

# Leke script: The “chicken scratch” script of Pwo Karen\*

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## Abstract

The Leke script is a writing system designed for Eastern Pwo Karen. It is primarily used by the followers of the Leke religion. Owing to its distinctive shapes, it is also called the “chicken scratch” script. Created in the mid-19th century, the script reflects the Eastern Pwo Karen phonological system of the time. This article elucidates the system of the Leke script by demonstrating its correspondence with the Eastern Pwo Karen phonological system of the 19th century. The analysis reveals that the Leke script is capable of accurately representing the phonological system of both 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen and contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen.

## 1. Introduction

The ethnic Karen have various writing systems. Drawing from the phrase “a fertile zone for the invention of new scripts” by Kelly (2018b: 189) to describe West Africa, Kato (2025) calls the Karen society “a fertile society for the invention of new scripts”. Even when limiting the discussion to Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen, who constitute the Karen people in the narrowest sense (Kato [2021b]), the writing systems representing their languages include at least the following scripts:

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\* In analyzing the system of the Leke script, information received from Van de Kasteelen, Frank (p.c., July 2025) proved invaluable. He also sent me a Unicode proposal for the Leke script (Van de Kasteelen 2025). I would like to express my deepest gratitude to him. For typing Leke characters in this article, I used the Plone Ware Shar Mla Font.

- (a) The Christian Sgaw Karen script is the best known. It was created by the American Baptist missionary Rev. Jonathan Wade in the 1830s (Kato [2025]).
- (b) The Buddhist Pwo Karen script was created by Karen Buddhist monks for Eastern Pwo Karen between the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Kato [2021a]).
- (c) The Christian Pwo Karen script was created for Eastern Pwo Karen by American Baptist missionaries in the 1840s (Kato [2021a, 2022a]). However, it is now primarily used for Western Pwo Karen.
- (d) The Buddhist Sgaw Karen script, called “Letalanyah”, was created by Karen Buddhist monks sometime after 1960 (Kato [2023]).
- (e) The Leke script is used by Leke followers to write Eastern Pwo Karen (Stern [1968]; see also Fickle and Hosken [2013], Kelly [2018a], and Van de Kasteelen [2025]).
- (f) Romei is a Romanized Sgaw Karen script mainly used by Roman Catholic Karens in Thailand (Seguinotte [2007]; Kato [2025]).
- (g) Lae Kwekaw is a newly created “ancient” writing system for Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen (Kato [2022b]; Kato [2024]).
- (h) There is also an “ancient” script for Sgaw Karen (Kato [2022b: 14]). However, the details of the script remain unclear.<sup>1</sup>

Of these, (a), (c), and (f) were created by Christian missionaries, whereas the remaining were created by the Karen themselves. Scripts (a), (b), and (c) are used by many speakers across a wide region. Scripts (d)–(h) are used less frequently. Additionally, there have been attempts in Thailand to write several Karen dialects using the Thai script. For example, Cooke et al. (1976) described an attempt to write a Pwo Karen dialect in northern Thailand using the Thai script.

One reason for the large number of scripts used in Karen society is language variations. The narrowly defined Karen language comprises two major groups: Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. Each group has numerous subgroups with different phonological systems. Another reason is the practice of diverse religions, including

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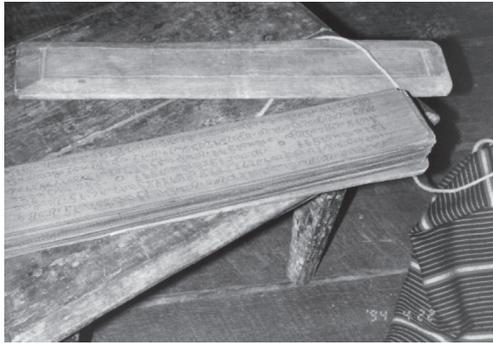
<sup>1</sup> Regarding script (h), I plan to discuss it in detail in a separate paper.

Buddhism, Christianity, Leke, Talakon, and animism. The choice of script for writing religious teachings is important for religious leaders. Additionally, being surrounded by Mon, Burmese, and Thai societies, which have long histories of written language, has likely provided numerous stimuli for writing.

This study discusses the Leke script, that is, script (e), which is one of the Eastern Pwo Karen<sup>2</sup> scripts and is used by the followers of the Leke religion (Figure 1). It is based on the phonology of the Hpa-an dialect of Eastern Pwo Karen. The founders of the Leke religion were most likely Karen people whose native language was a variety of Eastern Pwo Karen spoken around present-day Hpa-an, the capital of Kayin State, Myanmar. The script was created by them in the mid-19th century, around the same time when the Leke religion was founded. Based on its distinctive form, this script is called Leit Hsan Wait (/láichânwé/ in contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen; \*/láíʔchânwéʔ/ in 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen; <ꨀꨁꨂꨃꨄꨅꨆꨇꨈꨉꨊꨋꨌꨍꨎꨏꨐꨑꨒꨓꨔꨕꨖꨗꨘꨙꨚꨛꨜꨝꨞꨟꨠꨡꨢꨣꨤꨥꨦꨧꨨꨩꨪꨫꨬꨭꨮꨯꨰꨱꨲꨳꨴꨵꨶ꨷꨸꨹꨺꨻꨼꨽꨾꨿ꩀꩁꩂꩃꩄꩅꩆꩇꩈꩉꩊꩋꩌꩍ꩎꩏꩐꩑꩒꩓꩔꩕꩖꩗꩘꩙꩚꩛꩜꩝꩞꩟ꩠꩡꩢꩣꩤꩥꩦꩧꩨꩩꩪꩫꩬꩭꩮꩯꩰꩱꩲꩳꩴꩵꩶ꩷꩸꩹ꩺꩻꩼꩽꩾꩿꪀꪁꪂꪃꪄꪅꪆꪇꪈꪉꪊꪋꪌꪍꪎꪏꪐꪑꪒꪓꪔꪕꪖꪗꪘꪙꪚꪛꪜꪝꪞꪟꪠꪡꪢꪣꪤꪥꪦꪧꪨꪩꪪꪫꪬꪭꪮꪯꪰꪱꪴꪲꪳꪵꪶꪷꪸꪹꪺꪻꪼꪽꪾ꪿ꫀ꫁ꫂ꫃꫄꫅꫆꫇꫈꫉꫊꫋꫌꫍꫎꫏꫐꫑꫒꫓꫔꫕꫖꫗꫘꫙꫚ꫛꫜꫝ꫞꫟ꫠꫡꫢꫣꫤꫥꫦꫧꫨꫩꫪꫫꫬꫭꫮꫯ꫰꫱ꫲꫳꫴꫵ꫶꫷꫸꫹꫺꫻꫼꫽꫾꫿꬀ꬁꬂꬃꬄꬅꬆ꬇꬈ꬉꬊꬋꬌꬍꬎ꬏꬐ꬑꬒꬓꬔꬕꬖ꬗꬘꬙꬚꬛꬜꬝꬞꬟ꬠꬡꬢꬣꬤꬥꬦ꬧ꬨꬩꬪꬫꬬꬭꬮ꬯ꬰꬱꬲꬳꬴꬵꬶꬷꬸꬹꬺꬻꬼꬽꬾꬿꭀꭁꭂꭃꭄꭅꭆꭇꭈꭉꭊꭋꭌꭍꭎꭏꭐꭑꭒꭓꭔꭕꭖꭗꭘꭙꭚ꭛ꭜꭝꭞꭟꭠꭡꭢꭣꭤꭥꭦꭧꭨꭩ꭪꭫꭬꭭꭮꭯ꭰꭱꭲꭳꭴꭵꭶꭷꭸꭹꭺꭻꭼꭽꭾꭿꮀꮁꮂꮃꮄꮅꮆꮇꮈꮉꮊꮋꮌꮍꮎꮏꮐꮑꮒꮓꮔꮕꮖꮗꮘꮙꮚꮛꮜꮝꮞꮟꮠꮡꮢꮣꮤꮥꮦꮧꮨꮩꮪꮫꮬꮭꮮꮯꮰꮱꮲꮳꮴꮵꮶꮷꮸꮹꮺꮻꮼꮽꮾꮿꯀꯁꯂꯃꯄꯅꯆꯇꯈꯉꯊꯋꯌꯍꯎꯏꯐꯑꯒꯓꯔꯕꯖꯗꯘꯙꯚꯛꯜꯝꯞꯟꯠꯡꯢꯣꯤꯥꯦꯧꯨꯩꯪ꯫꯬꯭꯮꯯꯰꯱꯲꯳꯴꯵꯶꯷꯸꯹꯺꯻꯼꯽꯾꯿가각갂갃간갅갆갇갈갉갊갋갌갍갎갏감갑값갓갔강갖갗갘같갚갛개객갞갟갠갡갢갣갤갥갦갧갨갩갪갫갬갭갮갯갰갱갲갳갴갵갶갷갸갹갺갻갼갽갾갿걀걁걂걃걄걅걆걇걈걉걊걋걌걍걎걏걐걑걒걓걔걕걖걗걘걙걚걛걜걝걞걟걠걡걢걣걤걥걦걧걨걩걪걫걬걭걮걯거걱걲걳건걵걶걷걸걹걺걻걼걽걾걿검겁겂것겄겅겆겇겈겉겊겋게겍겎겏겐겑겒겓겔겕겖겗겘겙겚겛겜겝겞겟겠겡겢겣겤겥겦겧겨격겪겫견겭겮겯결겱겲겳겴겵겶겷겸겹겺겻겼경겾겿곀곁곂곃계곅곆곇곈곉곊곋곌곍곎곏곐곑곒곓곔곕곖곗곘곙곚곛곜곝곞곟고곡곢곣곤곥곦곧골곩곪곫곬곭곮곯곰곱곲곳곴공곶곷곸곹곺곻과곽곾곿관괁괂괃괄괅괆괇괈괉괊괋괌괍괎괏괐광괒괓괔괕괖괗괘괙괚괛괜괝괞괟괠괡괢괣괤괥괦괧괨괩괪괫괬괭괮괯괰괱괲괳괴괵괶괷괸괹괺괻괼괽괾괿굀굁굂굃굄굅굆굇굈굉굊굋굌굍굎굏교굑굒굓굔굕굖굗굘굙굚굛굜굝굞굟굠굡굢굣굤굥굦굧굨굩굪굫구국굮굯군굱굲굳굴굵굶굷굸굹굺굻굼굽굾굿궀궁궂궃궄궅궆궇궈궉궊궋권궍궎궏궐궑궒궓궔궕궖궗궘궙궚궛궜궝궞궟궠궡궢궣궤궥궦궧궨궩궪궫궬궭궮궯궰궱궲궳궴궵궶궷궸궹궺궻궼궽궾궿귀귁귂귃귄귅귆귇귈귉귊귋귌귍귎귏귐귑귒귓귔귕귖귗귘귙귚귛규귝귞귟균귡귢귣귤귥귦귧귨귩귪귫귬귭귮귯귰귱귲귳귴귵귶귷그극귺귻근귽귾귿글긁긂긃긄긅긆긇금급긊긋긌긍긎긏긐긑긒긓긔긕긖긗긘긙긚긛긜긝긞긟긠긡긢긣긤긥긦긧긨긩긪긫긬긭긮긯기긱긲긳긴긵긶긷길긹긺긻긼긽긾긿김깁깂깃깄깅깆깇깈깉깊깋까깍깎깏깐깑깒깓깔깕깖깗깘깙깚깛깜깝깞깟깠깡깢깣깤깥깦깧깨깩깪깫깬깭깮깯깰깱깲깳깴깵깶깷깸깹깺깻깼깽깾깿꺀꺁꺂꺃꺄꺅꺆꺇꺈꺉꺊꺋꺌꺍꺎꺏꺐꺑꺒꺓꺔꺕꺖꺗꺘꺙꺚꺛꺜꺝꺞꺟꺠꺡꺢꺣꺤꺥꺦꺧꺨꺩꺪꺫꺬꺭꺮꺯꺰꺱꺲꺳꺴꺵꺶꺷꺸꺹꺺꺻꺼꺽꺾꺿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷꾸꾹꾺꾻꾼꾽꾾꾿꿀꿁꿂꿃꿄꿅꿆꿇꿈꿉꿊꿋꿌꿍꿎꿏꿐꿑꿒꿓꿔꿕꿖꿗꿘꿙꿚꿛꿜꿝꿞꿟꿠꿡꿢꿣꿤꿥꿦꿧꿨꿩꿪꿫꿬꿭꿮꿯꿰꿱꿲꿳꿴꿵꿶꿷꿸꿹꿺꿻꿼꿽꿾꿿껀껁껂껃껄껅껆껇껈껉껊껋껌껍껎껏껐껑껒껓껔껕껖껗께껙껚껛껜껝껞껟껠껡껢껣껤껥껦껧껨껩껪껫껬껭껮껯껰껱껲껳껴껵껶껷껸껹껺껻껼껽껾껿꼀꼁꼂꼃꼄꼅꼆꼇꼈꼉꼊꼋꼌꼍꼎꼏꼐꼑꼒꼓꼔꼕꼖꼗꼘꼙꼚꼛꼜꼝꼞꼟꼠꼡꼢꼣꼤꼥꼦꼧꼨꼩꼪꼫꼬꼭꼮꼯꼰꼱꼲꼳꼴꼵꼶꼷꼸꼹꼺꼻꼼꼽꼾꼿꽀꽁꽂꽃꽄꽅꽆꽇꽈꽉꽊꽋꽌꽍꽎꽏꽐꽑꽒꽓꽔꽕꽖꽗꽘꽙꽚꽛꽜꽝꽞꽟꽠꽡꽢꽣꽤꽥꽦꽧꽨꽩꽪꽫꽬꽭꽮꽯꽰꽱꽲꽳꽴꽵꽶꽷꽸꽹꽺꽻꽼꽽꽾꽿꾀꾁꾂꾃꾄꾅꾆꾇꾈꾉꾊꾋꾌꾍꾎꾏꾐꾑꾒꾓꾔꾕꾖꾗꾘꾙꾚꾛꾜꾝꾞꾟꾠꾡꾢꾣꾤꾥꾦꾧꾨꾩꾪꾫꾬꾭꾮꾯꾰꾱꾲꾳꾴꾵꾶꾷



