ORTHOGRAPHY ISSUES IN KƠHO:
A MON-KHMER LANGUAGE

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Kơho [kəˈhɔ] is a Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language, spoken by more than 207,000 people located in Lam Dong province, Viet Nam. Kơho is related to Khmer (Cambodian) and more distantly to Vietnamese (Olsen 1968).

See Map 1 on page 6.

Kơho consonant phonemes are listed in Table 1 and vowel phonemes in Table 2.

Table 1. Consonant phonemes

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t	c	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops	pʰ	tʰ	cʰ	kʰ	
Voiced stops	b	d	ɟ	g	
Implosives	ɓ	ɗ			
Fricatives		s			h
Nasals	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
Aspirated nasals	mʰ	nʰ	ɲʰ	(*ŋʰ)	
Trill		r			
Aspirated trill		rʰ			
Lateral		l			
Aspirated lateral		lʰ			
Glides	w		j		

Table 2. Vowel phonemes.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ ~ ɯ	u
Mid‑high	e	ə	o
Mid	ɛ		ɔ
Low		a ɑː	

Since the 1930s, French, and later American, missionaries, government agencies, and educators using several different alphabets have produced scripture, primers,

grammars, and dictionaries. A romanized orthography based on the Vietnamese national alphabet (*quốc ngữ*) was developed in 1935 for the Sre dialect of Kơho by French colonial administrators and missionaries. That orthography was the most consistently (nearly phonemic) utilized to date (Smalley 1954). Many documents were published using that alphabet. Under pressure from Jacques Dournes, a French missionary/linguist, who was compiling a voluminous Sre-French dictionary (1950; Bochet et Dournes 1953), a new orthography commission met in Dalat, in 1949, to devise an acceptable replacement (Martini 1952).

Christian missionaries have prepared writing systems for far more languages in the world than has any other category of people. They usually do so to enable people to read the Bible as translated into the language, as well as to promote local development, lessen exploitation of the minority group, and respond to other humanitarian concerns (Sanneh 1989:88-156; Smalley 1991:199-202). They tend to live with and work with a language group for many years, learning and using the language constantly. Only a minority of missionaries have the competence or technical skill for such a specialized task as designing a writing system, but those who do have accomplished much, and in modern times technical help or training is available from some mission agencies.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a series of pedagogical materials in Kơho was produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) under contract to the former Saigon government. Writing primers, science, and health books were used in classrooms where Kơho was the language of instruction in the primary grades; in the higher grades, Vietnamese was phased in.

Even among a newly literate people, attachment to a written tradition, lingers on. Recent proposals have gained acceptance only with difficulty. Subsequent orthographies were proposed in 1953 (Condominas 1954) and in the 1960s. The latter orthography, developed by SIL, was employed by the former Republic of Vietnam (Saigon) government for educational materials. The 1967 New Testament and 1993 Psalms were published in that orthography. After reunification in 1976, all previous (i.e., south Vietnamese) pedagogical materials were discarded. In 1983, the Vietnamese government introduced a *quốc ngữ*-based orthography (Vũ Bá Hùng and Tạ Văn Thông, 1983; Tạ Văn Thông 2004), and published a Vietnamese—Kơho dictionary (Hoàng Văn Hanh, et al. 1983). The Kơho people living in North Carolina have no use for that orthography. The complete Bible was published in 2010 in the SIL orthography.

In the preparation of a dictionary and a reference grammar for the Kơho language, a decision on which orthography to use is crucial (Dournes 1974). There are five potential orthographies that Kơho could be written in. Currently, in North Carolina, the orthography employed depends on which church or dialect one is affiliated with. This paper explores the inherent problem of matching speakers' desires with a practical orthography that is acceptable to a majority of language users. Table 3 lists and compares the various orthographies that have been proposed and used over time. Some of the orthographies are so inconsistent and so are difficult to delineate accurately.

Table 3. Comparisons of the various Kơho orthographies.

Phoneme	1935	1950	1953 (1950 revision)	CMA	SIL	1983
Short vowels						
i	i, ĭ	i	i	i, ĭ	i	i
ɪ ~ e	î, ĭ̌	i	i	î	ê	ê
ɛ	e, ĕ, ê, ê̆	e, ê	e	e, ĕ	e	e
ɯ	ư,	ü	ü	ư	ư	ư
ə	ơ, ơ (	ö	ö	ơ	ơ	ơ
a	a, ă	a	a	a, ă	a	a
u	u, ŭ	u	u	u, ŭ	u	u
o	ô, ô(	ou	ou	ô	ô	ô
ɔ	ọ, ọ̆	o, ô	o	o, ŏ	o	i
Long vowels						
iː	ì	ii, i	ii	i, ì	ì	í, ì
ɪː ~ eː	î̀	ii, i	ii	ê, ê`	ề	ê
ɛː	ề, ê	e, ee, ê, êê	ee	e, è	è	é, è
ɯː	ừ	ü, üü	üü	ư, ừ	ừ	ứ, ừ
əː	ò	a	oo, a	ơ, ờ	ờ	ớ, ợ
aː	à	aa, a	aa, a	a, à	à	á, à
uː	ù	uu, u	uu	u, ù	ù	ú, ù
oː	ồ	ou	ou	ô, ồ	ồ	ố, ồ
ɔː	ò	o, oo, ô, ôô	oo	ọ, ọ`	ò	ó, ò
ɑː	ọ̀			ò	ò̠	ờ
Other						
aj	ai, ăi, ăî	ai	ai	ai	ai	ai
aːj	ài	ae	ae	ae	ài	ài
aw	ao, au, ău	au	au	au	ao	ao
aːw	àu	ao	ao	ao	ào	ào
ʔ	(-), x̆, (none)	', (none)	', (none)	', (none)	', (-), (none)	q, '
b	b	b	b	b	b	v
ɓ	ƀ	bb	bb	ƀ	ƀ	b
ɗ	đ	dd	dd	dd	đ	đ

| ɲ | ñ | ny | ny | ñ | ñ | nh |
ŋ	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng
w	w, u, o, ọ	w, u, o	w, u, o	w	w	u
y	y, i, î	y, i, e	y, i, e	i	i	i

Table 4 illustrates a sample page from the inventory of Kơho Unicode Standard letter/glyphs, their hexadecimal designation, and the character code chart script they appear in with their name.

