

To: Unicode Technical Committee  
From: Leb Ke (see bio on page 4)  
Subject: Comments on Final Proposal to encode Western Cham (L2/20-061)  
Date: 15 November 2020

L2/20-285

Phnom Penh, November 15, 2020

Deborah Anderson  
Technical Director  
Unicode Consortium

Dear Dr. Anderson,

After reviewing the last proposal for the encoding of Western Cham L2/20-061, I feel it is my obligation, both as a Western Cham speaker and as a scholar, to write a response to it. I strongly believe that the proposal must be rejected, and I would appreciate it if you could pass on the following arguments to the subcommittee.

**1. Proposal L2/20-061 deliberately excludes a number of characters from the encoding.**

In the interest of brevity, I will not list the missing characters here; they appear in L2/20-018, together with a series of examples of their use. The author of L2/20-061 is fully aware of their existence and of the debate and division he has himself created about their inclusion in Western Cham encoding. These characters were first presented to the Unicode consortium in proposal L2/16-198 (N4734) and removed in a later proposal by the author of L2/20-061. Their removal was contested in L2/20-018, where we presented examples of their use and explained their relevance in the current revival of the Western Cham language. It is, to say the least, surprising that this discussion is not even mentioned in L2/20-061. Previous responses by the author of L2/20-061 do acknowledge the discussion and revert to an argument of authority, which I will discuss in point 3 of this letter. He has also claimed that these characters are an innovation. This is completely dismissive of people who have used those characters for generations and who have had the generosity of spirit to allow me to review their privately owned manuscripts when I was developing the first Western Cham computer fonts more than a decade ago. It is also insulting to some of our greatest living Cham poets, like Hammat Yousoh, who also uses these characters and has kept the script alive through incredibly difficult circumstances.

The proposal does mention that Western Cham fonts exist, based on the Eastern Cham block. And yet it chooses to exclude characters that are present in those fonts.

**2. Proposal L2/20-061 knowingly mischaracterizes the current situation of the Western Cham language in Cambodia.**

The proposal states that there are few printed materials in Western Cham. Rather than arguing about the author's definition of "few", I would like to point out that they do exist, and they are relevant. There are language textbooks, of which several thousand copies have been printed, there are poetry books, traditional story books, and there is even a book that presents the state of the art in scholarship on Cambodian Cham language, culture, literature and history, all of it written in Western Cham. There is also a bilingual Khmer-Western Cham magazine that was published more or

less bimonthly for two years. I was personally involved in one way or another in many of those projects, so I can attest to the involvement of several dozen people as writers, translators, and consultants, in collaborations that have lasted over one decade. The script used in those projects included the characters that are missing in proposal L2/20-061.

These books and magazines are part of the collections of the National Library of Cambodia, the Buddhist Institute of Phnom Penh, and the libraries of the University of Wisconsin and the National University of Singapore, among others. The textbooks were approved and supported by the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. They all have registered ISBNs or ISSNs. They are not rare, scarce, or difficult to find. You can see a sample chapter of one of the books in document L2/20-018.

It is particularly important to note that some of these textbooks, which include the characters missing in proposal L2/20-061, have been used in schools across Cambodia since 2012 to teach the Western Cham script to children of several different sects of Islam, and represent the most commonly taught version of the script in the country. This has been done with the approval and support of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

**3. Proposal L2/20-061 does not represent the view of experts on the Western Cham script, or the Cham community of Cambodia.**

Proposal L2/20-061 claims that “experts” have been consulted in its preparation, but mentions no names or credentials. An actual expert could quickly tell, by looking at the proposal, that the “experts” consulted must have all been from one single district, Kampong Tralach, as the limited selection of characters presented in the proposal matches the spelling used by the religious authorities signing the attached letter of support. It must be noted that these authorities are the religious leaders of the Krom Kan Imam San, one of several sects of Islam present in Cambodia today, but they are neither linguistics scholars nor civil authorities.

