

**Cheke Holo Orthography:
Ethnic Language Community Decision-Making and
the Role of Trained Linguists**

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1.1 Orthographic conventions

1.1.1 Background to the Cheke Holo language situation

Cheke Holo, often referred to by its speakers in shortened form as Holo, and referred to throughout this paper as CH, is an Austronesian language found primarily on most of the southern geographical third of Santa Isabel¹ island of Solomon Islands.

CH is spoken by at least 10,840 people as their first language, with perhaps 1,500 of these speakers classified as monolingual.² It is one of seven languages spoken on Santa Isabel. Potentially, a couple of thousand people speak CH as a second or third language, particularly as it is the dominant language of Isabel, both in terms of numerical strength and in population expansion to other language areas.³ Among themselves, CH speakers often refer to their own language as *Cheke Tahati*, ‘the talk of us-inclusive’. But in talking about their language and identifying it to an outsider, they would never refer to it this way (one reason being that the pronoun *tahati* includes the one being spoken to). CH as a language name means ‘language of the bush’ or ‘language of the interior of the island.’ The two major dialects, Maringe and Hograno,

¹ Before Solomons independence in 1978, Isabel was spelled Ysabel. One notes this frequent spelling on maps. In every day usage, Santa Isabel is shortened to “Isabel”.

² There has been a fair-sized population of CH speakers living in the capital city Honiara, predominantly in the Naha and Kukum residential areas. The population of CH-speaking residents in Honiara is unknown.

³ Speakers of the other languages of Isabel have attested in the last 30 years that they have worried that CH would ‘take over the island’ (particularly noted at the beginning of this period in Simons 1978). As members of other language groups considered beginning translation work, and conveyed that interest to me, one of their reasons for doing so was because they were afraid that if their language was not preserved and used in worship, then CH would overtake them. Palmer discusses the dominance of CH (Palmer 2000:2) as do Whiteman and Simons (1978:6).

are located in the southern half of Isabel on the eastern and western sides of the island, respectively. They differ only by very few lexical items.⁴ Their phonological structures are almost identical, though one major difference is noted.⁵ CH, whose ISO 639-3 language identifier code is mrn, is classified in the *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) as Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Western Oceanic. The boundaries of the language group stretch from the village of Gnulahaghe southeast to Kuma'ihau. It is located on the Hograno coast in several villages in Kia District, and also in scattered villages in Gao-Bughotu Region (Gordon 2005).

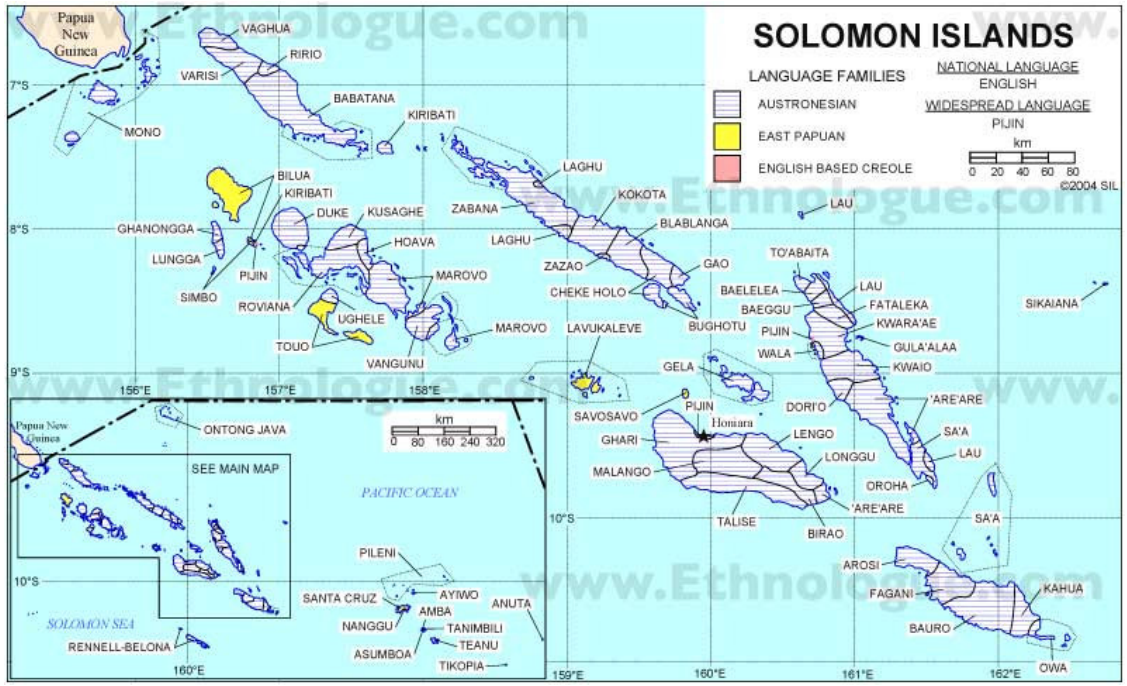
⁴ The lexical differences are listed in the preface of the Cheke Holo New Testament. Historically, the language was called 'Maringe' (and now spelled Mariñe), but the Hograno dialect speakers would not read anything with this term as the identifier. As a result, a neutral language name, Cheke Holo, or just Holo, was agreed upon. There is ongoing evidence that the two dialect groups are working much closer together than they ever have before, and this is quite encouraging, particularly as they are joined together in one church diocese which depends on effective cooperation.

