

An analysis of Lae Kwekaw, an “ancient” Karen script*

Atsuhiko Kato

Abstract

Lae Kwekaw (/lèʔ kwèkò/ or /liʔ kwèkò/ in Sgaw Karen) is a Karen script that began to be known around the year 2000. Some Karens believe it to be an ancient script. The main purposes of this article are as follows: (1) to show the correspondence between the system of Lae Kwekaw and the phonological system of Sgaw Karen (the Hpa-an dialect) and (2) to examine whether Lae Kwekaw is truly an ancient script. In addition, it is suggested that Lae Kwekaw can be considered as a variation of the Indic script.

1. Introduction

Karen uses a variety of scripts. Even if limited to just the Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen, who are the Karen people in the narrowest sense, there are three widely used writing systems: (1) the Christian Sgaw Karen script, which is the most widely known Karen script, created by the American Baptist missionary Rev. Jonathan Wade; (2) the Buddhist Pwo Karen script, which is a notable writing system in that it was created by the Karen people themselves (see Kato [2021a]); and (3) the Christian Pwo Karen script, which was also created by American Baptist missionaries (see Kato [2021a], [2022a]). Moreover, scripts used in more limited communities include: (4) the

* This article is based on a presentation by Kato (2022b) at the 55th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, held at Kyoto University. This is probably the first study to examine Lae Kwekaw linguistically. I would like to thank William Womack, Wolfgang Behr, Ben Mitchell, and Yuan Meng for providing me with valuable information and suggestions after the presentation.

Buddhist Sgaw Karen script called “Letalanyah” (see Kato [2023]); (5) the Leke script, a Pwo Karen script generally known as the Chicken Scratch script, which is used by Leke followers worshipping Maitreya (see Stern [1968] and Kelly [2018a]); and (6) the Romanized Sgaw Karen alphabet, which is mainly used by Roman Catholic Karens living in Thailand (see Seguinotte [2007]). For the shapes of these scripts, see Kato (2022b).

In around 2000, another Karen script with a unique shape became known. It is called Lae Kwekaw. It was spelled “Lekwaikaw” by Kato (2022b); however, in this article, the spelling “Lae Kwekaw” is used based on Mitchell (m.s.). This script is believed by some Karen people to be an ancient Karen script from thousands of years ago. According to them, Lae Kwekaw was recovered and revealed by U Thuzana (Burmese ဦးသုဇန) (1947–2018), a Sgaw Karen Buddhist monk, generally known as Myainggyingu Sayadaw (Burmese မြိုင်ကြီးငူဆရာတော်). U Thuzana led the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization, whose armed wing was called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (commonly known in its abbreviation as DKBA), when it separated from the Karen National Union in 1995. After the separation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization, he created a liberated area for Karen Buddhist refugees in a village called Myainggyingu in Hlaingbwe Township, Karen State, the Union of Myanmar. Since then, this area has developed into a kind of “holy city”. For more information on U Thuzana’s activities, see Gravers (2001). Recently, Lae Kwekaw has achieved some degree of popularity, centered in Myainggyingu.

This article has two main purposes. The first is to show the relationship between Lae Kwekaw and the phonology of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen. Lae Kwekaw has two versions: one for writing Sgaw Karen (Sgaw Karen Lae Kwekaw) and one for writing Eastern Pwo Karen (Pwo Karen Lae Kwekaw). This article deals with a version of Sgaw Karen. This is because it is this version that I have been able to linguistically analyze, and perhaps because this version was “recovered” first. The second purpose is to examine whether Lae Kwekaw is a true ancient script.

Before moving on to the main issues, let us briefly discuss the name of the script, Lae Kwekaw. Lae Kwekaw is pronounced /ləʔ kwèkò/ or /liʔ kwèkò/ in Sgaw Karen. It is most often pronounced /ləʔ kwèkò/ in the vicinity of Hpa-an District, which

contains Hpa-an (the capital of Karen State) and Myainggyingu. /lèʔ/ means writing, document, or book. This form regularly corresponds to the Eastern Pwo Karen form /láí/ and Western Pwo Karen /leiʔ/ and thus can be reliably traced back to the proto-language stage of Sgaw and Pwo. I believe that in old times it was borrowed from the Mon word ၵဝ် ၵဝ် <lik> (< Sanskrit/Pali *lekha*) meaning “written matter” (Shorto 1962: 184). However, I still have no precise information on the etymology of the “Kwekaw” part of the name. Three possibilities are presented below.¹

