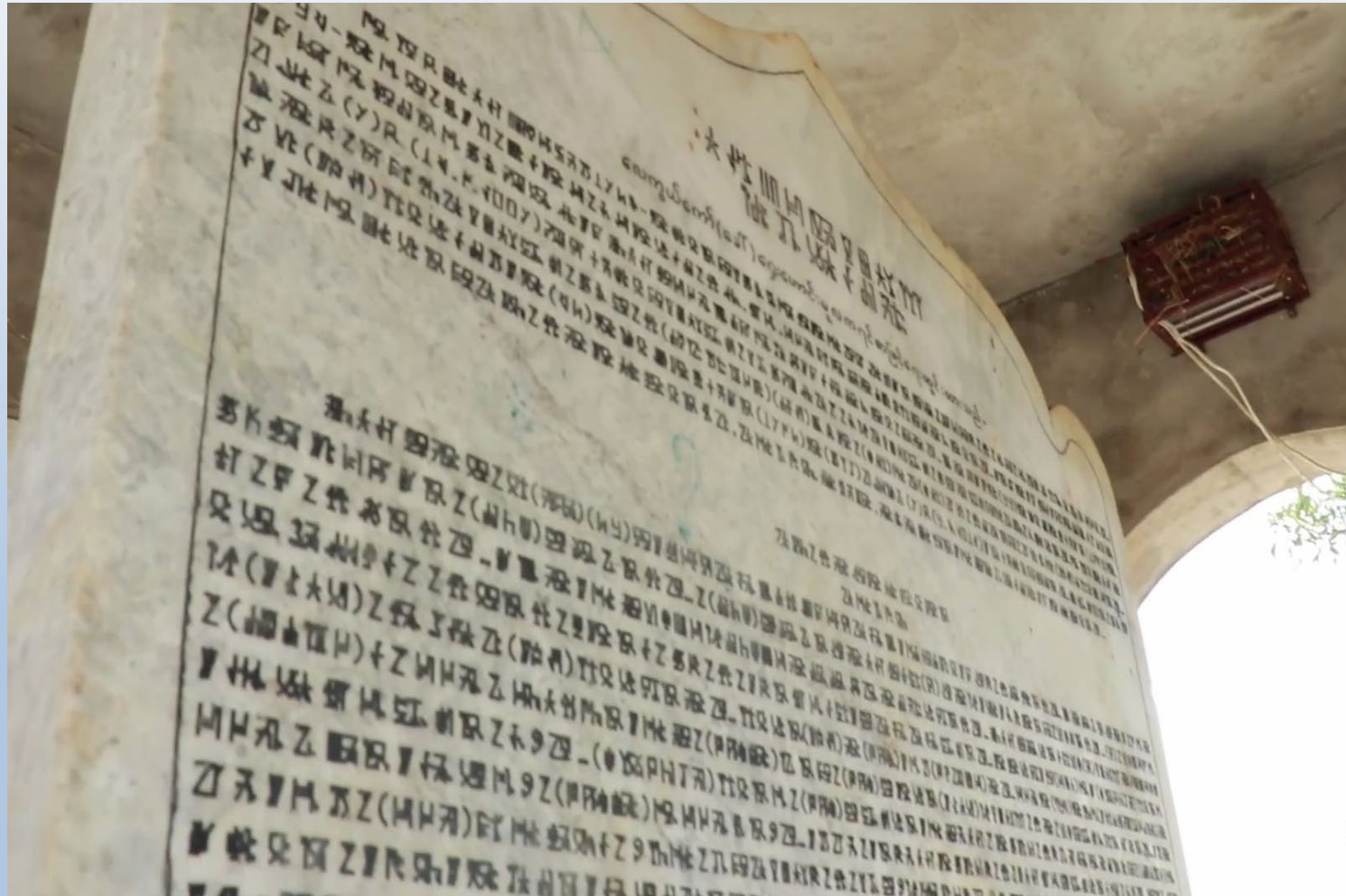
A Sgaw Karen inscription written in Lekwaikaw (in Myainggyingu Special Region, Karen State, Myanmar)
Scanned from a video uploaded by the Facebook channel "Morning Star"
URL of the video: https://www.facebook.com/100816694625419/videos/2593185394279634

Lekwaikaw is also used in song videos:

Scanned from a video uploaded by the YouTube channel 'Karen Music Media'
Video title: Karen Music Media 2015 Saw Sa Moo Ya Ei May Ka Yaw -Official MV-GSC
URL of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLMosbnHnxg

I learned Lekwaikaw by watching these videos:
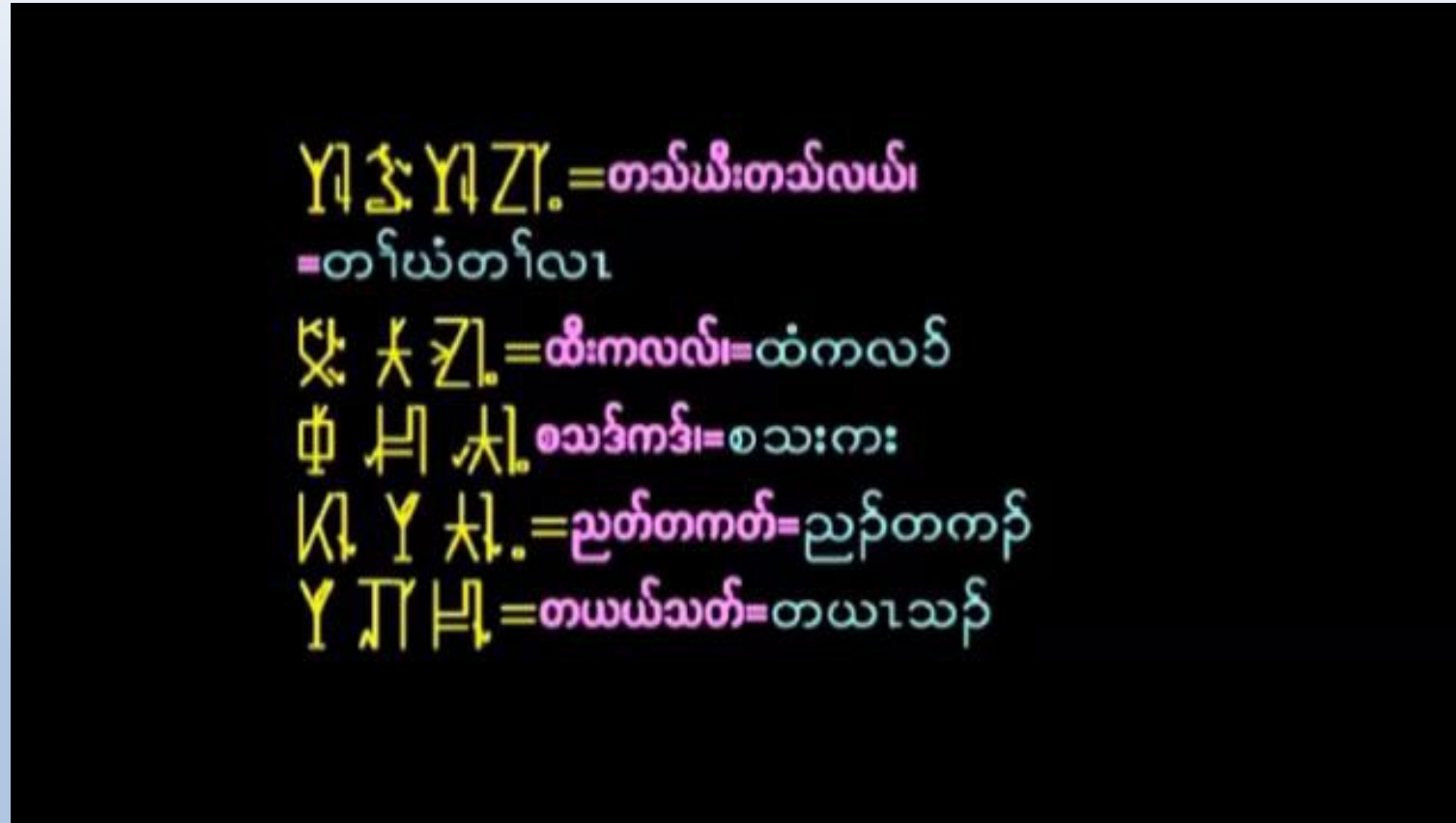
Scanned from a video uploaded by the YouTube channel 'jolerhba jungmaipo'
Video title: เรียนรู้ภาษากะเหรี่ยง 5 (บทเรียนตัวอย่าง) -Sgaw Karen Kwekor literatures
URL of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTIW-HxdIdg&t=31s

I learned Lekwaikaw by watching these videos:

Scanned from a video uploaded by the YouTube channel 'Phaw Lar Lar channel'
Video title: လေကွယ်ကော် ကာခို့ကနေ ငသီးအထိ(၅) ကြောင်း
URL of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lwFeKH3QK8

Phonemic system of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen

• To discuss a writing system, it is necessary to consider the phonemic system of the language it represents. First, the syllable structure of the Hpa-an dialect can be represented as follows:

$$C1(C2)V(ʔ)/(T)$$

• 'C' stands for a consonant, 'V' for a vowel, and 'T' for a tone. C1 is an initial consonant and C2 is a medial consonant.

• The syllable-final consonant /-ʔ/ can also be seen as an inherent feature of checked tones. In this study, /-ʔ/ is considered to be a syllable-final consonant as well as an inherent feature of checked tones.

Table 1: Tones in the Hpa-an dialect

Kato (forthcoming)		
à	[**41**]	low-**falling** tone
ā	[33]	mid-level tone
á	[**44**]	high-level tone
â	[51]	**high**-falling tone
àʔ	[11~21]	low-checked tone
āʔ	[**33**]	**mid**-checked tone
ə		atonic

Kato (2021b)		
à	[11]	low-level tone
ā	[33]	mid-level tone
á	[55]	high-level tone
â	[51]	falling tone
àʔ	[11]	low-checked tone
áʔ	[44]	high-checked tone
ə		atonic

• The description of Sgaw Karen tones given in Kato (2021b) unintentionally mixed features of the Delta dialect. It needs to be revised as in the left table (Kato, forthcoming).

Kato, Atsuhiko (forthcoming) "Letalanyah: A Buddhist writing system of Pwo Karen." Reports of the Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies 54.