In previous communications, as well as in my public activity as an advocate for the Western Cham language, script, and culture, I have always shown the utmost respect for that village, which happens to be where I myself grew up, as well as for its civil and religious authorities. However, there is no denying that their spelling system is neither the only nor the most complete one, and would not suffice to transcribe all extant Western Cham manuscripts. To be very clear, the religious authorities that support the proposal do not deny the existence of the characters absent from L2/20-061. They simply believe they are not necessary. There are disagreements about what shape a unified spelling of Western Cham should take, even amongst the Imam San. I have no personal stake in any particular spelling: I have written Western Cham textbooks using a spelling system that includes the characters missing in the proposal, which were supported by the Ministry of Education, but I am also one of the members of the Ministry of Education committee of experts that is currently preparing another set of textbooks using a different spelling. What I do believe is that, no matter what spelling system ends up being the prevalent one amongst the Cambodian Cham, or

even becoming official, there is no reason to prevent people from transcribing manuscripts that include other characters, or from quoting from books or magazines currently in print, or from continuing to write and publish their poetry using their own traditional spelling. Exclusionary, destructive approaches are not compatible with cultural preservation, much less with language revitalization.

I do not believe any experts in the script would vouch for the banning or disappearance of characters. What is actually happening is that a group of religious authorities, misunderstanding the role and usefulness of Unicode, have been led to believe that they can use Unicode to force their preferred spelling to become the *de facto* official one.

**4. Proposal L2/20-061 will cause divisions and damage the status of the Western Cham language in Cambodia. It will also cause a split in the use of Unicode.**

I would like to finish this document by appealing to the social responsibility of the Unicode Consortium. I believe that a proposal based on an inclusive approach would fit much better the mission of the Consortium than one like L2/20-061, which is exclusionary and divisive by design. After decades of work, we have arrived at an inflection point in the revitalization of the Western Cham language in Cambodia. We have more young students of the script than ever before in our lifetimes, we are developing new textbooks, books of poetry are being published, and talks and exhibits about the Cham and their language are becoming commonplace in the capital of the country. Proposal L2/20-061, if accepted, would make it impossible to reprint any previous work using Unicode fonts and would cause a split in the use of Unicode for the representation of Western Cham. Encoding a limited version of Western Cham, one that deliberately ignores characters in order to support a particular spelling system, is not only damaging to our heritage as a people and as a nation. It also represents a sabotage to all the social progress and cultural recovery that has been achieved by the Cham community since the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge genocide.

I appreciate your consideration of these arguments. I hope to be able to support and perhaps collaborate on a different proposal in the near future: a complete, inclusive one.

Sincerely,

Leb Ke

## **A Biographical Note on Leb Ke**

Leb Ke is the most recognized expert in the Western Cham language and in Cambodian Cham culture in Cambodia today. In a cultural domain studied mostly by Western scholars, he has become a strong local voice, being called to give talks as an expert in the language at the Buddhist Institute of Phnom Penh, the French Institute of Cambodia and Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand.

Leb Ke was born in the Imam San community of Kampong Tralach, where he learned the Western Cham script as a child with his grandmother. As a young man he started touring Cambodia looking for old manuscripts and expanding his view of the language beyond his own village. Using the knowledge acquired through that research, he created the Western Cham fonts used today in printed Western Cham materials. He has authored, coauthored or edited seven books using the Western Cham language, including the most widely distributed Western Cham textbook in history. He has also directed *Mukva*, a bilingual bimonthly magazine in Khmer and Western Cham, which was the first of its kind, and was published for two years. More recently, he was called by the Ministry of Education to participate in the committee tasked with the creation of a new set of textbooks for Western Cham speaking children.

He has been extremely active in community organization, teacher training, and cultural event promotion, bringing the Cham language and culture to the attention of a wider public, both Cham and Khmer.

As a scholar, he has published an article on the use of Cham script in inscriptions in Angkor Wat. He has recently completed his Master's thesis on the Phonetics and Phonology of Western Cham at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and is about to start his doctorate at the INALCO in Paris, where he expects to carry on with his research on Cham Royal Manuscripts from the 17th to the 19th centuries.