⁵ David Bosma noted (personal interview, 1999) that in the Hograno dialect, /b/ can occur as the plosive /b^h/, in such words as /nab^hai/, 'light'. The Maringe dialect cognate word is /nap^hae/. I do not know of any rules or predictable environments for the occurrence of this plosive in Hograno. Andrew Piaso (personal interview, 2001) noted the word /namb^hae/, '(gloss unknown)' which is another Hograno word to feature this implosive.



Map of the Solomons (courtesy of Univ. of Texas Library)

⁶ The significant break between Western and Eastern Oceanic is found at the southern border of the Cheke Holo language area where Cheke Holo meets the Bughotu language (Tryon and Hackman 1983, Grimes 2000).



Language map of Solomon Islands (courtesy of www.ethnologue.com)

CH is indicated just above the exact center of the illustration, at 8.5 degrees south, and 159.5 degrees east. (Gordon 2005). The Hograno dialect is on the southern and western geographical areas of the language group, while Maringe encompasses the remainder of the language area.

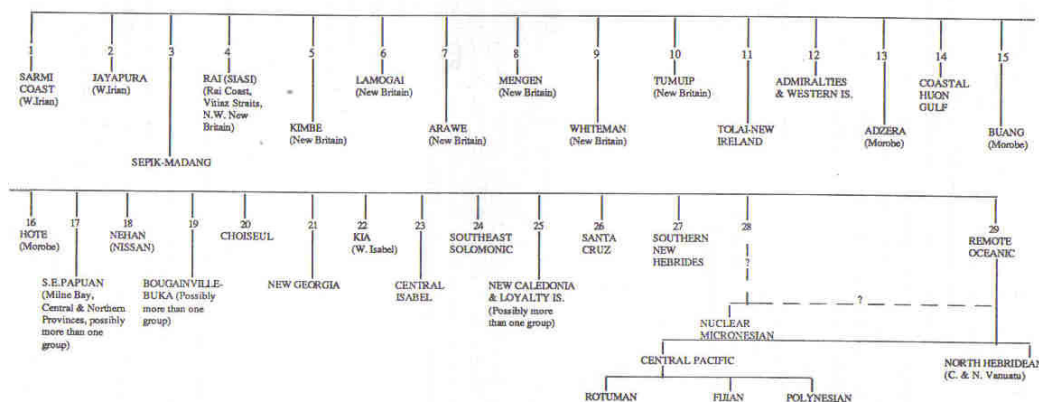


Map of Santa Isabel (courtesy of Hammond World Travel Atlas)

The village of Nareabu is located on the north coast between the provincial capital of Buala and the village of Kmagma. The Anglican diocesan office at Jejevo is located adjacent to Buala.



West Melanesian Oceanic language grouping, according to Ross (1988:2)



Pawley and Green's Sub-Groupings of Oceanic (Ross 1988:25). CH falls within number 23.

1.1.2 History of the orthography study

American anthropologist Geoffrey White and Dutch-Australian linguist David Bosma preceded me in work among the CH. Both attempted to apply their phonological

analyses of Cheke Holo to what they regarded as an improved orthography, but these efforts were met with firm resistance by CH speakers. Linguists and missionaries from the late 19th and early 20th centuries helped the CH people to write down their language, and the orthography used at that time has in turn been passed down to successive generations of CH speakers.⁷ Bosma particularly made a studied attempt to revise the orthography for the benefit of CH speakers. Before discussing Bosma's proposed revised orthography, the consonantal phonemes are listed with a historical representation of the orthography.