• The only vowel that can appear in atonic syllables is /ə/.

Table 2: Initial consonants in the Hpa-an dialect proposed by Kato (forthcoming)

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops/affricates	p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops/affricates	ph		th	ch	kh	
Voiced stops	b		d		g	
Voiceless fricatives				ɕ	x	h
Voiced fricatives			z		ɣ	ɦ
Nasals	m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
Semivowels	w			j		
Lateral			l			
Trill			r			

- /g/ and /z/ appear only in loanwords from Burmese and Pali. /ŋ/ usually appears in Burmese and Pali loanwords, but it also appears in a few indigenous words.

- /b/ and /d/ are implosives: [ɓ] and [ɗ]. /g/ is an egressive [g]. /b/ and /d/ are often pronounced with egressive [b] and [d] in Burmese and Pali loanwords.

- Kato (2021b) set up /s, sh/ separately from /c, ch/. However, [s] and [sʰ] in the Hpa-an dialect are considered free variants of /c/ [tɕ] and /ch/ [tɕʰ], respectively.

- /θ/ is [t̪ ~ t̪θ ~ θ]. /r/ is [r ~ ɹ].

Table 3: Possible combinations of C1 and C2 in the Hpa-an dialect

(Kato, forthcoming)

C1

C2	p	θ	t	k	ph	th	kh	b	d	c	ch	x	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	j	l	r
w	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
l	+			+	+		+	+					+						
r	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+		+						
j	+				+			+					+						
ɣ	+				+			+		+	+		+						

Examples:

/thwî/ 'dog'

/plà/ 'forgive'

/krə̄ʔ/ [krə̄ʔ~kɹə̄ʔ] 'ought, should'

/phjá/ 'shop, market'

/pɣā/ [pɣā~pɥā] 'person'

28

Table 4: Open rhymes in the Hpa-an dialect proposed by Kato (forthcoming)

i	ɨ	ɯ	u
e	ə		o
ɛ	a		ɔ

• These rhymes are realized as follows: /-i/ [i], /-e/ [e], /-ɛ/ [ɛ], /-ɨ/ [ɨ], /-ə/ [ə], /-a/ [ä], /-ɯ/ [⁽ᵊ⁾ɯ̯], /-u/ [u], /-o/ [o], and /-ɔ/ [ɔ̞].

• The vowel /ɯ/ in Kato (2021b) has been changed to /ɨ/. The reasons are as follows: (1) As Sarvestani (2018: 65) correctly pointed out, this vowel is phonetically [ɨ]; and (2) A separate vowel phoneme /ɯ/ needs to be set up.

• The phoneme /ɯ/ as opposed to /ɨ/ or /ə/ has never been proposed in previous studies. However, /ɯ/ is set up here for the following reasons: (1) Many native speakers recognize [ɯ] as a different sound from [ɨ] or [ə]; and (2) These are distinguished in Letalanyah and Lekwaikaw. Examples of /ɯ/ are: /lɯ́/ 'at; from; to' (a preposition; emphatic variation of /lə́/), /θɯ̂/ 'surely' (a sentence-final particle), /ɦɯ́/ 'you know?' (a sentence-final particle), and /hɯ́/ 'hey!' (an interjection).

Table 5: Stopped rhymes in the Hpa-an dialect proposed by Kato (forthcoming)

iʔ		ɯʔ uʔ
eʔ	əʔ	oʔ
ɛʔ	aʔ	ɔʔ

• These rhymes are realized as follows: /-iʔ/ [i̱ʔ], /-eʔ/ [e̱ʔ], /-ʔɛ/ [ɛʔ], /-əʔ/ [əʔ], /-aʔ/ [äʔ], /-ɯʔ/ [ɯ̱ʔ], /-uʔ/ [u̱ʔ], /-oʔ/ [o̱ʔ], and /-ɔʔ/ [ɔʔ].

• Unlike in the open syllables, there is no opposition between /ɨ/ and /ɯ/. There is only the rhyme /-ɯʔ/. (Kato's [2021b] transcription of the rhyme /-ɯʔ/ has not been changed to /-ɨʔ/ since it is pronounced [ɯʔ], not [ɨʔ].)

How does Lekwaikaw correspond to the phonemic system?

• Although Lekwaikaw looks very odd, it has an abugida system similar to the surrounding indic writing systems.

• Lekwaikaw has 38 basic letters. These basic letters represent the initial consonants. These letters correspond to the basic letters of Letalanyah, except one.

• Lekwaikaw has nine vowel symbols.

• Lekwaikaw has six tone symbols.

The table of basic letters (from the textbook given to me by Mr. Yuzo Uda)
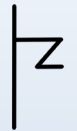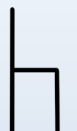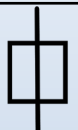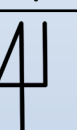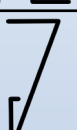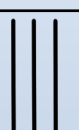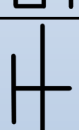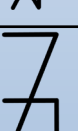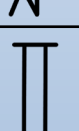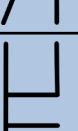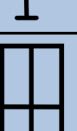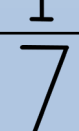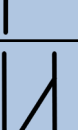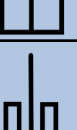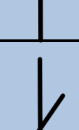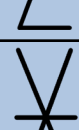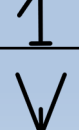
A version that I reworked on computer

This table shows the correspondence between the basic letters and initial consonants.
Bracketed in parentheses are the corresponding Letalanyah spellings.