**Figure 1: Altar of the Leke religion** (photograph by the author in Hpa-an, 1994)



**Figure 2: Palm-leaf manuscript of a sacred text** (photograph by the author in Hpa-an, 1994)

In Eastern Pwo Karen, /wē/ means ‘elder sibling’ and /eā/ means ‘old’. Therefore, /wēeā/ can be translated as ‘old elder sibling’. The sacred texts of the Leke religion are written using the Leke script (Figure 2). There are numerous sacred texts, with Saw Kya Shin et al. (2006) listing the titles of 49 scriptures.

The exact origins of the Leke script remain unclear, with varying accounts from researchers. This is likely because of the legendary elements associated with the origins of the script. Three accounts of the origins are introduced as follows.

First, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (1967: 409–410), written in Burmese, states that U Maw Yaing (ဦးမော့ယိုင်) created the Leke script at the Upper Yetagun Temple (အထက်ရေတံခွန်ကျောင်း) in 1846. It also mentions that Pi Mike Kali (ဖိမိုက်ကာလီ) of Hnitkya village (နှစ်ခြားကျေးရွာ) wrote the first sacred text in 1861.

Second, Womack (2005: 155) explains that in the year 1207 of the Myanmar

calendar (1844–45 CE), Pu Nai Thayat and Pu Maung Tawdut received a revelation from the Nat-prince Arimettaya, Thagya Min, Brahma, Min, and many nats at the Upper Yetagun Temple on Mount Zwegabin, and were granted a script. Pu Maw Yaing (the same person as U Maw Yaing) and Pu Ti Shwe Yauk systematized this script. Furthermore, in 1222 (AD 1860–61), Pi Mike Kali and Pu Ti Thaug Tawt of Hnitkya village received a holy book that formed the basis of Leke religious practice through revelations from the same divine messengers.

Third, Kelly (2018a), based on Saw Kya Shin et al. (2006), states that in 1844 or 1845, Mahn Thaug Hlya undertook a seven-day fast on Mount Zwegabin with six companions. He was the only one who completed the seven-day fast and received the vision of a figure in white robes on the final day, who granted him the script. After descending the mountain, he studied under Mahn Maw Yaing (= U Maw Yaing), who assisted Baptist missionaries by translating the Bible into Pwo Karen. Mahn Maw Yaing then systematized this script.

The name that appears most commonly in these studies is U Maw Yaing (= Pu Maw Yaing, Mahn Maw Yaing). He was likely heavily involved in creating the Leke script. Pi Mike Kali (= Hpee Mite Kali) and her husband, Pu Ti Thaug Tawt (= Hputee Thaug Htaut or Mahn Thaug Htaut), whom Womack (2005) mentioned as recipients of the holy book, may have also contributed significantly to the development of the Leke script. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the Leke script was created in the mid-19th century.

This article primarily aims to explain the Leke script system by showing how it corresponds to the phonology of the Hpa-an dialect. Although Stern (1968) previously analyzed the Leke script in relation to pronunciation, his analysis was, unfortunately, inaccurate and incomplete. Hence, this study analyzes the Leke script accurately and comprehensively.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the methods used in the study. Section 3 discusses the phonological system of contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen. Section 4 presents the phonological system of Eastern Pwo Karen from the 19th century. The Leke script largely reflects the pronunciation of 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen; however, it is also influenced by



understanding the Leke script system.



Figure 3: Pu Htaw Shong (n.d., p. 26)

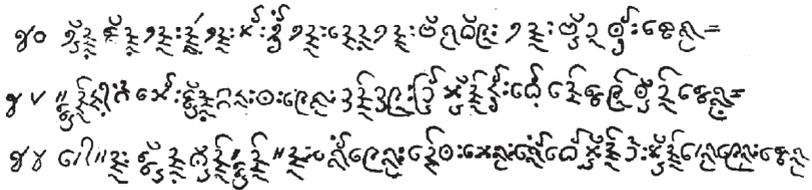


Figure 4: Pu Htaw Shong (n.d., p. 36)

For long, I was unable to find any information about reading this textbook. However, this changed when I learned about LEIT TAW TUG, a YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@leittawtug5487>; registered on February 27, 2018; last accessed October 21, 2025). This YouTube channel has uploaded a large number of videos explaining how to read the basic letters and vowel symbols of the Leke script in Eastern Pwo Karen and videos of Eastern Pwo Karen songs with Leke script subtitles. By watching these videos, I gained a general understanding of the relationship between the Leke script and the pronunciation of contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen. I had been unable to read Pu Htaw Shong (n.d.) previously, but this enabled me to do so. Reading Pu Htaw Shong (n.d.) helped me understand the details of the Leke script. These procedures were carried out in late 2024 and early 2025.

The tables of correspondence between spellings and sounds in Section 6 were created based on the findings obtained through these methods. Note that all spelling examples in this article are from Pu Htaw Shong (n.d.) or the lyrics of videos on the LEIT TAW TUG YouTube channel.

### 3. Phonology of contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen

The Leke script was created by speakers of Eastern Pwo Karen in the mid-19th century in the suburbs of Hpa-an, the present capital of Myanmar's Kayin State. Thus, the script largely reflects the phonological system of Eastern Pwo Karen spoken in Hpa-an during the 19th century. However, it is also influenced by contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen. Thus, understanding the script requires an understanding of both contemporary and 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen phonological systems. The phonological system of the contemporary Hpa-an dialect is presented first, followed by that of the 19th century. The contemporary phonological system is presented first because it allows for a more detailed and precise understanding of sounds.

Pwo Karen can be classified into at least four dialectal groups: Western Pwo Karen, Eastern Pwo Karen, Northern Pwo Karen, and Htoklibang Pwo Karen (Kato [2009a]; Phillips [2017]). These groups exhibit low degrees of mutual understanding. The Hpa-an dialect is representative of Eastern Pwo Karen because it has a large population of speakers and is understood in many regions. It includes languages spoken in the surrounding towns, such as Hlaingbwe and Kawkareik. In this article, the contemporary Hpa-an dialect is referred to as “CEPK” (Contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen).

The syllable structure of CEPK can be represented as C1(C2)V1(V2)(C3)/(T). “C” stands for a consonant, “V” for a vowel, and “T” for a tone. C1, C2, and C3 are the initial, medial, and final consonants, respectively. One or two vowels may occur and are represented by V1 and V2. Bracketed elements may or may not be present. The part C1(C2)- is called an onset, and the part -V1(V2)(C3) is called a rhyme. In the following discussion, hyphens are used to indicate C1 as “C-” (C is any initial consonant), C2 as “-C-” (C is any medial consonant), and the rhyme as “-R” (R is any rhyme), where necessary. Note that all phonetic symbols in the tables of Sections 3 and 4 are phonemic, but “/ʹ” is omitted.

As shown in Table 1, there are four tones: low-level, mid-level, high-level, and falling tones. In the table, they are shown with /a/ and tone marks. The mid-level tone is pronounced with a breathy voice. Moreover, there are atonic syllables that are

represented without the addition of tone marks. The only rhyme that can appear in atonic syllables is /-ə/. They are pronounced short and weak, and their pitches are inconsistent.

**Table 1: Tones in CEPK**

à	[a11]	low-level tone
ā	[a33~334]	mid-level tone
á	[a55]	high-level tone
â	[a51]	falling tone
ə		atonic

The simple onsets consisting only of C1 are listed in Table 2. There are 25 phonemes that can serve as simple onsets.

