

# Orthography issues in Kôho: a Mon-Khmer Language

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## Introduction

Kôho, a Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language, is spoken by approximately 200,000 people located in Lam Dong province in the highland region of Viet Nam. There are also several thousand other speakers who now live in France and the U.S. In 1986, and again in 1992, Kôho refugees were resettled primarily in North Carolina. Like so many emigrant groups preceding them, many children are not learning the language and some cultural traditions are not being preserved. Maintenance of the Kôho culture and its language has become an important issue to the relocated community.

Since the 1930s, missionaries, government agencies, and educators using several different alphabets have produced scripture, primers, grammars, and dictionaries. After 1975, use of minority languages was discouraged and a Vietnamization campaign emphasized integration of minority peoples into the majority national society. Despite the fact that there are 200,000 Kôho people, it has the potential to become an endangered language. A challenge to overseas Kôho will be maintaining their “critical mass” of speakers.

This presentation will review the history of the development of orthographies, explore the religious, political, and pedagogical ramifications of orthography choice in the preparation of literacy materials, and review resources for language and cultural maintenance.

## Background

In the preparation of a dictionary and a reference grammar for the Kôho language, a decision on which orthography to use is crucial. A romanized orthography based on the Vietnamese national alphabet (*quốc ngữ*) was developed in 1935 for the Sre dialect by French colonial administrators and missionaries. That orthography, while festooned with diacritics (like Vietnamese), was the most consistently systematic alphabet (i.e., nearly phonemic) utilized to date.

Both missionary and government documents were published in that alphabet. In 1949, a new orthography commission met in Đà Lạt to devise an acceptable replacement (Martini 1952). Even among a newly literate people, attachment to a written tradition, however brief, attendant with a particular orthography, lingers on.- Recent proposals have gained acceptance only with difficulty in some circles.- Subsequent orthographies were proposed in 1953 and in the 1960s.

The main controversy over the orthography arose between different factions of the Protestant (Tin Lành) churches. One group retained <î> to represent the phoneme /e/ in its publications (a hold-over from the 1935 alphabet); the other used <ê>, which was consistent with the orthography developed by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), in conjunction with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Most materials published by the Catholic church employ the 1935 orthography. The latter orthography was employed by the former Republic of Vietnam (Saigon) government for use in educational materials published by the Highlander Education Project. The 1967 New Testament and 1993 Psalms were published in that orthography. The complete Bible was published in 2010 in the CMA/SIL orthography. In North Carolina, the orthography employed depends on which church one is affiliated with. In Viet Nam, after 1976, all previous (i.e., south Vietnamese) pedagogical materials were discarded. In 1983, the Vietnamese government introduced a *quốc ngữ*-based orthography.

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

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t	c	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops	p <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>	c <sup>h</sup>	k <sup>h</sup>	
Voiced stops	b	d	ɟ	g	
Implosives	ɓ	ɗ			
Fricatives		s			h
Nasals	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
Aspirated nasals	m <sup>h</sup>	n <sup>h</sup>	ɲ <sup>h</sup>	(*ŋ <sup>h</sup> )	
Trill		r			
Aspirated trill		r <sup>h</sup>			
Lateral		l			
Aspirated lateral		l <sup>h</sup>			
Glides	w		j		

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ ~ ɯ	u
Mid-high	e	ə	o
Mid	ɛ		ɔ
Low	a	ɑ:	

## A brief overview of orthographies

A romanized orthography based on the Vietnamese national alphabet (*quốc ngữ*) was developed in 1936 for Kôho -Sre by French colonial administrators and missionaries. That orthography, while burdened with cumbersome diacritics (like Vietnamese), was the most consistently systematic alphabet (i.e., nearly phonemic) utilized to date for Kôho (Smalley, 1954). (Several characters in this orthography do not occur in Vietnamese font, e.g. *đ*, *î*, *ñ*.)

In 1949, a new orthography commission met in Dalat to devise an acceptable replacement. The commission was convened to address the problem encountered by Jacques Dournes, a Catholic priest, who had compiled a Kôho-French dictionary and found that no one would publish it in the 1936 orthography. The proposed orthography was modeled on European languages, such as Dutch and Finnish, where long vowels are doubled (*a*, *aa* versus *ă*, *â*, etc.). The intent was to create an orthography that could be used on an ordinary (French) typewriter, easily published, or even sent in a telegram (Martini, 1952). Vietnamese-based characters were changed to more European-looking ones (*đ ơ ư* became *dd ô ü*). Dournes’ dictionary (1950) and most of his subsequent works were published using this orthography.

During the 1960s and 70s, a series of pedagogical materials in Kôho and a dozen other minority languages were produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) under contract to the former Saigon government—the Highlander Education Project. Writing primers, science, and health books were used in many classrooms where Kôho was the language of instruction in the primary grades; in the higher grades, Vietnamese was phased in.

Following reunification in 1976, minority language use in the classroom was essentially discontinued and Vietnamese became the language of instruction at all levels of education. All pre-1975 materials were banned. An ongoing Vietnamization campaign emphasizes integration of minority peoples into the majority national society.

In 1983, a Vietnamese-Kôho dictionary (*Từ Điển Việt-Kôho*) was published using the revised orthography. However, it is doubtful that this orthography will be used outside of Việt Nam.