Table 4. Kơho Unicode Standard, 7.0 Version (illustrative page)

Letter/ Glyph	Hexadecimal	Character Code Chart Script	Name
A	0041	Latin Basic	Latin Capital A
a	0061	Latin Basic	Latin Small A
Ă	0102	Latin Extended A	Latin Capital A with breve
ă	0103	Latin Extended A	Latin Small A with breve
À	00C0	Latin-1 Supplement	Latin Capital A with grave
à	00E0	Latin-1 Supplement	Latin Small A with grave
Â	00C2	Latin-1 Supplement	Latin Capital A with circumflex
â	00E2	Latin-1 Supplement	Latin Small A with circumflex
B	0042	Latin Basic	Latin Capital B
b	0062	Latin Basic	Latin Small B
Ƀ	0243	Latin Extended B	Latin Capital B with stroke
ƀ	0180	Latin Extended B	Latin Small B with stroke
C	0043	Latin Basic	Latin Capital C
c	0063	Latin Basic	Latin Small C

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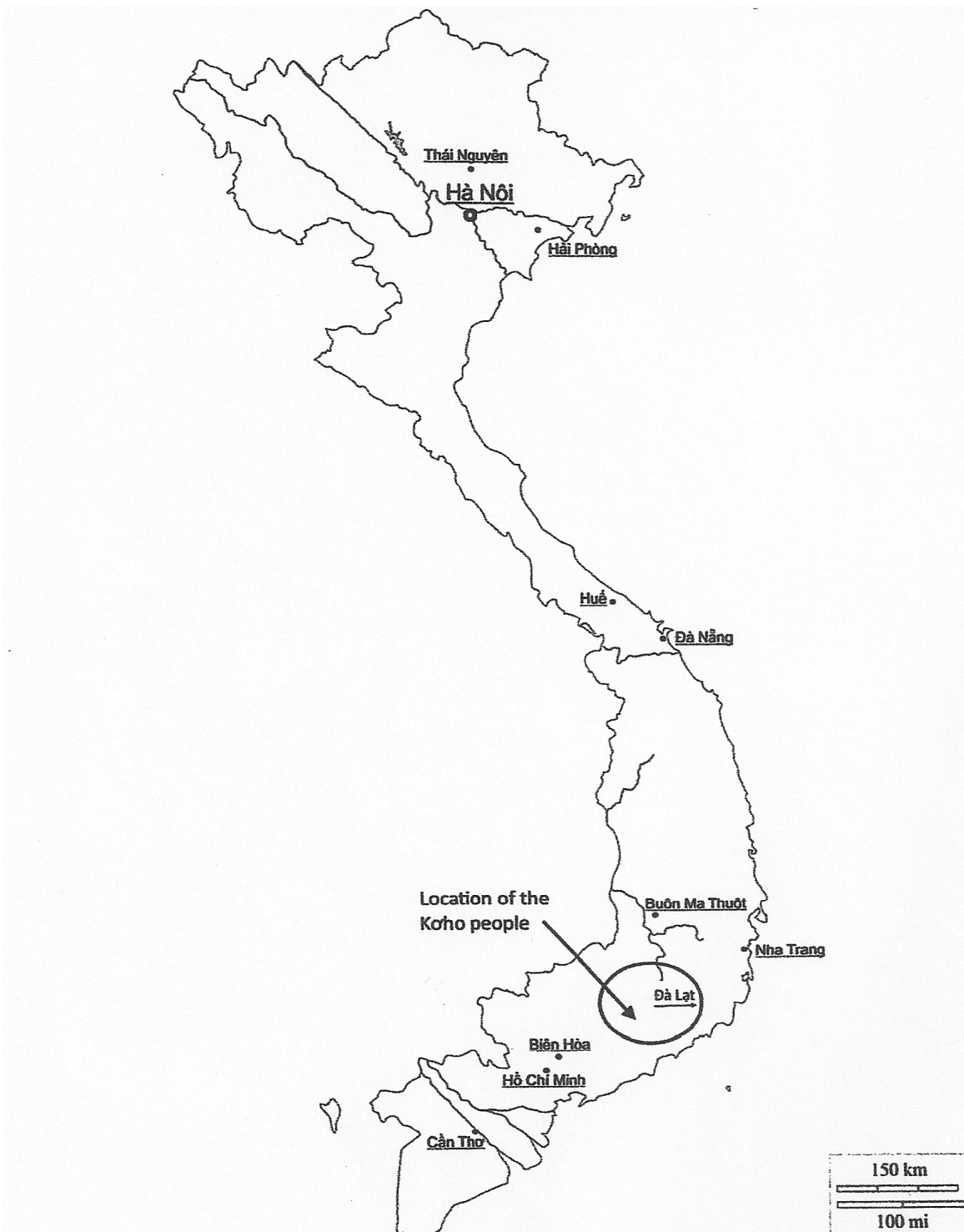
Map 1. Location of the Kơho people habitat in Vietnam.