First, Rev. Wade’s dictionary (Wade 1849: 101) gives the third definition of the item ၵဝ် (written in the Christian Sgaw Karen script; read as /kwè/ in the Hpa-an dialect) as “3. with the word for book prefixed, a record, or history”. In the three lines below this definition, the dictionary goes on to give the subentry ၵဝ် ၵဝ် (read as /lèʔ kwè/ in Hpa-an), saying that it has the same meaning as the third definition of ၵဝ်; that is, according to Wade, /lèʔ kwè/ means “record” or “history”. Furthermore, the word /kò/ means “country”. Thus, Lae Kwekaw as a whole might mean “a record of the country”.

Second, in the same dictionary, Wade (1849: 891) lists ၵဝ် ၵဝ် as a main entry and says that it has the same meaning as ၵဝ် ၵဝ် (read as /lèʔ kwè/ in Hpa-an) of “a written code of laws” (ibid.). If this is the case, then the name Lae Kwekaw as a whole might mean “the written code of laws of the country”.

Third, according to Gravers (2001: 14), in the 1930s, a leader called Phu Gwe Gow emerged among the Karen people. Phu means “grandfather”, and thus the core part of his name is Gwe Gow. “Kwekaw” might possibly be named after him. Kwekaw and Gwe Gow differ in Roman spelling but may be identical in Sgaw Karen. Furthermore, Gravers (2012: 347) suggests that the word Gwe “has a symbolic meaning with reference to a specific place (and persons)”.

These three possibilities are the only ones that exist. Further clarification would require finding and interviewing the person who first used the appellation “Lae Kwekaw”, but since this has not been possible thus far, I have included these explanations here to serve as a reference.

1 The discussion of the etymology of Lae Kwekaw owes much to information obtained from personal communications with William Womack. I would like to express my gratitude to him.

Regarding the rest of this article, in Section 2 the study method is explained. Section 3 presents the phonological system of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen, which was discussed in Kato (2023). Section 4 describes the relationship between the system of Lae Kwekaw and the phonology of Sgaw Karen. Section 5 presents Sgaw Karen sentences written in Lae Kwekaw. Section 6 argues that Lae Kwekaw cannot be considered an ancient script from the perspective of historical linguistics, and Section 7 suggests that Lae Kwekaw can be considered a variation of the Indic script.

2. Study method

I first became aware of Lae Kwekaw around 2000, when Yuzo Uda, a journalist, gave me a textbook of the script. Subsequently, I did not pay particular attention to it, but a few years ago, I found that Lae Kwekaw was attaining a certain degree of popularity in Karen State and planned to study it in 2020. However, due to Covid-19 pandemic and Myanmar's political instability, this plan could not be implemented. Despite these difficulties, I was able to learn the Lae Kwekaw system during 2021–2022 while still in Japan, by referring to videos on the two YouTube channels shown in (i) and (ii).

(i) “jolerhba jungmaipo”

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4N6LetXptM4PMnHWt57yqA> (Registered on Jul 30, 2012; last accessed on Nov 10, 2023)

(ii) “Phaw Lar Lar channel”

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZi9akDKSPUCJAS762cvhiw> (Registered on Oct 01, 2020; last accessed on Nov 10, 2023)

Fortunately, many example sentences from a Letalanyah textbook² (Anonymous 1988) that I used in my analysis of Kato (2023) were used in the videos uploaded to channel (i). Thus, I could easily understand the correspondence between Lae Kwekaw

2 The Buddhist Sgaw Karen script is called Letalanyah, as is mentioned in Section 1.

and the phonology of Sgaw Karen by contrasting Letalanyah and Lae Kwekaw. The discussion in this article is based on the knowledge I gained from this study.

3. Phonology of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen

Lae Kwekaw reflects the sounds of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen. It is closely related to the Moulmein dialect described by Jones (1961). In this section, the phonological system of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen discussed by Kato (2023) is briefly presented. For details on the phonetic realization of each phoneme and the co-occurrence restrictions between phonemes, see Kato (2023).³ The Hpa-an dialect is a dialectal group spoken around Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, Myanmar. The dialect spoken in Hlaingbwe Township, where Myainggyingu is located, is also considered to belong to this group.

3.1. Syllable structure

The syllable structure of the Hpa-an dialect can be represented as C1(C2)V(?)/(T), where C1 is the initial consonant, C2 is the medial consonant, V is the vowel, ? is the glottal stop that appears at the end of a syllable, and T is the tone that covers the entire syllable. The bracketed elements are optional. Furthermore, the -V(?) part is called the rhyme.