Any attempt at lexicographic work must entail a decision on which orthography to employ. With the advent of Unicode technologies, a dictionary can be compiled using materials written/printed in legacy alphabets. Table 3 illustrates a sample page abstracted from an inventory of glyphs used in various Kôho materials.

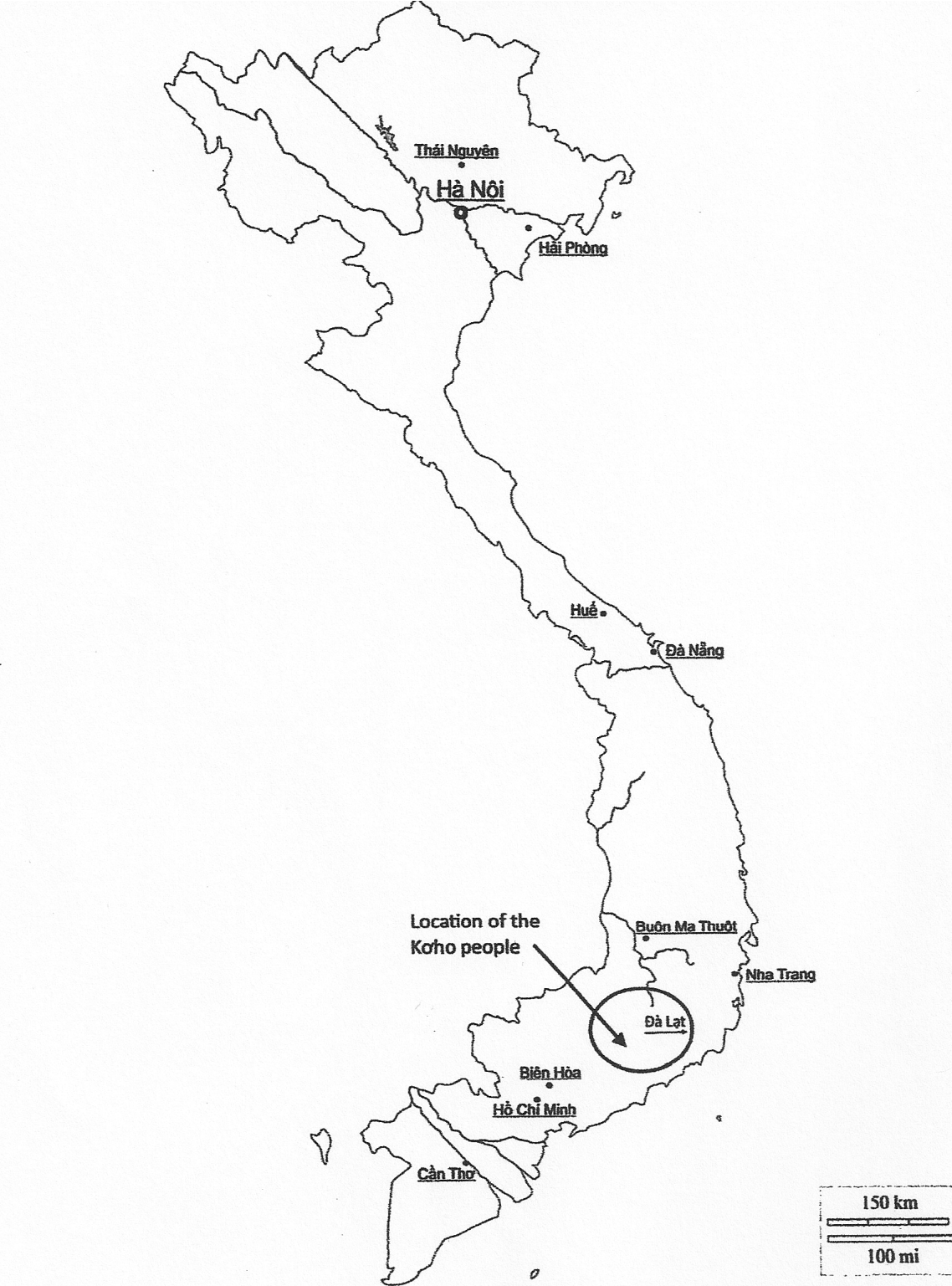
Table 3. Sample page of Kôho Unicode glyphs

Glyph	Hex	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	
Ā	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 w/ 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	
Ḃ	0243	Latin Extended B Latin Capital B with stroke	
ḃ	0180	Latin Extended B Latin Small B with stroke	
C	0043	Latin Basic Latin Capital C	
c	0063	Latin Basic Latin Small C	

## Opportunities

With the advent of word processors, custom fonts, and electronic publishing, the problems previously experienced with typewriters, typesetting, and limited fonts has become moot. Theoretically, a language community can now choose any orthography it pleases—however “cumbersome” it may have been previously judged. So much of the technical obstacles to orthography choice have essentially been removed.

Until a survey of the Kôho-speaking community is conducted, certain decisions regarding language maintenance cannot be made. However, an examination of successful indigenous language programs have provided resources, guidance, and encouragement.



Map of Viet Nam showing Kôho habitat

## Notes & References

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