**Table 2: Simple onsets in CEPK**

p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
ph		th	ch	kh	
b		d			
			ɛ	x	h
				ʏ	ɸ
m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
w			j		
		l			
		r			

The phonetic values of simple onsets are as follows: /p-/ [p], /θ-/ [t̥~t̥θ~θ], /t-/ [t], /c-/ [tɛ], /k-/ [k], /ʔ-/ [ʔ], /ph-/ [pʰ], /th-/ [tʰ], /ch-/ [tɛʰ], /kh-/ [kʰ], /b-/ [β~ʔb], /d-/ [d~ʔd~d], /ɛ-/ [ɛ~sʰ], /x-/ [x], /h-/ [h], /ʏ-/ [ʏ], /ɸ-/ [ɸ~f], /m-/ [m], /n-/ [n], /ɲ-/ [ɲ], /ŋ-/ [ŋ], /w-/ [w], /j-/ [j~j], /l-/ [l], and /r-/ [r~ɹ]. When one reads a written text, /c-/ and /ch-/ are often pronounced as [s] and [sʰ], respectively, regardless of the writing system. In this case, /ch-/ [sʰ] becomes indistinguishable from /ɛ-/ when the latter is pronounced [sʰ]. Finally, /r-/ is often pronounced [l]. In such cases, /r-/ loses its distinction from /l-/.

The phonemes that can appear as C2 are /-w-/ [w], /-l-/ [l], /-r-/ [r~ɹ], and /-j-/ [j~j]. The possible combinations of C1 and C2 are presented in Table 3. Medial /-r-/, like the initial /r-/, is often pronounced [l]. In such cases, /-r-/ loses its distinction from /-l-/.

**Table 3: Possible combinations of C1 and C2 in CEPK**

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

As previously mentioned, the structure of a rhyme can be represented as -V1(V2)(C3). Among its components, the position of C3 can only be occupied by the phoneme /N/, which cannot appear as C1 or C2. The final consonant /N/ is realized as [N] or the nasalization of the preceding vowel. Rhymes can be divided into two types: open rhymes without C3 and nasalized rhymes with /N/.

There are 13 open rhymes (Table 4).

**Table 4: Open rhymes in CEPK**

Monophthongs	Diphthongs	
i	i	ɯ
ĩ		ɯ
e	ə	o
ɛ	a	ɔ

These rhymes are realized as follows: /-i/[ǝi(jʰ)], /-ĩ/[ɪ], /-e/[ɛ], /-ɛ/[ɛ], /-i/[i], /-ə/[ə], /-a/[ä], /-ɯ/[ɯ~ǝɯ], /-ɯ/[ɯ], /-o/[o], /-ɔ/[ɔ], /-ai/[äi], and /-aɯ/[äɯ]. The rhyme /-i/ may be accompanied by a pharyngealized palatal approximant at the end, as indicated by [(jʰ)]. In the younger generation, the distinction between the rhymes /-ĩ/ and /-e/ is becoming unclear for many speakers. Similarly, the distinction between the rhymes /-ɯ/ and /-o/ is also becoming unclear. Among all the rhymes, /-e/, /-o/, /-ai/, and /-aɯ/, generally co-occur only with low- and high-level tones. This is because they originated from rhymes with a final glottal stop in the 19th century, and the tones that used to co-occur with a final glottal stop in the 19th century, that is, the low- and high-checked tones, merged into contemporary low- and high-level tones, respectively.

Note that I used to transcribe the vowel phoneme /ĩ/ as /i/. I have used /ĩ/ instead of /i/ since 2019 (Kato [2019a]; Kato [2019b]), because the symbol /i/ is difficult to distinguish from /i/ when written with a tone mark. Compare, for example, /ĩ/ and /i/.

Moreover, /i/ and /i/ are difficult to distinguish in some IPA fonts in italics.

There are eight nasalized rhymes (Table 5). I put /-iN/ in parentheses because it appears only in loanwords from Burmese and from other languages that have entered via Burmese.

**Table 5: Nasalized rhymes in CEPK**

Monophthongs	Diphthongs
(iN)	
əN    oN	eɪN    əuN    oʊN
aN	aiN

These rhymes are realized as follows: /-iN/ [iN~ĩ], /-əN/ [əN~ǝ], /-aN/ [ǎəN~ǎǝ~ǎ̃], /-oN/ [oN~ǝ], /-eiN/ [eiN~ei], /-əuN/ [əuN~əu], /-aiN/ [äiN~äi], and /-oʊN/ [oʊN~oʊ]. In the rhymes /-eiN/, /-əuN/, and /-oʊN/, the final /-N/ is often dropped in rapid speech. Furthermore, the distinction between /-əuN/ and /-oʊN/ is becoming increasingly unclear, particularly among the younger generation.

#### 4. Phonology of Eastern Pwo Karen in the 19th century

Kato (2021a) reconstructed the phonological system of the Hpa-an dialect of Eastern Pwo Karen from the late 18th to the mid-19th centuries. This reconstruction is based on a comparison of Pwo Karen dialects and an analysis of the Christian Pwo Karen script. This study refers to the Hpa-an dialect of Eastern Pwo Karen during this period as “19c EPK” (19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen). The Leke script reflects the phonological system of the 19c EPK. This section presents the 19c EPK phonological system. Note that as discussed in Kato (2022a), the 19th-century phonological system presented in Kato (2021a) requires a revision to include the consonant cluster \*/cj-/.

Similar to CEPK, the syllable structure of 19c EPK can be represented as C1(C2)V1(V2)(C3)/(T). However, 19c EPK differs significantly from CEPK in that a glottal stop can appear at C3.

There are six tones in 19c EPK: low-level, mid-level, high-level, falling, low-checked, and high-checked (Table 6). However, the exact pitches of these are unknown.

**Table 6: Tones in 19c EPK**

à	low-level tone
ā	mid-level tone
á	high-level tone
â	falling tone
àʔ	low-checked tone
áʔ	high-checked tone
ə	atonic

The major difference between tones in CEPK and 19c EPK is that the latter has tones ending with a glottal stop, namely the low-checked and high-checked tones. It is unclear whether the glottal stop in these tones should be considered an intrinsic tonal feature or a syllable-final consonant unrelated to tone. Therefore, I avoid drawing definitive conclusions in this study and regard the glottal stop as both an intrinsic tonal feature and a syllable-final consonant. Furthermore, it is very difficult to establish phonological correspondences between the low-checked and low-level tones and between the high-checked and high-level tones. Regarding notation, /à/ and /âʔ/ are represented by the same tone mark; however, they may or may not belong to the same toneme. Similarly, this is true for /á/ and /áʔ/. Hence, no definitive conclusions are drawn regarding this issue.

The simple onsets consisting only of C1 are listed in Table 7. The inventory of phonemes is the same as that of CEPK. However, it is unknown whether there are any differences between 19c EPK and CEPK in terms of phonetic realization.

**Table 7: Simple onsets in 19c EPK**

p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
ph		th	ch	kh	
b		d			
			e	x	h
				ɣ	ʁ
m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
w			j		
		l			
		r			

Table 8 presents the possible combinations of C1 and C2. The only difference from Table 3 is that Table 8 includes the /cj-/ cluster. In other words, 19c EPK contained the consonant cluster /cj-/, which does not exist in CEPK.

**Table 8: Possible combinations of C1 and C2 in 19c EPK**

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

The structure of a rhyme in 19c EPK can be represented as -V1(V2)(C3), similar to CEPK. As noted above, the major difference from CEPK is the glottal stop that can appear as C3 in 19c EPK.

As shown in Table 9, there are 10 open rhymes. A key difference from CEPK is that 19c EPK distinguished between /-u/ and /-u/.

**Table 9: Open rhymes in 19c EPK**

i	i	u u
e	ə	o
ε	a	ɔ

As shown in Table 10, there are seven nasalized rhymes. CEPK has /-ĩn/, which only appears in loanwords from Burmese. However, I assume that 19c EPK did not have this rhyme.

**Table 10: Nasalized rhymes in 19c EPK**

Monophthongs		Diphthongs
ə̃N	õN	ẽiN ə̃ũN oũN
ãN		aĩN

Rhymes ending with a glottal stop were present in 19c EPK. I refer to these as stopped rhymes. As shown in Table 11, there are eight stopped rhymes.

**Table 11: Stopped rhymes in 19c EPK**

Monophthongs		Diphthongs
ĩʔ		
ẽʔ	õʔ	
ãʔ	ɔ̃ʔ	aĩʔ aũʔ aũʔ

## 5. Correspondences of sounds between 19c EPK and CEPK

This section demonstrates how the sounds of 19c EPK correspond to those of CEPK. In this study, the forms of the 19c EPK (including the names of tones) are marked with asterisks.

The corresponding tones are listed in Table 12. In CEPK, \*/à/ and \*/àʔ/ in 19c EPK have merged to become /à/. Similarly, \*/á/ and \*/áʔ/ in 19c EPK have merged to become /á/ in CEPK.

**Table 12: Tones**

19c EPK	CEPK
*à, *àʔ	à [a11]
*ā	ā [ā33 ~ 334]
*á, *áʔ	á [a55]
*â	â [a51]
*ə (atonic)	ə (atonic)

The correspondences of the simple onsets are presented in Tables 13–15. Including all simple onsets in a single table would make it too long; hence, they are divided into three categories: “stops and affricates”, “fricatives”, and “nasals, semivowels, and liquids”. As these tables show, there is no difference between the C1, that is, simple onsets, of the 19c EPK and the CEPK.

**Table 13: Stops and affricates**

19c EPK	*p-	*θ-	*t-	*c-	*k-	*ʔ-	*ph-	*th-	*ch-	*kh-	*b-	*d-
CEPK	p-	θ-	t-	c-	k-	ʔ-	ph-	th-	ch-	kh-	b-	d-

**Table 14: Fricatives**

19c EPK	*ç-	*x-	*h-	*ɣ-	*ʁ-
CEPK	ç-	x-	h-	ɣ-	ʁ-

**Table 15: Nasals, semivowels, and liquids**

19c EPK	*m-	*n-	*ɲ-	*ŋ-	*w-	*j-	*l-	*r-
CEPK	m-	n-	ɲ-	ŋ-	w-	j-	l-	r-

The consonant phonemes appearing in position C2 exhibit a correspondence as shown in Table 16. This means that the consonant phonemes that can appear medially are /w/, /l/, /r/, and /j/ in both 19c EPK and CEPK, and the correspondences are

regular.

**Table 16: Medials**

19c EPK	*-w-	*-l-	*-r-	*-j-
CEPK	-w-	-l-	-r-	-j-

As stated in Section 4, the possible combinations of C1 and C2 differ only in one respect between 19c EPK and CEPK. 19c EPK had the consonant cluster \*/cj-/, consisting of the initial consonant \*/c-/ and the medial consonant \*/-j-/. However, CEPK does not have /cj-/. The \*/cj-/ of 19c EPK has become /c-/ in CEPK. Meanwhile, the \*/c-/ of 19c EPK has been inherited by /c-/ in CEPK. In other words, the \*/cj-/ and \*/c-/ of 19c EPK have merged to become /c-/ in CEPK (Table 17).