3.2. Tones

As shown in Table 1, there are six tones in the Hpa-an dialect. There are also atonic syllables, where only the rhyme /-ə/ appears. As discussed by Kato (2023), there are two possibilities for the phonological status of the glottal stop at the end of low-checked and mid-checked tones: It could be an intrinsic feature of the tones or a syllable-final stop. I tentatively consider this glottal stop as both an intrinsic feature of the tones and a syllable-final stop.

3 Note that the phonetic description of Sgaw Karen given in Kato (2021b) was corrected in Kato (2023).

Table 1: Tones in the Hpa-an dialect

à	[a41]	low-falling tone
ā	[a33]	mid-level tone
á	[a44]	high-level tone
â	[a51]	high-falling tone
àʔ	[aʔ11~21]	low-checked tone
āʔ	[aʔ33]	mid-checked tone
ə		atonic

3.3. Initial and medial consonants

The simple onsets consisting only of C1 are listed in Table 2. There are a total of 27 phonemes that can occur as a simple onset.

Table 2: Simple onsets in the Hpa-an dialect

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops	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			

The phonetic values of the simple onsets are as follows: /p-/ [p], /θ-/ [t̚~t̚θ], /t-/ [t], /c-/ [te~s], /k-/ [k], /ʔ-/ [ʔ], /ph-/ [pʰ], /th-/ [tʰ], /ch-/ [teʰ~sʰ], /kh-/ [kʰ], /b-/ [b~b], /d-/ [d~d], /g-/ [g], /ɕ-/ [ɕ], /x-/ [x], /h-/ [h], /z-/ [z], /ɣ-/ [ɣ], /ɦ-/ [ɦ], /m-/ [m], /n-/ [n], /ɲ-/ [ɲ], /ŋ-/ [ŋ], /w-/ [w], /j-/ [j~j], /l-/ [l], and /r-/ [r~ɾ]. The hyphen following each phoneme indicates the initial consonant.

Next, the phonemes that can appear as C2 are /-w-/ [w], /-l-/ [l], /-r-/ [r~ɾ], /-j-/ [j~j], and /-ɣ-/ [ɣ~w]. The hyphens on both sides of each phoneme indicate a medial consonant. The possible combinations of C1 and C2 are presented in Table 3.

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

		C1																	
		p	θ	t	k	ph	th	kh	b	d	c	ch	x	m	n	ɲ	j	l	r
C2	w	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	l	+			+	+		+	+					+					
	r	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+		+					
	j	+				+			+					+					
	y	+				+			+		+	+		+					

3.4. Rhymes

As mentioned in 3.1, the rhyme has a structure that can be represented as “-V(?)”. Rhymes can be divided into two types: open rhymes without the syllable-final /-ʔ/ and stopped rhymes with /-ʔ/.

There are 10 open rhymes, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Open rhymes in the Hpa-an dialect

i	i	u	u
e	ə	o	
ɛ	a	ɔ	

These rhymes are realized as follows: /-i/ [i], /-e/ [e], /-ɛ/ [ɛ], /-i/ [i], /-ə/ [ə], /-a/ [ä], /-u/ [u], /-u/ [u], /-o/ [o], and /-ɔ/ [ɔ~ɒ]. The hyphen before each symbol indicates that it represents the rhyme as a whole.

There are nine stopped rhymes, as shown in Table 5. These rhymes appear when a glottal stop is present at the end of a syllable. As stated in Section 3.2, a glottal stop at the end of a syllable may also be an intrinsic feature of a checked tone.

Table 5: Stopped rhymes in the Hpa-an dialect

iʔ		uʔ	uʔ
eʔ	əʔ	oʔ	
ɛʔ	aʔ	ɔʔ	

These rhymes are realized as follows: /-iʔ/ [iʔ], /-eʔ/ [eʔ], /-ɛʔ/ [ɛʔ], /-əʔ/ [əʔ],

/-aʔ/ [äʔ], /-uʔ/ [uʔ], /-uʔ/ [uʔ], /-oʔ/ [oʔ], and /-ɔʔ/ [ɔʔ].

4. Lae Kwekaw and the phonological system of Sgaw Karen

This section discusses the correspondence between the system of Lae Kwekaw and the phonological system of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen. The following discussion demonstrates that Lae Kwekaw is a highly systematic script.