/k-/ (က)	/kh-/ (ခ)	/g-/ (ဂ)	/x-/ (ဃ)	/ŋ-/ (င)
/c-/ (စ)	/ch-/ (ဆ)	/z-/ (ဇ)	/z-/ (ဈ)	/ɲ-/ (ည)
/p-/ (ပ)	/ph-/ (ဖ)	/b-/ (ဗ)	/b-/ (ဘ)	/m-/ (မ)
/j-/ (ယ)	/ɕ-/ (ၡ)	/r-/ (ရ)	/w-/ (ဝ)	[f-]
/n-/ (ၼ)	/th-/ (ဿ)	/d-/ (ဒ)	/d-/ (ဒ)	/d-/ (ဓ)
/θ-/ (သ)	/b-/ (ဗ)	/t-/~/d-/ (ၞ / ဒ)	/m-/ (ဝ)	/l-/ (လ)
/h-/ (ဟ)	/ɣ-/ (ၐ)	/l-/ (ၔ)	/th-/ (ၔ)	/ɦ-/ (ၔ)
	/ʔ-/ (အ)	/n-/ (ထ)	/t-/ (တ)	

34

Notes on the basic letters

大	/k-/ (က)	⊢z	/kh-/ (ခ)	💢	/g-/ (ဂ)	⩗	/x-/ (ဃ)	十	/ŋ-/ (င)
中	/c-/ (စ)	⩓	/ch-/ (ဆ)	🟤	/z-/ (ဇ)	🟤	/z-/ (ဈ)	K	/ɲ-/ (ည)
V	/p-/ (ပ)	⩗	/ph-/ (ဖ)	🟤	/b-/ (ဗ)	🟤	/b-/ (ဘ)	中	/m-/ (မ)
丅	/j-/ (ယ)	ᛏ	/ɕ-/ (ရ)	⩗	/r-/ (ရ)	🟤	/w-/ (ဝ)	🟤	[f-]
刁	/n-/ (ၐ)	⅄	/th-/ (ၜ)	△	/d-/ (ဒ)	🟤	/d-/ (ဒ)	🟤	/d-/ (ဓ)
⊟	/θ-/ (သ)	⬚	/b-/ (ဗ)	⊞	/t-/~/d-/ (ၑ / ဒ)	+	/m-/ (မ)	⟋	/l-/ (လ)
⋈	/h-/ (ဟ)	ᚲ	/ɣ-/ (ၐ)	🟤	/l-/ (ၗ)	🟤	/th-/ (ၗ)	⋇	/ɦ-/ (ၑ)
		⋁	/ʔ-/ (အ)	🟤	/n-/ (ၐ)	Y	/t-/ (တ)		

• Circled letters are only used for loanwords from Burmese, Pali, or English.

• ┼ /m-/ is only used for the morpheme /mɨ/ 'day'.

• ⊞, read as /t-/ or /d-/, is used for the retroflex stop ṭ for Pali words, or the frequently appearing Sgaw Karen word /dô/ 'big; very'.

• Pali words or borrowings from Pali are written using letters corresponding to those of Letalanyah, whose writing method of Pali is the same as the Burmese transcribing system of Pali. However:
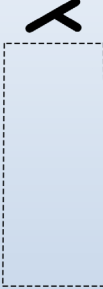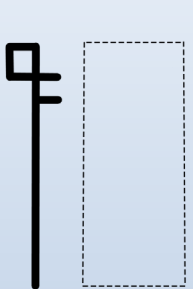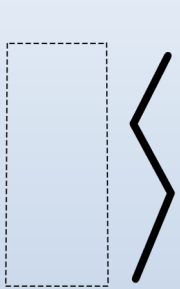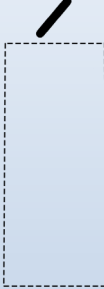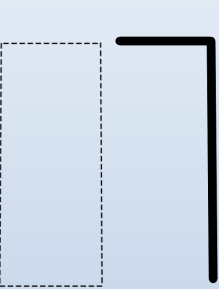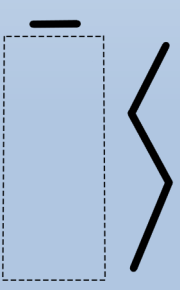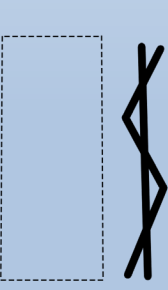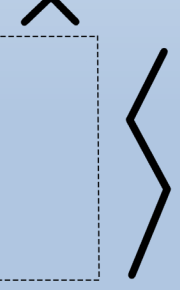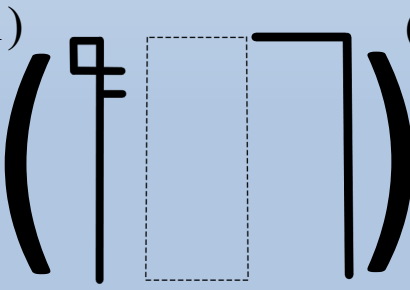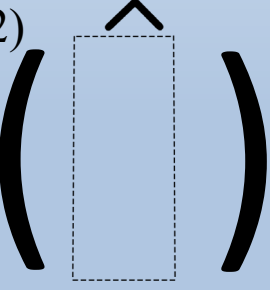
   - There found no equivalent of Pali ဃ **gh**. Maybe ⩗ is used for Pali ဃ; and,

   - There found no equivalents of Pali ဍ **ḍ** and ဎ **ḍh**. It is unknown how these Pali sounds are written.