**Table 17: \*/c-/ and \*/cj-/**

19c EPK	*c-	*cj-
CEPK	c-	

Kato (2021a) considered the spellings ၵၵ in the Buddhist Pwo Karen script and ၵၵ in the Christian Pwo Karen script to appear only in loanwords from Mon or Burmese. However, these spellings can also appear in vocabulary native to Pwo Karen. For example, Eastern Pwo Karen ၵၵၵ /cán/ ‘hut’ and Western Pwo Karen ၵၵၵ /cán/ ‘hut’. Moreover, although Eastern Pwo Karen /c-/ typically corresponds to Western Pwo Karen /s-/, in this case it corresponds to /c-/ instead. Therefore, to explain this fact, Kato (2022a) proposed that 19c EPK possessed a consonant cluster \*/cj-/. This consonant cluster is thought to have also existed in Proto-Pwo-Karen around the 17th century (see Kato [2019b] for the period in which Proto-Pwo-Karen was spoken). Proto-Pwo-Karen \*/cj-/ became /c-/ in both contemporary Eastern and Western Pwo Karen.

The open rhymes in 19c EPK correspond to the CEPK rhymes, as shown in Table 18. In the 19th century, there was a distinction between /-u/ and /-u/, but these two rhymes have merged into /-u/ in CEPK. The close-mid vowels /-e/ and /-o/ in 19c EPK have both been narrowed in CEPK, becoming /-i/ and /-u/, respectively.

**Table 18: Open rhymes**

19c EPK	*-i	*-e	*-ε	*-ĩ	*-ə	*-a	*-u	*-u	*-o	*-o
CEPK	-i	-i	-ε	-ĩ	-ə	-a	-u	-u	-o	-o

There is an exception to the correspondence listed in Table 18. The 19c EPK rhyme \*/-e/, preceded by the initial \*/w-/ or medial \*/-w-/, has become /-e/ in CEPK, not /i/. For example, /-e/ of the word /ʔəwê/ ‘3SG’ comes from \*/-e/, but this word is not pronounced /ʔəwî/. Similarly, /-e/ of the word /xwè/ ‘to buy’ comes from \*/-e/, but this word is not pronounced /xwî/.

The nasalized rhymes in 19c EPK correspond to those in CEPK in a one-to-one relationship (Table 19). As mentioned in Section 4, it is likely that /-ĩN/ did not exist in 19c EPK.

**Table 19: Nasalized rhymes**

19c EPK	*-əN	*-aN	*-oN	*-eiN	*-əuN	*-aiN	*-ouN
CEPK	-əN	-aN	-oN	-eiN	-əuN	-aiN	-ouN

As shown in Table 20, the stopped rhymes in 19c EPK have all changed to plain rhymes in CEPK. Moreover, the stopped rhymes \*/-auʔ/ and \*/-auʔ/ in 19c EPK have merged to become /-aʊ/ in CEPK.

**Table 20: Stopped rhymes**

19c EPK	*-eʔ	*-iʔ	*-aʔ	*-oʔ	*-əʔ	*-aiʔ	*-auʔ	*-auʔ
CEPK	-e	-i	-a	-o	-ə	-ai	-aʊ	

## 6. The Leke script and the phonology of 19c EPK and CEPK

This section presents how the Leke script corresponds to the phonological system of Eastern Pwo Karen. The Leke script was created in the mid-19th century. Therefore, it fundamentally reflects the phonological system of 19c EPK. Consequently, to understand its system, it is necessary to examine the correspondence between its various symbols and the phonological system of 19c EPK. However, some Leke script spellings have been modified to reflect CEPK. Therefore, it is also necessary to examine the correspondence between the Leke script and contemporary sounds. Thus, when indicating pronunciation in the following discussion, the 19c EPK sound is shown first, followed by the CEPK sound in parentheses. For example, \*/-ù/ (/ -ù/) indicates that the 19c EPK sound was \*/-ù/ and the CEPK sound is /-ù/.

In the Leke script, syllables are expressed by placing a letter representing the initial consonant in the center and adding various symbols around it. When the letter

appears without any symbol attached, it is pronounced with the rhyme \*/-à?/ (/ -à/). In other words, the Leke script uses an abugida system. In an abugida system, letters representing initial consonants are important because they form the basis for attaching other symbols. In this article, these letters are referred to as “basic letters”.

### 6.1. Initial consonants

The initial consonants are represented by basic letters. Table 21 lists the 25 basic letters of the Leke script, along with their pronunciations. This 5×5 array is the same as that used to teach the Leke script.

**Table 21: Basic letters**

(1) 	(2) /	(3) 	(4) 	(5) 
*/k-/ (/k-/)	*/kh-/ (/kh-/)	*/ŋ-/ (/ŋ-/)	*/c-/ (/c-/)	*/ch-/ (/ch-/)
(6) 	(7) 	(8) 	(9) 	(10) 
*/j-/ (/j-/)	*/t-/ (/t-/)	*/th-/ (/th-/)	*/n-/ (/n-/)	*/ɛ-/ (/ɛ-/)
(11) 	(12) //	(13) 	(14) 	(15) 
*/p-/ (/p-/)	*/ph-/ (/ph-/)	*/m-/ (/m-/)	*/j-/ (/j-/)	*/r-/ (/r-/)
(16) 	(17) 	(18) 	(19) 	(20) 
*/l-/ (/l-/)	*/w-/ (/w-/)	*/θ-/ (/θ-/)	*/ɣ-/ (/ɣ-/)	*/h-/ (/h-/)
(21) 	(22) 	(23) 	(24) 	(25) 
*/x-/ (/x-/)	*/ɸ-/ (/ɸ-/)	*/ʔ-/ (/ʔ-/)	*/b-/ (/b-/)	*/d-/ (/d-/)

To understand how the basic letters are used, the following notes should be kept in mind;

- When no symbol is attached to a basic letter (including when medial symbols from Table 23 in Section 6.2 are attached), it is pronounced with the rhyme \*/-à?/ (/ -à/). For example, the pronunciation of (1) <○> is \*/kà?/ (/kà/). See the cell located in the third row from the top of the left column in Table 31 in 6.3.3.
- The shapes of (1) through (9) in Table 21, namely <○>, </>, <∩>, <∪>, <∩>, <∪>, <∩>, <∪>, and <∩>, are thought to be modeled after the shapes of the numerals 1 through 9 in the Mon-Burmese script. For example, the Burmese script numerals 1

through 9 are ဝ, ည, ဝဲ, ဝ်, ဝဲ, ဝဲ, ဝဲ, ဝဲ, ဝဲ, and ဝဲ. Furthermore, the eight letters from (11) to (18), namely <ဝ>, <၂>, <ဝဲ>, <ဝ်>, <ဝဲ>, <ဝဲ>, <ဝဲ>, and <ဝဲ>, are formed by vertically stacking the shapes from (1) to (8).

- The shape of (10) <ဝ်> is thought to be modeled after the Burmese basic letter ဝ်, which represents the Burmese /e-/ sound.
- The shape of (24) <ဝ> is thought to be modeled after the Mon basic letter ဝ, which represents the Mon /b-/ [6] sound.

Examples of Eastern Pwo Karen words written with each basic letter follow: <ဝဲ> \*/ká/ (/ká/) ‘be difficult’, <ဝဲ> \*/khā/ (/khā/) ‘to break (as a long object)’, <ဝဲ> \*/hèṅṅò/ (/hèṅṅò/) ‘to quarrel’, <ဝဲ> \*/cú/ (/cú/) ‘hand’, <ဝဲ> \*/châ/ (/châ/) ‘to ache’, <ဝဲ> \*/jân/ (/jân/) ‘wisdom’, <ဝဲ> \*/ṭà/ (/ṭà/) ‘responsibility’, <ဝဲ> \*/thó/ (/thó/) ‘bird’, <ဝဲ> \*/nā/ (/nā/) ‘ear’, <ဝဲ> \*/éá/ (/éá/) ‘star’, <ဝဲ> \*/pàin/ (/pàin/) ‘be full’, <ဝဲ> \*/phā/ (/phā/) ‘father’, <ဝဲ> \*/mà/ (/mà/) ‘to do’, <ဝဲ> \*/já/ (/já/) ‘fish’, <ဝဲ> \*/nàràθá/ (/nàràθá/) ‘pineapple’, <ဝဲ> \*/là/ (/là/) ‘moon’, <ဝဲ> \*/wà/ (/wà/) ‘husband’, <ဝဲ> \*/θà?/ (/θà?) ‘heart’, <ဝဲ> \*/γà/ (/γà/) ‘NUMERAL CLASSIFIER FOR A HUMAN’, <ဝဲ> \*/hè/ (/hè/) ‘we’, <ဝဲ> \*/xí/ (/xí/) ‘be beautiful’, <ဝဲ> \*/bá/ (/bá/) ‘SENTENCE-FINAL PARTICLE DENOTING QUESTION’, <ဝဲ> \*/ṭá/ (/ṭá/) ‘be numerous’, <ဝဲ> \*/bá/ (/bá/) ‘be right’, and <ဝဲ> \*/dó/ (/dó/) ‘be big’.

Table 22 displays the numerals of the Leke script, which differ significantly from those in the Mon-Burmese script mentioned above.

**Table 22: Numerals**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	0

## 6.2. Medial consonants

Medial consonants are represented by the medial symbols shown in Table 23. In this article, “+” indicates the position of a basic letter. A basic letter accompanied by a medial symbol functions as an independent basic letter. However, this does not apply to Table 23; that is, no basic letter can bear more than one medial symbol.



far right is marked with a “?” because it is believed that there are no corresponding symbols in the Mon-Burmese script.

**Table 25: Vowel symbols**

ၚ	ၛ	ၜ	ၝ	ၞ	ၟ	ၠ	ၡ	ၢ
ခ	ဂ	ဂ (ဝ)	င	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	?

The second group of symbols used to write various rhymes consists of basic letters with the symbols <ၚ> or <ၛ> attached. These symbols are listed in the upper row of Table 26. To the best of my knowledge, at least 15 of the 25 basic letters are used to represent rhymes. The symbols <ၚ> and <ၛ> correspond to the vowel-suppressing sign ၚ (virāma) in the Mon-Burmese script and, in the Leke script, indicate that the basic letters function as symbols representing rhymes. The symbol <ၛ> is used for <ဂ> and <ဇ> to improve the readability. The lower row in the table shows the sound values of the basic letters as used to represent initials.

**Table 26: Basic letters with “virāma”**

ခ	ဂ	င	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ	ဇ
*/k-/	*/ŋ-/	*/c-/	*/n-/	*/t-/	*/n-/	*/p-/	*/m-/	*/j-/	*/w-/	*/y-/	*/h-/	*/x-/	*/s-/	*/ʔ-/

The symbols in Tables 25 and 26 are combined to represent the rhymes. I speculate that the creator(s) of the Leke script patterned the group in Table 25 after the Mon-Burmese script; however, they felt that these symbols and their combinations alone could not adequately represent the sound images of Eastern Pwo Karen and therefore added the group in Table 26. Pu Htaw Shong (n.d.) also contains the symbol <ၚ>, formed by adding <ၚ> to the basic letter representing /kh-/, in addition to the symbols listed in Table 26; however, its usage is unclear.