As discussed in Section 6, Lae Kwekaw can be considered a recent creation rather than an ancient script. Lae Kwekaw's creator(s) likely consulted the Letalanyah system, as is discussed by Kato (2023), in creating this script. The reason for this assumption is that Lae Kwekaw has commonalities with Letalanyah in the following respects: (1) There are basic letters for /b/ (C27; see the tables below) and /d/ (C23) in Sgaw Karen, aside from the basic letters for Pali /b/ (C13) and /d/ (C24) (probably because /b/ and /d/ in Sgaw Karen are implosives [b̥] and [d̥]). (2) There is a notation for /u/ (V07) among the closer back vowels, aside from those for /ə/ (V05), /i/ (V04), and /u/ (V08) (the Christian Sgaw Karen script uses the symbol for the vowel /ə/ to indicate /u/). (3) The vowel /u/ (V07) is indicated by combining the symbols for /i/ (V04) and /ə/ (V10). (4) The symbol for /u/ (V08) is formed by adding a line to the symbol for /i/ (V04). (5) The vowel /o/ (V09) is indicated by the combination of the symbol for /i/ (V04) and that for the Pali vowel /i/ (V12). Therefore, in the following explanations, the Letalanyah symbol corresponding to the Lae Kwekaw symbol will be presented, if it exists, for convenience of comparison. I believe that Lae Kwekaw owes its systematicity to Letalanyah.







































4.1. Initial consonants

Lae Kwekaw uses an abugida system in which syllables are expressed by placing a letter representing the initial consonant in the center and adding various symbols around it. In an abugida system, letters representing the initial consonants are important because they form the basis for attaching other symbols. In this article, letters representing the initial consonants are referred to as basic letters.

Table 6 lists the basic letters of Lae Kwekaw and their sound values.⁴ For ease of discussion, each letter is assigned a number beginning with “C”. The table used for teaching Lae Kwekaw in Karen State arranges basic letters in the order shown in Table 6. The order of the letters is similar to that of the Indic scripts until the third line, after which it differs. However, the reason for this remains unclear.







































Table 7 shows the basic letters of Letalanyah corresponding to each Lae Kwekaw

Table 6: Basic letters of Lae Kwekaw

(C01)  /k-/	(C02)  /kh-/	(C03)  /g-/	(C04)  /x-/	(C05)  /ŋ-/
(C06)  /c-/	(C07)  /ch-/	(C08)  /z-/	(C09)  /z-/	(C10)  /j-/
(C11)  /p-/	(C12)  /ph-/	(C13)  /b-/	(C14)  /b-/	(C15)  /m-/
(C16)  /j-/	(C17)  /e-/	(C18)  /r-/	(C19)  /w-/	(C20)  [f-]
(C21)  /n-/	(C22)  /th-/	(C23)  /d-/	(C24)  /d-/	(C25)  /d-/
(C26)  /θ-/	(C27)  /b-/	(C28)  /t-/	(C29)  /m-/	(C30)  /l-/
(C31)  /h-/	(C32)  /y-/	(C33)  /l-/	(C34)  /th-/	(C35)  /fi-/
	(C36)  /ʔ-/	(C37)  /n-/	(C38)  /t-/	

4 The basic letters and symbols for Lae Kwekaw in this article were created using Paint 3D. Ben Mitchell is currently working on a proposal to encode Lae Kwekaw in the Universal Character Set. I hope to see Lae Kwekaw fonts available in the near future.

Table 7: Correspondences between the basic letters of Lae Kwekaw and Letalanyah

(C01)  ka	(C02)  kha	(C03)  ga	(C04)  gha	(C05)  c ña
(C06)  ca	(C07)  cha	(C08)  ja	(C09)  jha	(C10)  ña ñña
(C11)  pa	(C12)  pha	(C13)  ba	(C14)  bha	(C15)  ma
(C16)  ya	(C17)  rha	(C18)  ra	(C19)  va	(C20) 
(C21)  ña	(C22)  tha	(C23)  sa	(C24)  da	(C25)  dha
(C26)  sa	(C27)  ña	(C28)  ta	(C29)  ma	(C30)  la
(C31)  ha	(C32)  ña	(C33)  la	(C34)  tha	(C35)  ca
	(C36)  ña 'a	(C37)  ña	(C38)  ta	

basic letter and Romanization in the Burmese transcription system of the Library of Congress. The corresponding basic letters of Letalanyah are given in the following video from the YouTube channel shown in (i) of Section 2.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n4Bed73Ab4&t=148s> (last accessed on Nov 10, 2023)

The basic letters that are not attached to Romanization are unique to Letalanyah. (C20) has no equivalent Letalanyah letter.