Vowel symbols

–There are nine symbols: ˥ ^ ˂ 〈 〉 ╪ ` ‾ ´

(Some of the vowels are represented by combinations of these symbols, as in (7), (9), and (11).)

(1) /i/

(2) /e/

(3) /ɛ/

(4) /ɨ/

(5) /ə/

(6) /a/

(7) /ɯ/

(8) /u/

(9) /o/

(10) /ɔ/

(11) /ɔ/

(12) /i/

• (11) and (12) are bracketed because they are used to write Pali words. (11) is used for the Pali **o**, and (12) for the Pali short **i**.
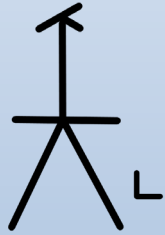
36

Tone symbols–There are six symbols.

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)

    v̀   v̄   v́   v̂   v̀ʔ   v̄ʔ
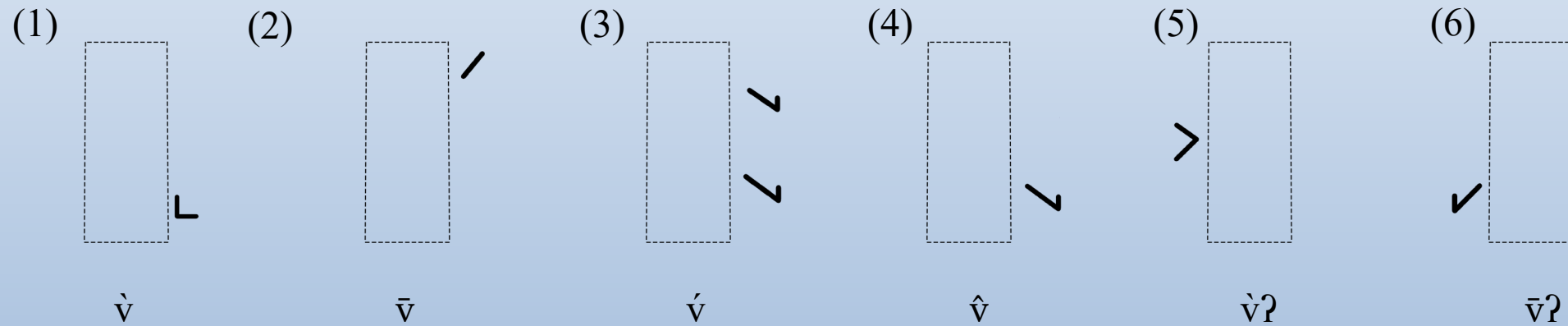
• Atonic syllables are indicated by the absence of a tone symbol.

Let us take the basic letter representing the initial consonant /k-/, i.e., 大 , as an example and see how all the rhymes are written. Bracketed in parentheses are the corresponding Letalanyah spellings.

The vowel /i/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)
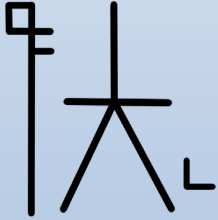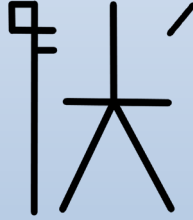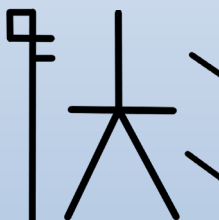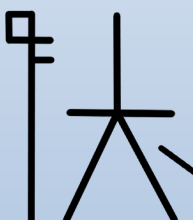
/kì/   /kī/   /kí/   /kî/   /kìʔ/   /kīʔ/

(ကီသ်)   (ကီယ်)   (ကီး)   (ကီတ်)   (ကီလ်)   (ကီဒ်)

The vowel /e/

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6)

/kè/

/kē/

/ké/

/kê/

/kè?/

/kē?/

(ကေသ်)

(ကေယ်)

(ကေး)

(ကေတ်)

(ကေလ်)

(ကေဒ်)

The vowel /ɛ/

(1)
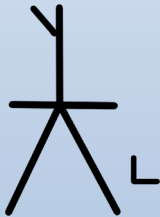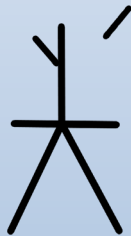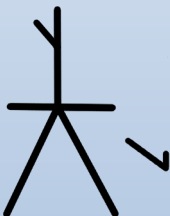/kɛ̀/
(ကဲသ်)

(2)
/kɛ̄/
(ကဲယ်)

(3)
/kɛ́/
(ကဲ)

(4)
/kɛ̂/
(ကဲတ်)

(5)
/kɛ̀ʔ/
(ကဲလ်)

