

# A preliminary description of Kensiw (Maniq) phonology<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

Kensiw is a Northern Aslian (Jahaic) language, a sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer language family. It is spoken by a small community in Yala Province in southern Thailand and also reportedly by a community of approximately 400 speakers in Western Malaysia in Perak and Kedah States. Speakers of this language refer to themselves as the Maniq. This paper represents the phonology of the Yala Province speakers only and should be considered distinct from other Negrito dialects found in other southern provinces of Thailand.

Previous research on Kensiw has been limited due to inaccessibility of the speakers, but see especially Phaiboon (1984) and Bauer (1990). This analysis is based upon research carried out intermittently from 1988-1992. Dr. Jerold Edmondson of the University of Texas at Arlington did selected acoustical instrumental analysis on Kensiw in 1992 at Bansakai.<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to his findings in Sections 1.1 and 2.2. Due to the small speech community and extensive Malay borrowings, it is to be considered a tentative analysis. The corpus of the data consisted of a rhyming glossary of 2,170 items.<sup>3</sup>

Kensiw vowels, as in many Mon-Khmer languages, are numerous. There are 14 oral monophthongs, 12 nasal monophthongs and two diphthongs (1 oral and

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the dynamics of final consonants on the preceding vowels and to the preponderance of vowels in Mon-Khmer languages, a rhyming list has been used to identify contrastive segments. Throughout the paper, words listed as contrastive sets are arranged according to the final rhyme. The reader should examine these examples from right to left in order to observe the segment(s) in question. The only exception to this ordering is in the listing of unstressed central vowel contrasts in Appendix 2 where they are ordered by the initial consonant.

1 nasal diphthong) bringing the total inventory to 28 vowels. Of particular interest is the presence of front, central and back vowels at a tongue height intermediate to the close-mid and open-mid positions.<sup>4</sup> There does not appear to be any voice register distinction.

Of interest in the consonants is the large inventory of palatal consonants: *c*, *j*, *ɲ* and *ç*. There appears to be sound change in process, particularly found in some Malay borrowings, where a retroflexed approximant [ɻ] is reanalyzed as a velar fricative [ɣ]; this change is inconsistently produced at the moment. As in Pacoh, a Mon-Khmer language (Watson 1964), voiced final stops have allophones in word-final position. These allophones are pre-stopped nasals. Maier (1969) also described pre-stopped final nasals which she analyzed as consonant clusters of glottal stop and nasal in Cua, another Mon-Khmer language.

This description is organized into three sections. Section 1.0 charts and describes both the vowel and consonant segmental phonemes and their distribution. Section 2.0 describes suprasegmentals and Section 3.0 outlines the possible syllable types, the segments that can occur in each syllable and reduplication.

## 1.0 Phonemes

### 1.1 Vowel phonemes

	FRONT		CENTRAL		BACK	
Tongue Height	Oral	Nasal	Oral	Nasal	Oral	Nasal
close	i	ĩ	ɯ	ũ	u	ũ
near-close	ɪ	ĩ				
close-mid	e̞	ẽ	ə̞		ɔ̞	õ
mid	e	ẽ	ə		o	õ
open-mid	ɛ	ẽ	ʌ	ã	ɔ	õ
open			a	ã		
Diphthongs	ie	ĩẽ				

Chart 1. Vowel Phonemes

Two noteworthy features of Kensiw vowels are nasality and tongue height. As reflected in Chart 1, there is a contrasting nasal monophthong for each oral monophthong except /ə/ and /ə̞/. While the frequency of the nasal vowels is much less than that of the oral ones and they are often in a conditioned environment, there are sufficient examples of their occurrence in non-conditioned environments to warrant assigning phonemic status to them (see Appendix 1).

<sup>4</sup> The revised IPA system has been used throughout this paper.

Kensiw vowels have five distinctive tongue heights for the front and central vowels and four for the back vowels. The close-mid vowels /ɛ/, /ə/ and /ɛ̃/ exhibit a slightly higher tongue height than their mid-counterparts /e/, /ə/ and /o/, which appear unmarked (see Appendix 2).

Acoustical analysis by Edmondson confirms an earlier subjective judgment regarding front and back vowels' tongue heights in Kensiw. It may be noted further that tension is associated with closer rather than with open tongue height, contrary to what is reported in Gregerson (1976) for other Mon-Khmer languages.

### 1.1.1 Vowel description

/i/ is a close front unrounded vowel, slightly lower and more backed than CV (cardinal vowel) 1, [i]. It is produced at a slightly higher position than its counterpart, [i]. Examples: [ka.piŋ] *kapiŋ* 'CLASS.', [ha.miʔ] *hamiʔ* 'person', [pa.si] *pasi* 'sand'.

/ĩ/ is the nasal counterpart of /i/. Examples: [he.hĩ] *hehĩ* 'to growl/snarl', [du.miĩ] *dumiĩ* 'ankle', [ʔe.tĩʔ] *ʔetĩʔ* 'to disobey'.

/ɪ/ is a near-close front unrounded vowel [ɪ] which has a slightly lower tongue height and is slightly more backed than /i/. Its distribution is more restricted than that of /i/. Examples: [lap.sɪp] *lapsɪp* 'to be noisy', [ma.nɪh] *manɪh* 'ring finger', [naŋ.nɪŋ] *naŋŋ* 'tail movement of bird'.

/ĩ/ is the nasal equivalent of /ɪ/. Examples: [kɪp.lĩp] *kɪplĩp* 'to wink', [ku.ʒĩt] *kujĩt* 'cumin', [hã.ʔĩt] *hãʔĩt* 'smelly'.