The following are notes on the basic letters:

- Among the basic letters, (C03), (C08), (C09), (C13), (C14), (C20), (C24), (C25), (C28), (C33), (C34), and (C37) are, in principle, used only for words borrowed from foreign languages, including Burmese, English, and Pali.
- (C09), (C25), and (C14) are used to denote the Pali voiced aspirated stops /jh/, /dh/, and /bh/, respectively.
- (C04) is the letter for /x-/ in Sgaw Karen but is also used to represent /gh/ in Pali.
- (C28), (C34), (C37), and (C33) are letters representing the Pali retroflexes /ṭ/, /ṭh/, /ṇ/, and /ḷ/, respectively. There appear to be no letters for the Pali retroflexes /ḍ/ and /ḍh/, but perhaps /ḍ/ is written by using (C23) for the Sgaw Karen /d-/ [d̃~d]. It is unclear how /ḍh/ is written.
- (C20) is used to denote [f] in English and other languages. I currently see no need to set up /f/ as a phoneme in Sgaw Karen; however, this may become necessary in the future.
- Sgaw Karen /d-/ is usually written with (C23), but the word /dô/ meaning “big; much” is written with (C28) (see (12) in Section 5). Thus, (C28) may represent /d-/ in exceptional cases.
- Both (C15) and (C29) represent /m-/. I assume that two letters are provided for /m-/ to distinguish the homonyms. Among words beginning with /m-/, /mì/, which means “sun; day”, is written with the basic letter only, without a vowel or tone sign.

4.2. Medial consonants

The medial consonants /-w-/, /-l-/, /-r-/, /-j-/, and /-y-/ are written as shown in (M1) to (M5) in Table 8. The basic letter (C11), representing the initial consonant /p-/, is used as an example. The symbols for the medial consonants are circled by dotted lines. The symbol for /-l-/ in Letalanyah is not designated in the Library of Congress Burmese transcription but is transliterated as “pl-” here. In addition, the symbol for /-y-/ should be represented by “h” in the Library of Congress system, but “pH-” is used here to avoid being identical to (C12).

Table 8: Medial consonants

(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)
				
/pw-/	/pl-/	/pr-/	/pj-/	/py-/
ဝ pv-	ဉ pl-	၂ pr-	၃ pj-	၄ py-

Note that the loanwords from Burmese originally written as ကျ <ky> or ကြ <kr> in Burmese are pronounced /c-/ following the Burmese pronunciation, but that this consonant is represented without using the basic letter (C06) for /c-, but with the combination of (C01) for /k-/ and (M4) for /-j-/: for example, /có/ “school” (<Burmese ကော့ခိး /cáun/) (see the last word in (2), in Section 5).

4.3. Vowels and tones

Table 9 shows how the vowels are written. A basic letter is placed inside a square drawn with a dotted line. The vowel notation of Lae Kwekaw is characteristic in that, like Letalanyah, it has a particular way of representing /w/. The Christian Sgaw Karen script, the most common writing system for Sgaw Karen, has no symbol for /w/, which is represented by the symbol for /ə/. The bracketed symbols (V11) and (V12) are used to represent the Pali vowels /o/ and /i/.

Table 9: Vowels













(V01)	(V02)	(V03)	(V04)	(V05)	(V06)
					
/i/	/e/	/ɛ/	/u/	/ə/	/a/
ိ ī	ေ e	ဲ ai	ု u	း :	ာ ā
(V07)	(V08)	(V09)	(V10)	(V11)	(V12)
					
/w/	/u/	/o/	/ə/	/o/	/i/
ံ w	ူ ū	ိ ui	့ ə	ဝ o	ိ i

Table 13: The vowel /ɛ/

(ε1)	(ε2)	(ε3)	(ε4)	(ε5)	(ε6)
/kɛ̃/	/kɛ̄/	/kɛ́/	/kɛ̂/	/kɛ̃ʔ/	/kɛ̄ʔ/
ကဲသ် kais ^c	ကဲယ် kaiy ^c	ကဲ kai	ကဲဝ် kait ^c	ကဲလ် kail ^c	ကဲဒ် kaid ^c