(6)
/kɛ̄ʔ/
(ကဲဒ်)

The vowel /ɨ/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)

/kɨ̀/   /kɨ̃̀/   /kɨ́/   /kɨ̃́/   (/kɨ̀ʔ/)   (/kɨ̃́ʔ/)
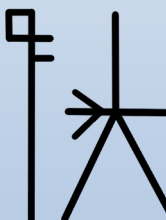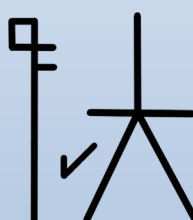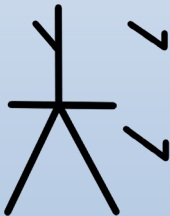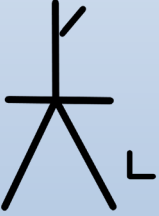
(ကုသ်)   (ကုယ်)   (ကုː)   (ကုတ်)   (ကုလ်)   (ကုဒ်)
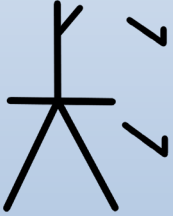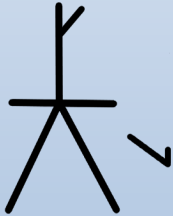
• (5) and (6) do not exist phonologically, but do exist as spellings.

The vowel /ə/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)   (7)

/kà/   /kā/   /ká/   /kâ/   /kàʔ/   /kāʔ/   /kə/

(ကးသ်)   (ကးယ်)   (ကး)   (ကးတ်)   (ကးလ်)   (ကုးဒ်)   (က)

• (7) is an atonic syllable. The vowel /ə/ is the only vowel that appears in an atonic syllable. Atonic syllables are indicated by the absence of a tone symbol.

The vowel /a/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)
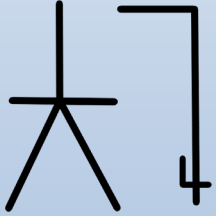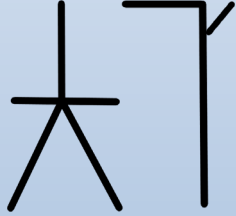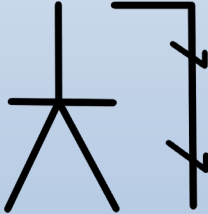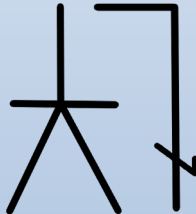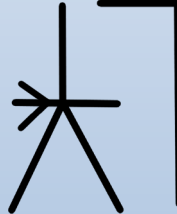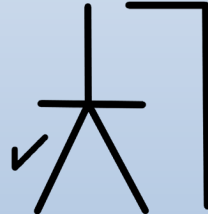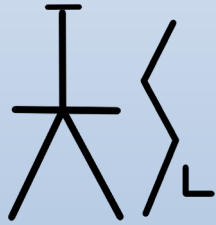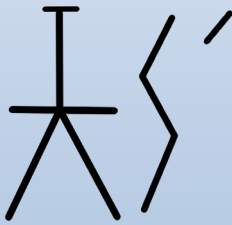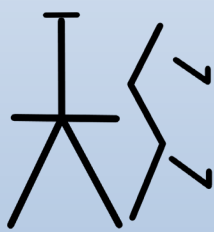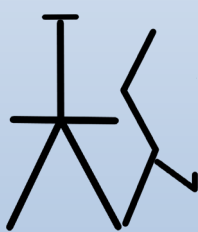
/kà/   /kā/   /ká/   /kâ/   /kàʔ/   /kāʔ/

(ကသ်)   (ကယ်)   (ကား)   (ကတ်)   (ကလ်)   (ကဒ်)

The vowel /ɯ/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)

/kɯ̀/   /kɯ̄/   /kɯ́/   /kɯ̂/   /kɯ̀ʔ/   /kɯ̄ʔ/

(ကုံသ်)   (ကုံယ်)   (ကုံ)   (ကုံတ်)   (ကုံလ်)   (ကုံဒ်)

The vowel /u/

(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6)

/kù/   /kū/   /kú/   /kû/   /kùʔ/   /kūʔ/

(ကူသ်)   (ကူယ်)   (ကူ)   (ကူတ်)   (ကူလ်)   (ကူဒ်)

The vowel /o/

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)   (6)