/ɛ/ is a close-mid front unrounded vowel [e], lower and further back than CV 2. It does not occur in the environment of final voiced bilabial stops or liquids. Examples: [ʔɛʔ] *ʔɛʔ* 'dog', [bu.tɛw] *butɛw* 'water', [ʔɛʔ] *ʔɛʔ* 'feces'.

/ɛ̃/ is phonetically similar to /ɛ/, but is nasal. Examples: [si.sɛ̃] *sisɛ̃* 'garbage dump', [ʒɛ̃k] *ʒɛ̃k* 'to stab', [pɛ̃j] *pɛ̃j* 'IMPERATIVE'.

/e/ is a mid front unrounded vowel [e], lower and backed more than /ɛ/. It is unmarked diacritically since it is closer to the position of rest for the tongue, therefore, more natural. Its distribution is slightly broader than that of /ɛ/, but its frequency is essentially equivalent. Examples: [ti.jek] *tijek* 'to sleep', [legŋ] *leg* 'fluid', [jeʔ] *jeʔ* 'PRONOUN 1S'.

/ẽ/ is the nasal equivalent of /e/. Examples: [ʒə.pẽt] *ʒəpẽt* 'to squeeze', [kə.tɛk] *kətɛk* 'rubber', [ʔa.wẽh] *ʔawẽh* 'to be sprained'.

/ɛ/ is an open-mid front unrounded vowel [ɛ] which is slightly higher and more backed than CV 3. Its distribution and frequency are almost identical to that of /ɛ/. Examples: [gə.hɛt] *gəhet* 'sweet', [wɛʔ] *wɛʔ* 'quiet', [pi.sɛŋ] *pisɛŋ* 'banana'.

/ẽ/ is the nasal counterpart of /ɛ/. Examples: [ʒan.hẽt] *ʒanhẽt* 'to be short', [ba.l.tɛk] *baltɛk* 'black', [tam.bɛl] *tambɛl* 'slow loris'.

/u/ is a close backed central unrounded vowel [u]. It is significantly more fronted than CV 16, [ʊ], but not enough to compare it with CV 17, [i]. Like the previous close vowels, it is lower in tongue height than its comparable cardinal vowel. Examples: [ha.jʊp] *hajʊp* 'to know', [kan.kʊdɪn] *kankʊd* 'to throb', [ʔuh] *ʔuh* 'this'.

/ũ/ is phonetically similar to /u/, except that it is nasal. Examples: [tʌn.nũt] *tʌnnũt* 'lower lip', [taʔ.tũʔ] *taʔtũʔ* 'to crash together', [kũs] *kũs* 'beetle'.

/ə/ is a close-mid central unrounded vowel [ə]. It has a retroflexed quality, perhaps influenced by Malay contact. It is slightly higher than the schwa [ə]. It can occur in stressed syllables in limited environments, but is primarily found in unstressed syllables. Examples: [jəh] *jəh* 'to trim', [ba.həbm] *bahəb* 'to pass gas', [kəʔ] *kəʔ* 'to vomit'.

/ə/ is a mid central unrounded vowel [ə]. Its tongue height appears to be midway between the close-mid and open-mid positions as diagramed in the IPA vowel chart. It rarely occurs in stressed syllables. Examples: [pə.nəlas] *pənəlas* 'last of something', [təh] *təh* 'to be bald', [bə.ʔut] *bəʔut* 'good'.

/ʌ/ is an open-mid backed central unrounded vowel [ʌ]. Its tongue height is slightly higher than that of CV 14, but significantly more fronted. As with /ə/ and /ə/, /ʌ/ is most commonly found in unstressed syllables. Unlike these other two central vowels, which usually occur in the syllable pattern CV, /ʌ/ frequently occurs in the closed syllable pattern, CVC. Examples: [sʌt.si.ʔɛc] *sʌt siʔɛc* 'to steal', [sʌt luk] *sʌt luk* 'mud', [hʌʌ] *hʌʌ* 'stream'.

/ʌ̃/ is the nasal equivalent of /ʌ/. Examples: [gʌ̃t] *gʌ̃t* 'to swim', [kʌ̃t.kʊt] *kʌ̃tkʊt* 'to lay eggs', [hʌ̃.ʔit] *hʌ̃ʔit* 'smelly'.

Except for /a/, none of the central vowels appear to carry a heavy functional load, but they are in contrast with one another, requiring their analysis as separate phonemes. The pattern is also symmetrical, involving a three way contrast in tongue height for close-mid, mid and open-mid vowels in all three tongue positions (front, central and back).

/a/ is an open central unrounded vowel [ə]. It is the most frequently occurring vowel and can co-occur with every initial single consonant and virtually every final consonant. [ka.maj] *kamaj* 'butterfly', [pi.ʔagn] *piʔag* 'tuber', [sa] *sa* 'to descend'.

/ã/ is the nasal counterpart of /a/. Examples: [ka.wãp] *kawãp* 'bear', [pɛ.ʔãt] *pɛʔãt* 'to be spoiled', [sãw] *sãw* 'large bat'.

/u/ is a close back rounded vowel [u]. In comparison to CV 8, it is slightly lower and more fronted. Examples: [jum.put] *jumput* 'grass', [pə.tuc] *pətuc* 'long', [pʌnguh] *pʌnguh* 'to play'.

/ũ/ is phonetically similar to /u/, but nasal as well. Examples: [jan.nũh] *janũh* 'many', [tʌn.tũʔ] *tʌntũʔ* 'to be certain', [lʌφ.lũφ] *lʌφlũφ* 'to be swollen'.