The symbols <ၚ>, <ၛ>, <ၜ>, and <ၝ> in Table 27 are tone symbols. <ၚ> represents the \*low-level or \*low-checked tone, <ၛ> represents the \*mid-level tone, <ၜ> represents the \*high-level or high-checked tone, and <ၝ> represents the \*falling tone. However, when the rhyme is represented solely by vowel symbols, <ၚ> is not used, and the \*low-level tone is shown by no mark. Furthermore, when the rhyme is represented using a symbol with a “virāma” (Table 26), <ၛ> is not used, and the

\*falling tone is shown by no mark. These are the general principles; however, in the case of the stopped rhymes discussed in Section 6.3.3, the application of these principles is inconsistent.

**Table 27: Tone symbols**

◌̎	◌̎̄	◌̎̃	◌̎̇
*/á/, */áʔ/	*/ā/	*/á/, */áʔ/	*/â/

### 6.3.1. Open rhymes and tones

Open rhymes are represented by the symbols in Table 28. The vertical columns show the types of rhymes without tones, and the horizontal rows show the tones. Tables 29, 30, and 31 follow the same format. As the notation for the rhyme type \*/-ə/ without tone would be identical to that of the atonic syllable \*/-ə/, it is notated as \*/-ə//.

The following should be kept in mind when writing open rhymes and tones:

- Instead of the symbol <+> used in the notation of \*/-ə/, a hyphen-like <+> may be used. For example, <e̎̄> \*/mō/ (/mō/) ‘mother’ may be written as <e̎̄>. Similarly, <e̎̇> \*/mô/ (/mô/) ‘unripe’ may be written as <e̎̇>. Furthermore, although it is likely a simplified notation, <e̎̃> is sometimes written as <e̎̃> by omitting <+>. Consequently, the spelling of \*/mō/ (/mō/) ‘mother’ can take three forms: <e̎̄>, <e̎̄>, and <e̎̄>.
- The rhyme /-ə/ in an atonic syllable is spelled the same as /-ə/ and written as <e̎̇>. Another less frequent spelling for an atonic syllable /-ə/ is <e̎̇̄>. This is likely to be the case for specific words only. An example is <e̎̇̄> \*/khədòʔ/ (/khədò/) ‘to spell’. Furthermore, an atonic syllable /-ə/ is sometimes written using the simplified spelling for \*/-ə/, i.e., <e̎̃>. For example, the first-person singular pronoun \*/jə/ (/jə/) should be written <e̎̇̄>, but it is sometimes written <e̎̃>. However, this may be an exception or an incorrect spelling.
- The tone symbol <e̎̃> for the \*low-level or \*low-checked tone exceptionally represents the mid-level tone in the notation of \*/-ə/ (/-ə/). Furthermore, only for the

**Table 28: Open rhymes and tones**

	*Low-level	*Mid-level	*High-level	*Falling	*Atonic
*-/i/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ì/ (/ -ì/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ī/ (/ -ī/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-í/ (/ -í/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-î/ (/ -î/)	
*-/e/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-è/ (/ -è/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ē/ (/ -ē/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-é/ (/ -é/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ê/ (/ -ê/)	
*-/ɛ/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ê/ (/ -ê/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ē/ (/ -ē/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-é/ (/ -é/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ê/ (/ -ê/)	
*-/i/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ì/ (/ -ì/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ī/ (/ -ī/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-í/ (/ -í/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ ? */-î/ (/ -î/)	
*//ə/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ə/ (/ -ə/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ə/ (/ -ə/)			
*-/a/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-à/ (/ -à/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ā/ (/ -ā/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-á/ (/ -á/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-â/ (/ -â/)	
*-/u/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ù/ (/ -ù/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ū/ (/ -ū/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ú/ (/ -ú/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-û/ (/ -û/)	
*-/u/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ù/ (/ -ù/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ū/ (/ -ū/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ú/ (/ -ú/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-û/ (/ -û/)	
*-/o/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ò/ (/ -ò/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ō/ (/ -ō/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ó/ (/ -ó/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ô/ (/ -ô/)	
*-/ɔ/	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ò/ (/ -ò/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ō/ (/ -ō/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ó/ (/ -ó/)	$\overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}, \overset{\circ}{\underset{\circ}{\text{f}}}$ */-ô/ (/ -ô/)	

notation of \*/-ô/ (/ -ô/), the vowel symbol <f̂> is used to denote the falling tone.

- \*/-í/ (/ -í/) is spelled as either <f̂> or <f̂>, \*/-ú/ (/ -ú/) is spelled as either <f̂> or <f̂>, \*/-ē/ (/ -ē/) is spelled as either <f̂> or <f̂>, \*/-é/ (/ -é/) is spelled as either <f̂> or <f̂>, and \*/-ī/ (/ -ī/) is spelled as either <f̂> or <f̂>. However, the principles that govern their use remain unclear.
- <f̂> is presented as the spelling representing \*/-î/ (/ -î/), but a “?” is attached, because no actual examples have been found. The rhyme \*/-î/ (/ -î/) occurs only in a few sentence-final particles including \*/mî/ (/mî/ ‘I am telling you’.
- The symbols in Table 26 (including a tone symbol, if present) may be written repeatedly to represent reduplication. For example, the spelling of \*/klàklà/ (/klàklà/



<ᑭᑦᑲᑦ> \*/chô/ (/chô/) ‘be early’  
 \*/-ɔ/: <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ> \*/lò/ (/lò/) ‘to tell’, <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ> \*/pɔ̄/ (/pɔ̄/) ‘to read’, <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ> \*/ʔó/ (/ʔó/) ‘to exist’, <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ> \*/thô/ (/thô/) ‘be long, be high’

### 6.3.2. Nasalized rhymes and tones

Nasalized rhymes are represented by the symbols shown in Table 29.

**Table 29: Nasalized rhymes and tones**

	*Low-level	*Mid-level	*High-level	*Falling
*/-əN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-əN/ (/əN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ə̄N/ (/ə̄N/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-əN/ (/ə̄N/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ə̄N/ (/ə̄N/)
*/-aN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-àN/ (/àN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-āN/ (/āN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-áN/ (/áN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-âN/ (/âN/)
*/-oN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-òN/ (/òN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ōN/ (/ōN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-óN/ (/óN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ôN/ (/ôN/)
*/-eiN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-èiN/ (/èiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ēiN/ (/ēiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-éiN/ (/éiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-êiN/ (/êiN/)
*/-əuN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-əuN/ (/əuN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ə̄uN/ (/ə̄uN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-əuN/ (/ə̄uN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ə̄uN/ (/ə̄uN/)
*/-aiN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-àiN/ (/àiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-āiN/ (/āiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-áiN/ (/áiN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-âiN/ (/âiN/)
*/-ouN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-òuN/ (/òuN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ōuN/ (/ōuN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-óuN/ (/óuN/)	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ */-ôuN/ (/ôuN/)

The rhyme /-īN/, which appears only in CEPK, is spelled as shown in Table 30. I speculate that this spelling was devised well into the 20th century.

**Table 30: The nasalized rhyme /-īN/**

	Low-level	Mid-level	High-level	Falling
/-īN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ /-īN/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ /-ī̄N/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ /-ī̄̄N/	ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ /-ī̄̄̄N/

The following should be kept in mind when writing nasalized rhymes and tones:

- There are two ways to write the nasalized rhyme /-aN/: one using <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ> and another using <ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ>. However, the difference in their roles remains unclear. Both can sometimes

be used to spell the same words. For example, the spelling of \*/thán/ (/thán/) ‘to ascend’ can use either <ṭh̄i> or <ṇṭe>.

● As mentioned in Section 3, the distinction between /-əuN/ and /-ouN/ has become unclear in CEPK. Consequently, the spellings for \*/-əuN/ and \*/-ouN/ may sometimes be confused.

The following are examples of how to write nasalized rhymes and tones:

- \*/-əN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/məN/ (/məN/) ‘be drunk’, <ṭh̄i> \*/θəNchi/ (/θəNchi/) ‘thirty’, <ṭh̄i> \*/θəNṭəNθá/ (/θəNṭəNθá/) ‘guava’, <ṭh̄i> \*/xəN/ (/xəN/) ‘be heavy’
- \*/-aN/: <ṭh̄i> (= <ṭh̄i>) \*/làn/ (/làn/) ‘to descend’, <ṭh̄i> \*/khāN/ (/khāN/) ‘country’, <ṭh̄i> \*/yāN/ (/yāN/) ‘for the sake of’, <ṭh̄i> \*/ṭáN/ (/ṭáN/) ‘to eat’, <ṭh̄i> \*/yáNkhó/ (/yáNkhó/) ‘ground’, <ṭh̄i> \*/chāN/ (/chāN/) ‘chicken’, <ṭh̄i> \*/θāN/ (/θāN/) ‘be new’
- \*/-oN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/yòN/ (/yòN/) ‘to end’, <ṭh̄i> \*/thōN/ (/thōN/) ‘copper’, <ṭh̄i> \*/phón/ (/phón/) ‘to catch’, <ṭh̄i> \*/thôn/ (/thôn/) ‘gold’
- \*/-eiN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/mèiN/ (/mèiN/) ‘name’, <ṭh̄i> \*/phēiN/ (/phēiN/) ‘opium’, <ṭh̄i> \*/yéiN/ (/yéiN/) ‘house’, <ṭh̄i> \*/mēiN/ (/mēiN/) ‘be cooked’
- \*/-əuN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/təuN/ (/təuN/) ‘to mock’, <ṭh̄i> \*/khəuN/ (/khəuN/) ‘to insult’, <ṭh̄i> \*/θəuN/ (/θəuN/) ‘to build’, <ṭh̄i> \*/phəuN/ (/phəuN/) ‘fishing trap’
- \*/-aiN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/thàin/ (/thàin/) ‘to return’, <ṭh̄i> \*/yāin/ (/yāin/) ‘strength’, <ṭh̄i> \*/cháin/ (/cháin/) ‘be sour’, <ṭh̄i> \*/thāin/ (/thāin/) ‘bracelet’
- \*/-ouN/: <ṭh̄i> \*/kòuN/ (/kòuN/) ‘to assemble’, <ṭh̄i> \*/lōuN/ (/lōuN/) ‘stone’, <ṭh̄i> \*/bōuN/ (/bōuN/) ‘festival’, <ṭh̄i> \*/lōuN/ (/lōuN/) ‘goblet’
- /-iN/ (only in CEPK): <ṭh̄i> /kīN/ ‘patrol’ (< Burmese /kín/), <ṭh̄i> /thīN/ ‘to assume’ (< Burmese /thin/)

### 6.3.3. Stopped rhymes and tones

The stopped rhymes are represented by the symbols listed in Table 31. As stated in Section 4, only the \*low- and \*high-checked tones can co-occur with stopped rhymes.