/kò/   /kō/   /kó/   /kô/   /kòʔ/   /kōʔ/

(ကိုသ်)   (ကိုယ်)   (ကို)   (ကိုတ်)   (ကိုလ်)   (ကိုၣ်)
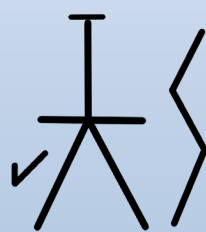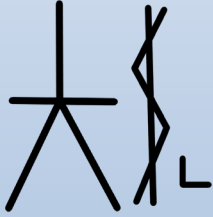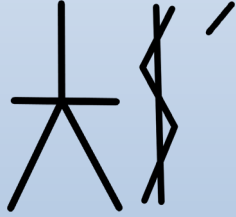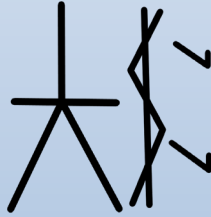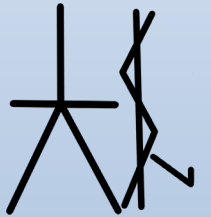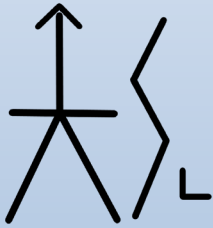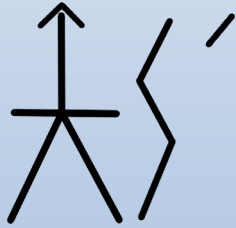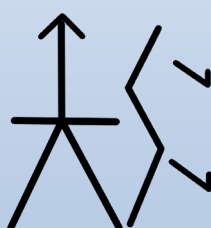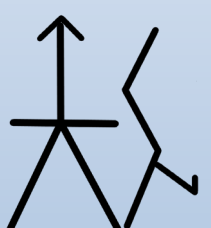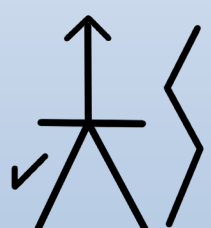
The vowel /ɔ/

(1)

/kɔ̀/

(ကံသ်)

(2)

/kɔ̄/

(ကံယ်)

(3)
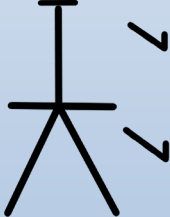
/kɔ́/

(ကံ)

(4)
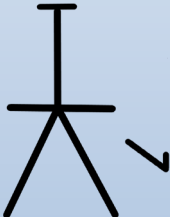
/kɔ̂/

(ကံတ်)

(5)

/kɔ̀ʔ/

(ကံလ်)

(ကောလ်)

(6)

/kɔ̄ʔ/

(ကံဒ်)

(ကောဒ်)

Medial consonants

(1)   (2)   (3)   (4)   (5)

/p**w**-/   /p**l**-/   /p**r**-/   /p**j**-/   /p**ɣ**-/

(ပွ)   (ပ္လ)   (ပြ)   (ပျ)   (ပ္ၟ)
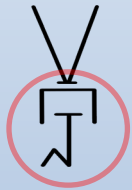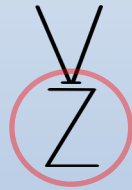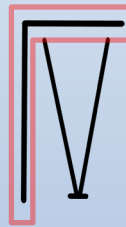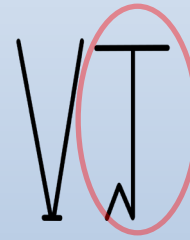
- Circled symbols represent each medial consonant.
- Symbol (4) combined with the basic letter for /k-/ represents /c-/ (not /ky-/, which is not present in Sgaw Karen). It is used for loanwords from Burmese that has the spelling <ky->.

Special letters representing certain frequently used words

(There is no corresponding Letalanyah letters.)

/nê/ 'that; topic marker, etc.'
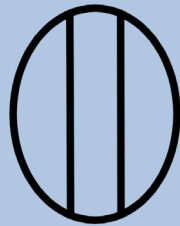
/wī/ 'to end; after Ving'
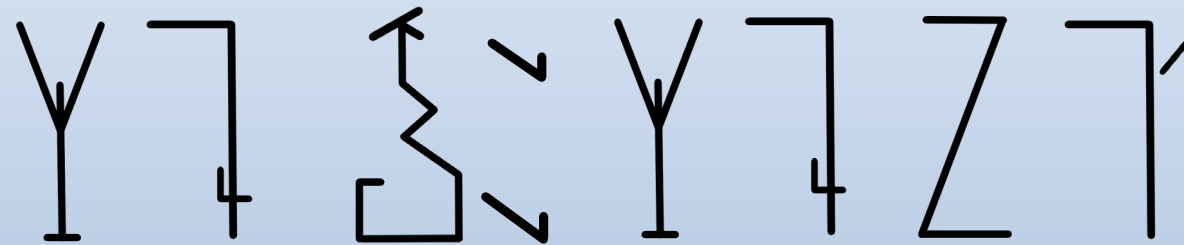
/tàxítàlā/
'beauty; culture'

Sample words and sentences

ㄥˊ ㄥ↗ 朩↘。

/lɛ̄   lɯ́   có/
go   to   school

'(I) went to school.'

Sample words and sentences

/nā, mā　　cá　nê　təɣē/
you　do　　　like　that　don't

'You, please don't do like that.'

Is Lekwaikaw really an ancient script?