Table 14: The vowel /i/

(i1)	(i2)	(i3)	(i4)	(i5)	(i6)
/ki/	/kī/	/kí/	/kî/	(/kiʔ/)	(/kīʔ/)
ကုသ် kus ^c	ကုယ် kuy ^c	ကုး ku:	ကုဝ် kut ^c	ကုလ် kul ^c	ကုဒ် kud ^c

Table 15: The vowel /ə/

(ə1)	(ə2)	(ə3)	(ə4)	(ə5)	(ə6)	(ə7)
/kə̃/	/kə̄/	/kə́/	/kə̂/	/kə̃ʔ/	/kə̄ʔ/	/kə/
ကဲးသ် ka:s ^c	ကဲးယ် ka:y ^c	ကဲး ka:	ကဲးဝ် ka:t ^c	ကဲးလ် ka:l ^c	ကဲးဒ် ka:d ^c	ကဲ ka

Table 16: The vowel /a/

(a1)	(a2)	(a3)	(a4)	(a5)	(a6)
/kà/	/kā/	/ká/	/kâ/	/kàʔ/	/kāʔ/
ကသ် kas ^c	ကယ် kay ^c	ကး kâ:	ကဝ် kat ^c	ကလ် kal ^c	ကဒ် kad ^c

Table 17: The vowel /u/

(u1)	(u2)	(u3)	(u4)	(u5)	(u6)
/kù/	/kū/	/kú/	/kû/	/kùʔ/	/kūʔ/
ကိုသ် kùs⁴	ကိုယ် kuy⁴	ကို kum	ကိုတ် kumt⁴	ကိုင် kuml⁴	ကိုဒ် kumd⁴

Table 18: The vowel /u/

(u1)	(u2)	(u3)	(u4)	(u5)	(u6)
/kù/	/kū/	/kú/	/kû/	/kùʔ/	/kūʔ/
ကိုသ် kūs⁴	ကိုယ် kūy⁴	ကိုး kū:	ကိုတ် kūt⁴	ကိုင် kūl⁴	ကိုဒ် kūd⁴

Table 19: The vowel /o/

(o1)	(o2)	(o3)	(o4)	(o5)	(o6)
/kò/	/kō/	/kó/	/kô/	/kòʔ/	/kōʔ/
ကိုသ် kuis⁴	ကိုယ် kuy⁴	ကို kui	ကိုတ် kuit⁴	ကိုင် kuil⁴	ကိုဒ် kuid⁴

Table 20: The vowel /ɔ/

(ɔ1)	(ɔ2)	(ɔ3)	(ɔ4)	(ɔ5)	(ɔ6)
/kɔ/	/kɔ̄/	/kɔ́/	/kɔ̂/	/kɔʔ/	/kɔ̄ʔ/
ကိုသ် kams⁴	ကိုယ် kamy⁴	ကို kam	ကိုတ် kamt⁴	ကိုင် kaml⁴	ကိုဒ် kamd⁴

Hpa-an dialect. The Letalanyah spelling for this word is ငုၵ် /luú/.

- (3) နာ် ၵာ် ငါ် နဲ တၵ်း
nā, mā cá nê tᵛᵛē
2SG do like that don't
'You, please don't do like that.'

Note: The standard expression meaning “like that” is /dī? nê/, and is written in Sgaw Karen Christian script as ဒီးနီၵ်, while in the modern Hpa-an dialect the phrase /cá nê/ is frequently used and written as such in Lae Kwekaw (and also in Letalanyah: စားနေဝ်).

- (4) ထီၵ် ကလာ်
thí kōlā?
water boil
'The water is boiling.'

- (5) လူ မဲသု
lū mēdú
chase bravely
'Chase (him) bravely.'

- (6) နဲ တာ်ပု လိ
nè tàbù lí
get benevolence PFV
'(He) received benevolence.'

- (7) ကာ် နာ် ပာ် နဲ
kā? nā pá nê
call 2SG father that
'Call your father.'

Note: The spelling ဝံး in the Christian Sgaw Karen script for the verb meaning

“call” reflects the pronunciation /kōʔ/, while in the modern Hpa-an dialect, it is pronounced /kōʔ/, and the spelling of Lae Kwekaw represents this pronunciation, as well as that of Letalanyah ၵၵၵၵ.

(8) ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ

yē ləʔkətəʔ
 good perfectly
 ‘(It) is perfectly good.’

(9) ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ

ké pəwé ləʔ lí
 become ours complete PFV
 ‘Now (it) is completely ours.’