**Table 31: Stopped rhymes and tones**

	*Low-checked	*High-checked
*/-eʔ/	ᑭᑦ */-èʔ/ (/ -è/)	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-éʔ/ (/ -é/)
*/-iʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦ */-iʔ/ (/ -i/)	? ?*/-iʔ/
*/-aʔ/	ᑭ */-àʔ/ (/ -à/)	ᑭᑦᑦ */-áʔ/ (/ -á/)
*/-oʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ, ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-òʔ/ (/ -ò/)	ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ */-óʔ/ (/ -ó/)
*/-ɔʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ */-ɔʔ/ (/ -ɔ/)	? ?*/-ɔʔ/
*/-aiʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-àiʔ/ (/ -ài/)	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-áiʔ/ (/ -ái/)
*/-auʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-àuʔ/ (/ -àu/)	ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ */-áuʔ/ (/ -áu/)
*/-auʔ/	ᑭᑦᑦᑦ */-àuʔ/ (/ -àu/)	ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ */-áuʔ/ (/ -áu/)

The following should be kept in mind when writing stopped rhymes and tones:

- The existence of the rhymes \*/-íʔ/ and \*/-ýʔ/ in 19c EPK has not yet been confirmed. Therefore, “?” has been shown. No spellings representing these rhymes have been found in the Leke script.
- There are two spellings for /-òʔ/ (/ -ò/): <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ> and <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ>. However, the principles that govern their use remain unclear. Regarding <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ>, it is unusual in that \*/-òʔ/ has a low pitch but is marked with a symbol indicating the mid-level tone.
- As discussed in Section 5, \*/-auʔ/ and \*/-auʔ/ in 19c EPK have merged into /-au/ in CEPK. Consequently, the spellings of \*/-auʔ/ and \*/-auʔ/ are frequently confused. For example, \*/cjàuʔ/ (/càu/) ‘to drag’ should be spelled <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ> but is sometimes spelled <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦ>. Similarly, \*/máuʔ/ (/máu/) ‘comfortable’ should be spelled <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ>, but is sometimes spelled <ᑭᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ>.



script has an abugida system. The second is that, although it contains some redundancy, it can represent the pronunciation of 19c EPK completely accurately, except that the notation for the atonic rhyme \*/-ə/ (/ə/) is identical to that for \*/-ə̃/ (/ə̃/).

The second point is of particular importance. Although the Leke script is notable for its distinctive shape, it is also an excellent writing system in terms of accuracy. Its ability to accurately represent the pronunciation of 19c EPK implies that it can accurately represent CEPK as well. Redundancy, namely, the existence of multiple symbols for a single pronunciation, cannot necessarily be regarded as a defect in a writing system, because such symbols may serve to distinguish homophones.

### **7.2. Relationship with the Mon-Burmese script**

Many basic letters in the Leke script imitate the shape of numerals in the Mon-Burmese script, indicating that it was influenced by the Mon-Burmese script. Among the various writing systems belonging to the Mon-Burmese script tradition, the Mon and Burmese scripts possibly influenced the Leke script. However, it is difficult to ascertain which of the two had a stronger influence on the Leke script.

As mentioned in Section 6.1, the basic letters (10) and (24) in Table 21 are thought to imitate the Burmese and Mon scripts, respectively. Thus, even in terms of just the basic letters, the Leke script was influenced by both the Mon and Burmese scripts. Regarding the representation of rhymes, the Leke script was certainly influenced by the Mon-Burmese script, since various vowels are represented by combining vowel signs (Table 25) and symbols employing the “virāma” (Table 26). However, because the Mon and Burmese scripts share many features in their rhyme representations, it is difficult to identify which aspects of the Leke script’s rhyme representation are influenced by which script. Therefore, although the Leke script as a whole was influenced by the Mon-Burmese script, it is unclear whether the Mon or Burmese scripts had a greater influence.

### **7.3. Relationship with other Eastern Pwo Karen scripts**

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, several scripts are used to represent Eastern Pwo Karen in addition to the Leke script, such as the Buddhist Pwo Karen

script, the Christian Pwo Karen script, and Lae Kwekaw. Buddhist and Christian Pwo Karen scripts already existed when the Leke script was created. However, no elements of the Leke script were likely influenced by these two writing systems. Possibly, the high degree of accuracy in the Leke script was influenced by the highly systematic Christian Pwo Karen script (Kato [2021a]; Kato [2022a]), because Saw Kya Shin et al. (2006: 12) state that U Maw Yaing assisted Baptist missionaries in translating the Bible. Nevertheless, at least in terms of the shapes of the symbols or the way they are combined, there are no similarities between the Leke and the Christian Pwo Karen scripts.

#### 7.4. Representation of Indic vocabulary

Many languages in Southeast Asia have borrowed a significant number of words of Indic origin. Eastern Pwo Karen too contains many loanwords from Pali, most likely through the Mon influence. In the Leke script, these words are written as they are pronounced. For example, the Pali word *loka* ‘world’ is written as <ꨀꨁꨂꨃꨄꨅ> \*/līkàʔ/ (/līkà/) ‘world’.

#### 7.5. Evolution of the Leke script

Currently, almost nothing is known about how the Leke script has changed since its creation. As mentioned in Section 6.3.3, after \*/w-/ and \*/-w-, the rhyme \*/-e/ of 19c EPK did not change to /-i/ in CEPK but remained /-e/; in this case, \*/-e/ is written using the spelling that represents \*/-eʔ/. For example, the word <ꨀꨁꨂꨃꨄꨅꨆꨇꨈ> \*/ʔəwêʔ/ (/ʔəwê/) ‘s/he’ would, according to the usual way of writing \*/-ê/, be expected to be written as <ꨀꨁꨂꨃꨄꨅꨆꨇꨈꨉ>. However, in reality, it is not written this way. Thus, although the Leke script generally reflects the 19th-century pronunciation of Eastern Pwo Karen, some parts have been modified in accordance with sound changes. To discuss the history of Leke script development, one needs to examine the original palm-leaf manuscripts produced in the 19th century. However, it is not known whether such manuscripts still exist. If old manuscripts were available, the representation of rhymes (as mentioned above) and tones would be of particular interest. Regarding tone marking, the Buddhist Pwo Karen script, another writing system for Eastern Pwo



- (7) ဝေါဝါးဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး  
 ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး =
- (8) ဝေါဝါးဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး  
 ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး =
- (9) ဝေါဝါးဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး  
 ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး =
- (10) ဝေါဝါးဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး  
 ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး ဗွဲဒီး =

## 8.2. Transcription and translation

Here, the example sentences listed in Section 8.1 are transcribed with CEPK pronunciation and provided with English translations. The second line of each example shows the form of each word in 19c EPK. Note that the phonetic symbols for these sentences represent phonemes, but “/ /” is omitted.

- (1) chəchə̀n lān θān, ɣáŋkhó ɛ́u lān.  
 \*chəchə̀n \*lān \*θān \*ɣáŋkhó \*ɛ́u \*lān  
 rain to.descend recently ground be.cool down  
 ‘The rainy season has begun, and the ground has cooled.’

θóuN lāN θā wá khī nāN bòn.  
 \*θóuN \*lāN \*θā \*wá \*khī \*nāN \*bòn  
 to.plant down now! bamboo to.fall some NCI  
 ‘Now, raise the fallen bamboo.’

mō mōN thán lō.  
 \*mō \*mōN \*thán \*lō  
 IRR be.alive up AST  
 ‘It will come back to life.’

**Note 1:** In the second sentence, /θóuN/ is written as <ḡḡ>, which represents /θóuN/, but it should properly be written as <ḡḡ>. This “error” likely results from the increasingly blurred distinction between the rhymes /-əuN/ and /-oʊN/ in CEPK.

- (2) 

nə	mō	l̩	chō	nó,		
*nə	*mō	*l̩	*chō	*nó		
2SG	IRR	to.go	thing	when		
chō	mō	khléiN	bá	nə	khó.	
*chō	*mō	*khléiN	*bá	*nə	*khó?	
thing	IRR	be.cold	APP.JUD	2SG	FUT	
θò	thán	nə	châiN	nó	bá	lé.
*θò?	*thán	*nə	*châiN	*nó	*bá	*l̩
to.wear	up	2SG	shirt	that	why	Q

‘If you go out, you might feel cold. Why don’t you put on some clothes?’

**Note 2:** The word /bá/ in the first sentence is an applicative marker denoting judgment. It expresses the meaning ‘be V for (someone); be V to (someone)’ and introduces the experiencer as the object (Kato 2009b). Although Kato (2009b) does not refer to /bá/ as an applicative marker, this usage may be called a “judgmentive applicative” (suggested by Christopher Tancredi [p.c.]).

- (3) 

phlòUN	lō	ʔəʔāiNʔəbà	chón	nó		
*phlòUN	*lō	*ʔəʔāiNʔəbà?	*chón	*nó		
person	REL	strength	be.strong	that		
ʔəwê	jò	chō	nī	ʔáʔálé	lō.	
*ʔəwê	*jò?	*chō	*nē	*ʔáʔálé?	*lō	
3SG	to.lift	thing	to.get	much	AST	

‘A powerful man can lift many things.’

- (4) 

cáin	ʔèphlé	nó,	l̩	chō	thòn	jàin.
*cáin	*ʔèphlé	*nó	*l̩	*chō	*thòn	*jàin
to.walk	fast	if	to.go	thing	to.arrive	be.far
cáin	ʔèʔwi	nó,	mō	thòn	wê	bàukhó lō.
*cáin	*ʔèʔwi	*nó	*mō	*thòn	*wê	*bàukhó? *lō
to.walk	slowly	if	IRR	to.arrive	EMP	be.close AST

‘If you walk fast, you’ll get far. If you walk slow, you’ll only reach nearby.’

**Note 3:** The form /ʔè/ in /ʔèphlé/ and /ʔèʔwi/ is a prefix that forms adverbs. /phlé/ and /ʔwi/ are stative verbs that mean ‘be fast’ and ‘be slow’, respectively. It is thought to have been pronounced /ʔé/ in 19c EPK. In the Leke script, this is sometimes written in a spelling that directly reflects that pronunciation, and sometimes in a spelling that can be read as /ʔé/, which likely reflects an intermediate stage leading to the contemporary /ʔè/. The same applies to the

subordinate clause marker /ʔè/, which means ‘if’.

- (5) chā lā khî nó ʔó wê dòuntəwān phən ʔé,  
 \*chā \*lā \*khê \*nó \*ʔó \*wê \*dòuntəwān \*phən \*ʔé?  
 thing LOC tiger TOP to.be EMP urban.area inside NEG
- ʔó wê mwē mèinlá θónklà ló.  
 \*ʔó \*wê \*mwē \*mèinlá? \*θónklà \*ló  
 to.be EMP COP forest jungle AST
- ‘Tigers do not live in urban areas. They live in forested regions.’