⁷ It is obvious that there is a need to uncover some sources, oral or written, which can help us to determine exactly how the Cheke Holo language was first written, and then analyse any changes which may have occurred between then and now. Codrington (1885) and Ray (1926) provide the earliest published documentation of the language, but a history of the actual spelling by the people themselves is unfortunately not available. All I have ever been told is, "This is the way we have always written it." Further interaction yields the information that "early missionaries wrote it down." That statement generates many more questions than it answers, but does indicate there is some history which needs uncovering. I know of no current source for accessing that information. Interestingly, Besnier (1995:xv) says the same for Nukulaelae, stating "how Nukulaelae Islanders developed historically the orthographic system that they currently use to write their language is undocumented. One can surmise that they tailored it on the orthography that London Missionary Society missionaries devised in the early nineteenth century for Samoan." The CH orthography was perhaps fashioned after work done by missionaries in Bughotu, which as noted, served as the "church language" for the island for many years.

Table 1: Table of historical representation of the orthography

Consonantal phoneme	Historical representation	Consonantal phoneme	Historical representation
p	p	ɣ	g
p ^h	ph	x	gh
t	t	h	h
t ^h	th	m	m
k	k	ᵐ	mh
k ^h	kh	n	n
ʔ	∅	ᵐ	nh
b	b	ŋ	ñ
d	d	ɲ	ñh
g	ḡ	ñ	gn
tʃ	ch	ñ	gnh
dʒ	j	l	l
f	f	l̥	lh
s	s	r	r
v	v	ɾ	rh
z	z		

1.1.3 Bosma's suggested revised orthography: reasons and representation

The basic revision, as described by Bosma, concerned the representation of two different sound patterns: 1) those reflecting a range of voiceless consonants, and 2) those reflecting voiced velar stops and nasals. He suggested eleven changes in the orthography. These are noted in the table at the end of this section.

For the range of voiceless consonants, the first problem concerns the representation of what he called “strengthened consonants.”⁸ All of the nasals, laterals, and trills have voiceless counterparts. The voiceless sound was described by Bosma as the production of the consonantal sound preceded by a puff of air. He represented this sound in the language by the letter ‘h’ preceding the consonant. Thus, /m̥ata/ ‘interior’ was spelled as *hmata* (though historically spelled *mhata*) and /n̥anai/ ‘eight’ was spelled as *hnanai* (historically *nhanai*). Bosma felt that the placement of the h before the nasal stop represented what the people knew empirically was happening in the production of the stop, and would thus be easier for new readers to grasp, rather than having the ‘h’ come after the sound, as was represented in the historically accepted orthography. The voiced stops /b d g/ all have voiceless and voiceless aspirated phonemic counterparts, but Bosma’s suggested orthographical changes were not directed at any features related to these phonemes, since they were written in an easily reproduced way.

⁸ Bosma (1981) proposed this term as he compiled his recommendations for orthographic conventions for various languages of Isabel.

Palmer (1999b) has recently analysed a similar type phenomenon in Kokota language, as he examined the occurrence of voiceless sonorants, trying to determine if they are underlyingly phonemes, or “the result of synchronic surface coalescence of underlying /h/ plus sonorant clusters”. He makes a fairly strong case that these are indeed underlying voiceless sonorant phonemes, noting that if the opposite were true, then they would reflect proto-Isabel forms with that order. Instead, he found that “the segment order of these proto forms is the reverse of that which generated underlying clusters.” Thus the phonemic inventory he presents is quite similar to CH, in which every voiced phoneme has a voiceless counterpart.

In the same type patterning, Bosma felt another adjustment was needed with the representation of the voiceless continuants /l̥/ and /r̥/. Thus /l̥oti/ ‘prevent’ was spelled *hloti*, and /r̥ana/ ‘startled’ was *hrana*.