(10) ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ


kì mēʔú təyē
 burn fire don’t
 ‘Don’t start a fire.’


(11) ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ ၵၵ

mîphó tə dû kōʔ bí
 maiden one group reap paddy
 ‘A group of maidens are harvesting rice.’

Note: The spelling ၵၵ in the Christian Sgaw Karen script for the verb meaning “reap” reflects the pronunciation /kūʔ/, while the modern Hpa-an dialect pronounces it /kōʔ/, and the spelling of Lae Kwekaw follows this pronunciation, as well as that of Letalanyah, ၵၵ.

- (12) 
 kò dō mā?
 hot much very
 ‘(It) is hot very much.’

- (13) 
 bâ kù? pū
 hit jail inside
 “(He) is in jail.”

- (14) 
 hù mó fū
 hey mother SFP
 “Hey, Mother!”

6. Ancientness of Lae Kwekaw

Lae Kwekaw is said to be a script possessed by the ancestors of the Karens thousands of years ago. This section examines this issue from the perspectives of tone and initial consonants.

First, let us examine the tone. In his reconstruction of Proto-Karen tones, Haudricourt (1946) argues that the three-tone system in the proto-language—that is, the system with Tones *1, *2, and *3—evolved in daughter languages under the conditioning influence of the initial consonants, with high (H), mid (M), and low (L) series. Furthermore, Haudricourt (1975) added another tone, represented as *2' here, to his original reconstruction. For details on this reconstruction, see Kato (2018). Table 22 shows how the four proto-tones reconstructed by Haudricourt evolved in Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen (both Hpa-an dialects). The L-series for Tone *2' is left blank because no reflexes for Tone *2 have been found in the L-series.

Table 22: Proto-Karen tones and the tones of Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen

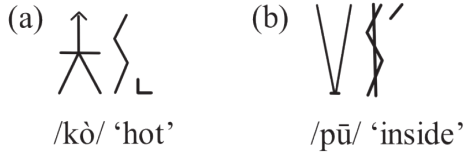
	*1		*2		*2'		*3	
	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw	Pwo	Sgaw
L	à [11]	ā [33]	ā [33]	à [41]			á [55]	à? [11?]
M	à [11]	á [44]	á [55]	â [51]	á [55]	á [44]	à [11]	ā? [33?]
H	â [51]	á [44]	á [55]	â [51]	á [55]	á [44]	à [11]	ā? [33?]

Although it has not yet been determined whether Tone *2' actually existed, scholars agree that Tones *1, *2, and *3 did. If Lae Kwekaw were a script from several thousand years ago, the notation of tones would distinguish only three (Tones *1, *2, and *3) or four (Tones *1, *2, *2', and *3). However, Lae Kwekaw uses six symbols to represent the Sgaw Karen tones (T1 to T6 in Table 10). If Lae Kwekaw were a genuine ancient script, it would not have used as many as six symbols to represent the tones. Recall that, although there are as many as five plain tones in Siamese, the Thai script, which reflects older tones, has only three symbols, including the zero marking, to represent plain tones.

Next, let us consider the notation of initial consonants in terms of voicing. What was revealed in Haudricourt's (1946) argument is that the Proto-Karen initial voiced stops *b, *d, *j, and *g changed to the voiceless aspirated stops /ph-, th-, ch-, and kh-/ in Pwo Karen and the voiceless unaspirated stops /p-, t-, c-, and k-/ in Sgaw Karen when the tones split (see Kato 2018). Thus, when there is a correspondence between a Pwo Karen voiceless aspirated stop and a Sgaw Karen voiceless unaspirated stop, then Proto-Karen had a voiced stop.

For example, let us consider the words “hot” and “inside”. The forms for “hot” are /khō/ in Pwo Karen and /kò/ in Sgaw Karen; thus, it can be assumed that the corresponding Proto-Karen form had an initial consonant *g. In fact, the corresponding form in Geba, a Karenic language that preserves the Proto-Karen voiced stops, is /gō/ “hot” (Kato 2008: 270). Similarly, the forms for “inside” are /phàN/ in Pwo Karen and /pū/ in Sgaw Karen; thus, it can be assumed that the corresponding Proto-Karen form had an initial consonant *b. In fact, the corresponding Geba form is /bū/ (Kato 2008: 196). If Lae Kwekaw were an ancient script, these words would have been written with letters representing the voiced stops. In reality, however, they are written with letters representing voiceless unaspirated stops in Sgaw Karen Lae Kwekaw; see (15):

(15)



(15a) is written with the letter (C01) representing /k-/ and (15b) with the letter (C11) representing /p-/; these words are used in examples (12) and (13) in Section 5, respectively. If Lae Kwekaw were an ancient script, (15a) would be written with (C03) and (15b) with (C13). The Lae Kwekaw notation of stops accurately reflects modern Sgaw Karen’s phonetic values.