From what has been discussed so far, it can be said that Lekwaikaw reflects the phonological system of present-day Sgaw Karen (the Hpa-an dialect) in a very precise way. Next, let us consider whether Lekwaikaw is really an ancient script. If it is an ancient script, it should reflect older features of the Karenic languages. We will consider this issue from the following two perspectives:

(1) Notation of tones

(2) Notation of stops

Notation of tones

Studies by Haudricourt (1946, 1953, 1975) revealed that four tones (*Tone 1, *Tone 2, Tone 2',
and *Tone 3) can be reconstructed in Proto-Karen. They are reflected in modern Pwo Karen and
Sgaw Karen as shown in the table (The phonetic values of the tones are those of the Hpa-an
dialects for both Pwo and Sgaw. See Kato [2018] for an account of how Haudricourt
reconstructed proto-tones.)。

	*Tone 1		*Tone 2		*Tone 2'		*Tone 3'	
	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw
*B	Low-level [11]	Mid-level [33]	Mid-level [33]	Low-falling [41]			High-level [55]	Low-checked [11ʔ]
*M	Low-level [11]	High-level [55]	High-level [55]	High-falling [51]	High-level [55]	High-level [44]	Low-level [11]	Mid-checked [33ʔ]
*H	Falling [51]	High-level [55]	High-level [55]	High-falling [51]	High-level [55]	High-level [44]	Low-level [11]	Mid-checked [33ʔ]

However, Lekwaikaw's tonal notation accurately reflects the six-tone system of a modern Sgaw
Karen dialect, rather than the four-tone system of Proto-Karen.

Notation of stops

The same studies by Haudricourt (1946, 1953, 1975) show that the Proto-Karen voiced stops ***b**, ***d**, ***j**, ***g** changed to /p, t, c, k/ in Sgaw Karen and /ph, th, ch, kh/ in Pwo Karen as the tones split (see also Kato [2018]). In Lekwaikaw, however, stops derived from the Proto-Karen voiced stops are written with the symbols representing voiceless sounds. For example:
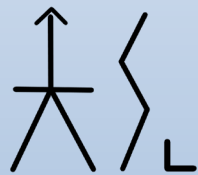
/kò/ 'hot'

Pwo Karen form: /khō/ 'hot'
Thus, Proto-Karen had ***g**.

/pū/ 'inside'

Pwo Karen form: /phə̀ɴ/ 'inside'
Thus, Proto-Karen had ***b**.

The notation of stops accurately reflects the phonetic values of modern Sgaw Karen.

On Lekwaikaw's authenticity

Given the notation of tones and stops, Lekwaikaw cannot be considered to be an ancient script. As already discussed, Lekwaikaw accurately reflects the pronunciation of present-day Sgaw Karen. It is unlikely that an ancient script would accurately reflect the phonological system of a modern language.

Why does Lekwaikaw accurately reflect the phonological system of present-day Sgaw Karen?

Lekwaikaw is a writing system that accurately reflects the phonological system of the present-day Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen. Thanks to its accurate phonological reflection, this script can properly serve as a writing system for Sgaw Karen. This accuracy can be attributed to the following reasons.

(1) Given the fact that the vowel /ɯ/ is notated separately from /ɨ/ or /ə/, it is likely that the creator of Lekwaikaw consulted Letalanyah.

(2) Letalanyah, as will be pointed out in Kato (forthcoming), was probably created referring to Christian Sgaw Karen Script. As a writing system of the Hpa-an dialect, Letalanyah is even more elaborate than the highly systematic Christian Sgaw Karen Script because it has a notation for the vowel /ɯ/.

(3) The highly systematic nature of Lekwaikaw can be attributed to its having inherited the system of Letalanyah.

Conclusion

Lekwaikaw is a writing system that accurately reflects the phonological system of present-day Sgaw Karen (the Hpa-an dialect). In addition, we cannot see any characteristics of the Karenic languages of older times in its system. Therefore, we can conclude that this character is a modern creation. This creation can be characterized as one of the movements that Kelly (2018) noted as those that promoted indigenous writing systems in ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia.

Although this script is certainly a modern creation, I do not think we should disrespect the effort that created it. In contemporary Myanmar, the Karen people face extremely difficult cultural and political challenges. Under such circumstances, it would not be surprising if some cultural creation including the creation of a new script occurred for the enhancement of ethnic consciousness. Moreover, creation of Lekwaikaw may be interpreted as an attempt to resolve the problem that the various current Karen scripts have been "markers of difference" as pointed out by Womack (2005). When we consider how Lekwaikaw was created, we need to keep in mind the complicated circumstances in which the Karen people are placed. Of course, we must keep an eye on the situation because the creation of a new script could become a new source of conflict.

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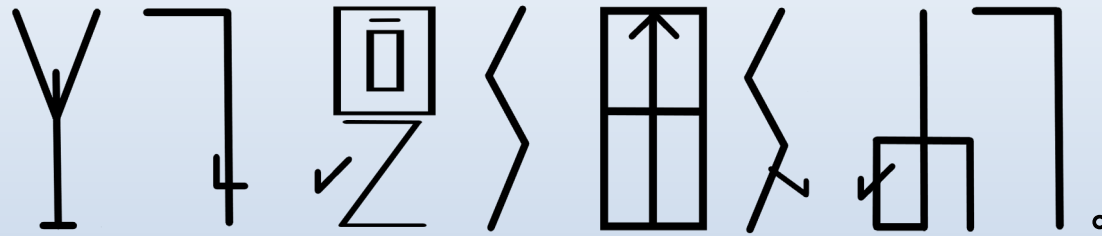
Lekwaikaw

တသ်ဘၣ်ၣ်ၣ်ဒိ်ဒိုတ်မဒ်။ Letalanyah

တၢ်ဘျုးဒိၣ်မး. Christian Sgaw

/tà blɯ̄ʔ dô mā̄ʔ/
'Thank you very much!'