- (6) chā ʔè khóuN kəmlôn lā ʔə lāN bá nó,  
 \*chā \*ʔé \*khóuN \*kəmlôn \*lā \*ʔə \*lāN \*bá \*nó  
 IMPS if to.dig well REL 3SG place right TOP
- thi mō ʔó wê chùkhó ló.  
 \*thi \*mō \*ʔó \*wê \*chùkhó? \*ló  
 water IRR to.be EMP be.shallow AST
- ‘If you dig a well in the right place, water will be found in shallow ground.’

**Note 4:** In this sentence, the word /chā/ (also pronounced /chə/) ‘thing’ functions as the subject of an impersonal construction (Kato [2020]).

- (7) phóthá mú yì khwâ yì ʔə jáu ʔé pàin  
 \*phóthá \*mú \*yè \*khwâ \*yè \*ʔə \*jáu? \*ʔé \*pàin  
 child female be.good male be.good 3SG age if be.full
- nwē néin nó ʔə ménūthi bá phó ló.  
 \*nwē \*néin \*nó \*ʔə \*ménūthi \*bá \*phó? \*ló  
 seven year TOP 3SG deciduous.tooth must to.fall.out AST
- ‘Children, whether boys or girls, are supposed to lose their baby teeth at age 7.’

- (8) phlòuN ʔánphôn ʔán θôn nó mə bá phôn  
 \*phlòuN \*ʔánphôn \*ʔán \*θôn \*nó \*mə \*bá \*phôn  
 person to.cook to.eat side.dish TOP IRR must to.put.in
- lān wê dē jâbān, mə nânxi bá khó.  
 \*lān \*wê \*dē \*jâbān \*mə \*nânxi \*bá \*khó?  
 down EMP with turmeric IRR be.fishy BA FUT
- ‘Anyone making curry must add turmeric. Otherwise, it will smell fishy.’







[A]×2

- (1) lái thài ʔó jə mə(mə) bá lə lán.  
\*láíʔ \*thàiʔ \*ʔó, \*jə \*mə(mə) \*bá \*lə \*lán  
script origin to.be 1SG IRR must to.tell down  
'I must tell the truth about the origin of the Leke script.'

- (2) phú thàurəjá thán mjānθi lə khwēkəbàn.  
\*phú \*thàurəjáʔ \*thán \*mjānθi \*lə \*khwēkəbàn  
grandfather Thaug.Hlya to.ascend to.practice LOC Mt.Zwegabin  
'Pu Thaug Hlya climbed Mt. Zwegabin to practice asceticism.'

**Note 1:** In the song, the second part of the name Thaug Hlya is pronounced /rəjá/. The corresponding spelling in the Leke script is <ꠘꠗ>. Presumably, the spelling <ꠘꠗ> is pedantic. If read according to the regular rules, it would be pronounced /tərá/. As /t/ occurs frequently in the cultural vocabulary borrowed from Mon and Pali, using a letter to represent it conveys a sense of sophistication.

- (3) nī thàin láí, ʔə θóunθà máu. həʔèin phílán.  
\*nē \*thàin \*láíʔ \*ʔə \*θóunθàʔ \*máuw? \*həʔèin \*phélán  
to.get back script 3SG heart comfortable spirit to.give  
'Upon receiving the script, he rejoiced. The spirits had bestowed it upon him.'

**Note 2:** The first syllable of /θóunθà/ is written as <ꠘꠗ>, which represents /θóun/, but it should properly be written as <ꠘꠗ>. This “error” stems from the increasingly blurred distinction between the rhymes /-əun/ and /-oun/ in CEPK.

**Note 3:** /máu/ is written as <ꠘꠗ>. This spelling corresponds to \*/máuw/ in 19c EPK. However, as the 19c EPK form of /máu/ was \*/máuw/, it should properly be written as <ꠘꠗ>.

- (4) phú thàurəjá lə dōunjān yê thàin lán.  
\*phú \*thàurəjáʔ \*lə \*dōunjān \*yê \*thàin \*lán  
G.F. Thaug.Hlya LOC Don-yin to.come to.return down  
'Pu Thaug Hlya returned to Don-yin (a place name at the foot of Mt. Zwegabin).'

**Note 4:** The normal word order of this sentence is /phú thàurəjá yê thàin lán lə dōunjān/. As it is a part of the lyrics of a song, a special word order was likely used for the rhetorical effect.

- (5) nī thàin lái, bá thōun éán mèinlá wàn.  
 \*nē \*thàin \*lái? \*bá \*thōun \*éán \*mèinlá? \*wān  
 to.get back script must receive be.poor forest compound  
 ‘He obtained the script, but his practice in the forest was rigorous.’

- (6) ʔə θilá khôn lānān θí, ʔə wīpān lē phān.  
 \*ʔə \*θilá? \*khôn \*lānān \*θí \*ʔə \*wīpān \*lē \*phān  
 3SG precept be.firm although also 3SG wisdom NEG be.bright  
 ‘He strictly adhered to the precepts, but his knowledge was limited.’

- (7) dá làn tè phlōun lái mûlā,  
 \*dá \*lān \*tè \*phlōun \*lái? \*mûlā  
 to.see down thoroughly Pwo.Karen script basics  
 khədò pō mjā lə wān wōn(γōn)lə wān.  
 \*khədò? \*pō \*mjā \*lə \*wān \*γōn \*lə \*wān  
 to.spell to.read so.much one time after one time  
 ‘He carefully observed the basics of the Pwo Karen script, repeatedly spelling and attempting to read it.’

- (8) pō bá ʔé.  
 \*pō \*bá \*ʔé?  
 to.read be.right NEG  
 phû θàorəjá lə γà ʔə θáunθà éán.  
 \*phû \*θàurəjá? \*lə \*γà \*ʔə \*θáunθà? \*éán  
 G.F. Thuang.Hlya one NCh 3SG heart poor  
 ‘He couldn’t read. Pu Thuang Hlya was disappointed.’

[B]×2

- (9) thōnnó phû mójain ʔó lē thīwā.  
 \*thōnnó \*phû \*mójain \*ʔó \*lē \*thīwā  
 then G.F. Maw.Yaing to.be LOC opposite.bank  
 báchain lái ʔəwê pō bá.  
 \*báchain \*lái? \*ʔəwê \*pō \*bá  
 about script 3SG to.read be.right

‘At that time, a man named Pu Maw Yaing lived on the opposite bank (of the Thanlwin River). He was a man well-versed in reading scripts.’

(10) phû	θàorəjá	γ̂ənpərəŋ	cò,
*phû	*θàuʔrəjáʔ	*γ̂ənpərəŋ	*cò
G.F.	Thaung.Hlya	to.hear.of	at.a.distance

mə	dàu	p̄	dē(dè)	lái	mùlà.
*mə	*dàuuʔ	*p̄	*dē	*láiʔ	*mùlà
IRR	let	to.read	with	script	basics

‘Pu Thaung Hlya heard about this and decided to have him read the basics of the script.’

**Note 5:** The /γ̂əŋ/ in /γ̂ənpərəŋ/ is spelled <𑜉𑜂𑜫>, and similarly, /rəŋ/ is spelled <𑜉𑜂𑜫>. These spellings represent /γ̂ə/ and /rə/, respectively. Presumably, they must properly be spelled as <𑜉𑜂𑜫> and <𑜉𑜂𑜫>.

**Note 6:** The spelling of /cò/ (also pronounced /cò/), which means ‘at a distance,’ should properly be <𑜉𑜂𑜫>, but it appears as <𑜉𑜂𑜫>. This spelling actually represents the pronunciation \*/ciʔ/ (/ci/). However, the reason for this discrepancy remains unclear.

**Note 7:** /dàu/ is a causative particle. Although its 19c EPK pronunciation was \*/dàuuʔ/, it is written with a spelling that represents \*/dàuʔ/. This “error” stems from the merger of \*/-auʔ/ and \*/-auʔ/ into /-aʊ/ in CEPK. This should be written properly as <𑜉𑜂𑜫>.

(11) báchâin	lái	lànblè	γ̂əŋ,	p̄	bá	láuʔkhlà.
*báchâin	*láiʔ	*lànblèʔ	*γ̂əŋ	*p̄	*bá	*láuʔkhlà
about	script	skillful	and	to.read	be.right	all

‘Pu Maw Yaing was highly skilled in literacy and possessed the ability to read any script.’

(12) dá	làn	lái,	p̄	bá,	phû	θàorəjá	dàoné	pjà.
*dá	*làn	*láiʔ	*p̄	*bá	*phû	*θàuʔrəjáʔ	*dàuuʔné	*pjà
to.see	down	script	to.read	be.right	G.F.	Thaung.Hlya	to.show	PJA

‘He could read it when he saw writing, so Pu Thaung Hlya showed (him the script).’

**Note 8:** Similar to /dàu/ in Note 7, the 19c EPK pronunciation of the first syllable in /dàoné/ was \*/dàuuʔ/, yet it is written with a spelling that represents \*/dàuʔ/.

(13) jə	m̄	p̄.	khòchònná.
*jə	*m̄	*p̄	*khòʔchònná
1SG	IRR	to.read	to.listen

‘I will read. Listen.’

- (14) láí kháɴthài ké tháɴ phlòUN mwē kà khà ñà.  
 \*láí? \*kháɴthài? \*ké \*tháɴ \*phlòUN \*mwē \*kà? \*khà? \*ñà?  
 script beginning to.become up Pwo.Karen COP Ka Kha Nga  
 ‘The first letters of the Pwo Karen script are read as Ka, Kha, and Nga.’

[C]×2

- (15) ləjáiłəmō phû ʔəʊrəjá ʔŋ ʔə láí lànmə.  
 \*ləjái?łəmō \*phû \*ʔəʊrəjá? \*ʔŋ \*ʔə \*láí? \*lànmə  
 soon G.F. Thuang.Hlya to.hear 3SG script to.disappear  
 həphlòUN chì ʔəʔāN phōbàʊ lē. méthī bá lánjwà.  
 \*həphlòUN \*chì \*ʔəʔāN \*phōbàʊ? \*lē \*mé?thī \*bá \*lánjwà  
 Pwo.Karen race for how.much Q tear must to.flow  
 ‘Soon, Pu Thuang Hlya heard that the script was a lost one. How devastating it must have been for the Karen people (to lose their script). Tears flowed.’

- (16) ɛóchàʊ dē bàɴnàʊchàʊ.  
 \*ɛóchàʊ? \*dē \*bàɴnàʊ?chàʊ?  
 to.chant(?) with white.clothing(?)  
 ‘He chanted sutras in a white robe. (?)’

**Note 9:** I consulted two native speakers of Eastern Pwo Karen regarding the meaning of this sentence; however, they were unable to provide an interpretation. I tentatively interpret this as the meaning given above.

- (17) ʔəbòUNchə̀N thōN ʔəθàklà,  
 \*ʔəbòUNchə̀N \*thōN \*ʔəθà?klà  
 during at middle  
 phī máikàli phûthī θàʊthô ʔó nī ʔà.  
 \*phī \*mái?kàli \*phûthī \*θàʊ?thô \*ʔó \*nī \*ʔà  
 grandmother Mike.Kali grandfather Thuang.Tawt to.be two NCh  
 ‘At that time, there were two people named Pi Mike Kali and Pu Ti Thuang Tawt.’