It is clear from the above discussion that when the tones and consonants are examined, Lae Kwekaw reflects the pronunciation of a modern language rather than an ancient one. Thus, Lae Kwekaw cannot be considered ancient. In addition, as discussed in Section 4, Lae Kwekaw accurately reflects the pronunciation of present-day Sgaw Karens. Ancient scripts are unlikely to accurately reflect the phonological systems of modern languages. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Lae Kwekaw is a modern creation.

7. Concluding remarks

Lae Kwekaw is a highly systematic script that accurately reflects the phonology of the Hpa-an dialect of Sgaw Karen. Therefore, one must be skeptical of the claim that it is an ancient script. Lae Kwekaw is most likely a modern creation. However, considering the difficult political and cultural situation of the Karens in Myanmar, I would like to express a certain understanding of the movement to create a new script for the revitalization of their culture and the enhancement of their ethnic consciousness. The creation of Lae Kwekaw can be characterized as one of the movements that Kelly (2018a) noted as promoting the indigenous writing systems of the ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia.

As mentioned in Section 1, Karen has various scripts, including the Christian Sgaw Karen script, Buddhist Pwo Karen script, Christian Pwo Karen script, Buddhist

Sgaw Karen script, Leke script, and Romanized Sgaw Karen alphabet (and possibly others). Lae Kwekaw has been added to this list. Kelly (2018b: 189) described West Africa as “a fertile zone for the invention of new scripts”. One could say that Karen society has the same characteristics. However, problems can arise when a culture has a large number of writing systems. Womack (2005: 3) pointed out that “Karen scripts have served as markers of difference—regional, linguistic, sectarian, and political—between disparate, and sometimes antagonistic, Karen groups.” The creation of Lae Kwekaw has the potential to help revitalize Karen culture and enhance its ethnic consciousness, but it also has the negative potential to function as a marker of difference. We must keep a close eye on how Lae Kwekaw evolves in Karen society in the future.

Finally, I will discuss Lae Kwekaw’s lineage from a grammatological perspective. The basic letters and symbols of Lae Kwekaw correspond almost perfectly with those of Letalanyah, a variation of the Mon-Burmese script. Thus, it can also be used to write Pali. Furthermore, the Burmese script can also be replaced by Lae Kwekaw. Figure 1 shows an image of a sample of Lae Kwekaw from Kato (2021a). In this article, I inferred that this was Sgaw Karen. However, after studying Lae Kwekaw, I found that it is the Burmese sentence given in (16): This is a kind of slogan that can be translated as “My innocent brethren, let’s wake up and start laying bricks!”.⁵



Figure 1: A Burmese slogan written in Lae Kwekaw

- (16) 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫
 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫

Here, the Burmese tone symbol ◌◌ is written with the Lae Kwekaw tone symbol (T3) in Table 10, and the Burmese tone symbol ◌◌ is replaced with (T4). Furthermore, the

⁵ Figure 1 is a scan of one of the documents that I collected in Karen State. However, unfortunately I cannot recall which document it was.

Burmese virama ၵ is transliterated with (T1). Thus, Lae Kwekaw has an abugida system that is compatible not only with Letalanyah but also with the Burmese script. Furthermore, the shapes of letters and symbols in Lae Kwekaw appear to be similar to their counterparts in various Indic scripts.⁶ It is highly likely that the creator(s) of Lae Kwekaw referenced ancient Indic scripts, including the Brahmi and ancient Mon-Burmese scripts. Given these characteristics of Lae Kwekaw, I believe that it can be considered as a variation of the Indic script. In other words, Lae Kwekaw is one of the most recent developments in Indic scripts, which have continuously evolved from Brahmi scripts over 2,000 years ago.

Abbreviations

PFV = perfective; SFP = sentence final particle; SG = singular; 2 = second person.

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6 It was Ms. Yuan Meng, a Chinese student studying Sgaw Karen in Thailand, who first pointed out to me that the shapes of the elements in Lae Kwekaw look similar to those of the ancestors of the Mon-Burmese script.

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