- (18) ʔəθiwê      mwē      thəmânwà.  
 \*ʔəθiwê      \*mwē      \*thəmânwà  
 3PL      COP      married.couple
- phón      khôn      tè      θilà      θàocà.  
 \*phón      \*khôn      \*tè      \*θilàʔ      \*θàuʔcjàʔ  
 to.catch      be.firm      thoroughly      precept      faith
- ‘They were a married couple. And they strictly adhered to their precepts and loyalty.’

- (19) ʔəθiwê      mwē      thəmânwà.  
 \*ʔəθiwê      \*mwē      \*thəmânwà  
 3PL      COP      married.couple
- phón      khôn      tè      θilà      θàocà.      (= 18)  
 \*phón      \*khôn      \*tè      \*θilàʔ      \*θàuʔcjàʔ  
 to.catch      be.firm      thoroughly      precept      faith
- ‘They were a married couple. And they strictly adhered to their precepts and loyalty.’

- (20) ʔə      wījān(wijān)      phàn      mjā,      dá      láokhlà.  
 \*ʔə      \*wījān(wijān)      \*phàn      \*mjā      \*dá      \*láuʔkhlà  
 3SG      wisdom      be.bright      so.much      to.see      all
- ‘Her (Pi Mike Kali) wisdom was exceptional, and she could see through anything.’

- (21) lái      múlà      phló      thán      l̄      ʔə      θà.  
 \*láiʔ      \*múlà      \*phló      \*thán      \*l̄      \*ʔə      \*θàʔ  
 script      basics      to.appear      up      LOC      3SG      heart
- ‘Texts in the Leke script came to her mind.’

- (22) ʔə      mâ      l̄      ʔə      wà      k̄i      k̄e(kə)mūnà.  
 \*ʔə      \*mâ      \*l̄      \*ʔə      \*wà      \*k̄e      \*k̄emūnà  
 3SG      wife      to.tell      3SG      husband      to.write      night
- ‘The wife (Pi Mike Kali) had her husband (Pu Ti Thuang Tawt) write them down through the night.’

- (23) eán      dáwê,      làn      bá      pə      tà.  
 \*eán      \*dávê      \*làn      \*bá      \*pə      \*tà  
 be.poor    OPT      to.descend    to.hit    1PL    duty  
 ‘Let us grow weary. This is our duty.’

- (24) chichá      yān,      bē      lə(lə)      lānbái,      tōunpāin      làn      θà.  
 \*chichá?      \*yān      \*bē      \*lə(lə)      \*lānbái?      \*tōunpāin      \*làn      \*θà?  
 race      for      so.as      NEG      be.buried      to.swear      down      MID  
 ‘For the sake of their people, they vowed (to strive) so that the Karen people would not decline.’

**Note 10:** The word /bē/ ‘so as to, so that’ (also pronounced /bê/) was probably pronounced \*/bê/ in 19c EPK, as indicated by its spelling in the Christian Pwo Karen script. The Leke spelling follows the pronunciation of CEPK and appears to have been revised in accordance with this phonological change.

[D]

- (25) lèlêyē,      máikàli      máikàli      phúthī      θàothô.  
 \*lèlêyē      \*mái?kàli      \*mái?kàli      \*phúthī      \*θàu?thô  
 oh!      Mike.Kali      Mike.Kali      grandfather      Thaung.Tawt  
 ‘Oh, Pi Mike Kali and Pu Ti Thaung Tawt!’

- (26) máikàli      phúthī      θàothô      dè      láilē      ?əwê      thào      phló.  
 \*mái?kàli      \*phúthī      \*θàu?thô      \*dē      \*láilē      \*?əwê      \*thàu?      \*phló  
 Mike.Kali      grandfather      Thaung.Tawt      with literature      3PL      to.draw      to.appear  
 ‘Pi Mike Kali and Pu Ti Thaung Tawt brought the sacred texts into the world.’

**Note 11:** The 19c EPK pronunciation of /thào/ ‘to draw’ was \*/thàu?/. Therefore, the correct spelling is <ဝဒ>.

**Note 12:** In canonical word order, the prepositional phrase /dè láilē/ typically follows /thào phló/. In this instance, a non-canonical word order appears to have been employed for rhetorical effect.

- (27) dè      láilē      ?əwê      thào      phló.  
 \*dē      \*láilē      \*?əwê      \*thàu?      \*phló  
 with      literature      3SG      to.draw      to.appear  
 ‘They brought the sacred texts into the world.’

- (28) chichá yāN ʔə θwí wòwò.  
 \*chichá? \*yāN \*ʔə \*θwí \*γòγò  
 race for 3PL blood redly  
 ‘For their people, their blood was red.’

**Note 13:** /wòwò/ ‘redly’ is a reduplication of /wò/ ‘be red’. This word was probably pronounced \*/γò/ in 19c EPK; however, it is pronounced /γò/ or /wò/ in CEPK. The spelling of the Leke script is based on the latter pronunciation.

- (29) chichá yāN ʔə θwí wòwò. (= 28)  
 \*chichá? \*yāN \*ʔə \*θwí \*γòγò  
 race for 3PL blood redly  
 ‘For their people, their blood was red.’

- (30) lèlékē, láichânwé láichânwé pə bá thàu phl̩.  
 \*lèlékē \*láíʔchânwé? \*láíʔchânwé? \*pə \*bá \*thàuu? \*phl̩  
 oh! Leit.Hsan.Wait Leit.Hsan.Wait 1PL must to.draw to.appear  
 ‘Oh, we must bring Leit Hsan Wait into the world.’

- (31) láichânwé pə bá thàu phl̩.  
 \*láíʔchânwé? \*pə \*bá \*thàuu? \*phl̩  
 Leit.Hsan.Wait 1PL must to.draw to.appear  
 ‘We must bring Leit Hsan Wait into the world.’

- (32) phā cài θóuN làn náin wè ph̩.  
 \*phā \*cjàí? \*θóuN \*làn \*náiN \*wè \*ph̩  
 father Buddha to.plant down recorded in.advance EXCLM  
 ‘Metteyya had planted it for us.’

- (33) phā cài θóuN làn náin wè ph̩. (= 32)  
 \*phā \*cjàí? \*θóuN \*làn \*náiN \*wè \*ph̩  
 father Buddha to.plant down recorded in.advance EXCLM  
 ‘Metteyya had planted it for us.’

- (34) m̩ p̩n kòkəjàn nāN bl̩n d̩.  
 \*m̩ \*p̩n \*kòʔkr̩n \*nāN \*bl̩n \*d̩ʔ  
 IRR to.govern globe some time after  
 ‘(Metteyya) will again reign over the world.’

**Note 14:** The word /pə̀N/ is written as <ᑭᑦᑭᑦ>, representing /pə̀/. This is probably an error for <ᑭᑦᑭᑦ>.

**Note 15:** The pronunciation of /kòkə̀jàn/ in 19c EPK was probably \*/kòʔkràn/. The spelling in the Leke script is based on this pronunciation. However, in CEPK, this word is generally pronounced /kòkə̀jàn/. In this word, the consonant cluster \*/kr-/ in 19c EPK developed into /kə̀j-/ in CEPK.

- (35) m̄ə̀ pə̀N kòkə̀jàn nāN blàn d̄ò. (= 34)  
 \*m̄ə̀ \*pə̀N \*kòʔkràn \*nāN \*blàn \*d̄òʔ  
 IRR to.govern globe some time after  
 ‘(Metteyya) will again reign over the world.’

- (36) lèlèᑭē, xwè bē nó.  
 \*lèlèᑭē \*xwè \*bê \*nó  
 oh! as.much.as like that  
 ‘That’s enough for now.’

- (37) xwè bē nó pə̀tháú nāN th̄ò.  
 \*xwè \*bê \*nó \*pə̀tháúʔ \*nāN \*th̄ò  
 as.much.as like that to.stop some while  
 ‘I’ll stop here for now.’

- (38) xwè bē nó pə̀tháú nāN th̄ò. (= 37)  
 \*xwè \*bê \*nó \*pə̀tháúʔ \*nāN \*th̄ò  
 as.much.as like that to.stop some while  
 ‘I’ll stop here for now.’

- (39) l̄ò pjá lā láí múlā nó,  
 \*l̄ò \*pjáʔ \*lā \*láíʔ \*múlā \*nó  
 to.tell PJA OPT script basics TOP  
 l̄ò pjá lā láí múlā nó,  
 \*l̄ò \*pjáʔ \*lā \*láíʔ \*múlā \*nó  
 to.tell PJA OPT script basics TOP  
 mwē bá jàú. máló eòN l̄ó.  
 \*mwē \*bá \*jàúʔ \*máló \*eòN \*l̄ó  
 COP enough PFV to.study together AST  
 mwē bá jàú. máló eòN l̄ó.  
 \*mwē \*bá \*jàúʔ \*máló \*eòN \*l̄ó  
 COP enough PFV to.study together AST  
 ‘So much for talking about the Leke script. Let’s learn together.’

## 9. Conclusion

The Leke script is a writing system used by followers of the Leke religion to represent Eastern Pwo Karen. It dates back to the mid-19th century. Consequently, it strongly reflects the phonology of 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen. This study examines the relationship between the phonology of Eastern Pwo Karen and the Leke script. The results reveal that the Leke script is capable of accurately representing the phonology of 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen.

Concerning its relationship to other scripts, the Leke script was evidently influenced by the Mon-Burmese script. However, it is impossible to determine whether the influence of the Mon script or the Burmese script was greater. Regarding its relationship with Buddhist and Christian Pwo Karen scripts, both of which already existed when the Leke script was created, no elements of the Leke script were likely influenced by these writing systems. The Leke script is unusual in that many of its basic letters are based on the numerals of the Mon-Burmese script. Nevertheless, its abugida system and strong Mon-Burmese influence mean that it can be considered a version of the Indic script.

### Abbreviations

APP.JUD = applicative marker denoting judgment; AST = particle indicating assertion; BA = verb particle /bá/ indicating opportunity, feasibility, inadvertence, or inevitability; CEPK = contemporary Eastern Pwo Karen; COP = copular verb; EMP = emphasis; EPK = Eastern Pwo Karen; EXCLM = exclamative; FUT = future; G.F. = grandfather; IMPS = impersonal subject; INEV = inevitability; IRR = irrealis; LOC = particle indicating location, goal, or source; MID = middle marker; NCf = numeral classifier for a flat thing; NCh = numeral classifier for a human; NCl = numeral classifier for a long thing; NEG = negativity; OPT = optative; PFV = perfective; PJA = verb particle /pjà/ (also pronounced /pjá/) indicating presentation; PL = plural; Q = question; REL = relative marker; SG = singular; TOP = topic; 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; 19c EPK = 19th-century Eastern Pwo Karen.

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