The representation of the voiced and voiceless velar fricative presented another type challenge and the possible adjustment was thus different in that the ‘h’ took a position following rather than preceding the consonant. Bosma represented the /ɣ/ as ‘gh’. For the voiceless counterpart, he applied the same type principle of representing with ‘h’ the ‘puff of air preceding the sound,’ and thus the /x/ became ‘hgh.’ The second type of sound pattern requiring orthographic adjustment concerned the occurrence of voiced velar stops and nasals. Bosma proposed an adjustment for the voiced velar stops when occurring before lateral or trill continuants. Thus, in the word /glimai/ ‘five’, the CH people had always represented the velar stop with what they called a ‘g bar’ or \bar{g} , and spelled it *ḡlimai*. The same would hold for /gromno/ ‘darkness’, spelled as *ḡromno*. Bosma proposed doing away with the ‘g bar’

representation in these environments, because even though /g/ and /ɣ/ phonemically contrast, the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ never occurs before /l/ or /r/, and thus the contrast is neutralized. Representing this /g/ sound simply as ‘g’ would in Bosma’s proposal provide for 1) ease of typing for the CH speaker, and 2) ease of transfer to English, the national language, which has no diacritics. Regarding ease of typing, the ‘g bar’ required 1) typing the ‘g’, 2) backspacing, 3) rolling the platen up one half turn, 4) hitting the shift key, 5) striking the underline key, and 6) rolling down the platen one half turn before proceeding to the next letter. Bosma reasoned that the people would embrace one step, typing the ‘g’, rather than six steps. Also, he felt that few people would modify their typewriters to make typing easier.

Bosma’s same idea held for the representation of voiced velar nasal /ŋ/ and voiceless velar nasal /ŋ̥/. Considering the identical process surrounding the typewriter production of ‘g bar’, he felt that the /ŋ/ could be represented as ‘ng’ rather than as ñ, or ‘n bar’. Unlike /g/, the /ŋ/ occurs in non-predictable environments. The use of ‘ng’ would also make for a smoother transition for new readers in English than ñ. Following the same pattern as other voiceless nasals, the /ŋ̥/ would be written as ‘hng’.

Bosma’s major effort at demonstrating and promoting the new orthography was the publication of the book, *Life in our village: short stories from Nareabu, Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands* (1981b). He also produced a spelling survey of Isabel languages in which he presented his proposed orthography, and early Bible translation materials were circulated with the changes. A few years later, after gathering his own data, White prepared to publish his dictionary in this new orthography as outlined below. Phonemes

which are affected by the revised orthography are marked by an asterisk before the phoneme.

Table 2: Suggested Revisions to Orthography

Consonantal phoneme Historical representation Bosma-suggested representation

p	p	p
p ^h	ph	ph
t	t	t
t ^h	th	th
k	k	k
k ^h	kh	kh
*ʔ	Ø	,
b	b	b
d	d	d
*g	ḡ	g
tʃ	ch	ch
dʒ	j	j
f	f	f
s	s	s
v	v	v
z	z	z
ʎ	g	g
*x	gh	hg
h	h	h
m	m	m
*m̥	mh	hm
n	n	n
*n̥	nh	hn
*ŋ	n̄	ng
*ŋ̥	n̄h	hng
*ñ	gn	ng
*ñ̥	gnh	hgn
l	l	l

*l̥	lh	hl
r	r	r
*r̥	rh	hr

1.1.4 Retreat to tradition

Despite Bosma and White’s best efforts at promoting the new orthography, the CH speakers were not satisfied.⁹ They felt that the early orthographic rendering of their language was sufficient, and should not be modified. After all, if they could read and write in their orthography, why change it and try to learn a new system?¹⁰

Bosma noticed that the Bible translators with whom he was working kept the original spelling, and so did the people when writing and corresponding in the language. He did not have enough momentum, despite the best efforts of outside help such as Lee to change the system. Bosma was able to notify White, who was in Hawaii preparing his dictionary with the new orthography, that their efforts had indeed been rejected. White made the necessary changes to conform to the old orthography.

⁹ During this time period, Bosma’s SIL colleague Ernest Lee held an orthography workshop and was successful in showing CH speakers the benefit of representing the glottal stop, whereas before it was only represented when contrast was noted between two words. He introduced the apostrophe to represent this sound. An example of minimal contrast is shown in this example: /biʔo/ ‘big’ spelled *bi’o*, and /bio/ ‘nautilus shell’, spelled *bio*. Lee proposed the apostrophe upon noting its widespread acceptance on Malaita and Makira. However, Lee’s other CH orthographical suggestions for revision were rejected.

¹⁰ English speakers have also resisted spelling reform, though it can easily be demonstrated that 1) a more phonemic-based writing system would better represent the sounds of words, and 2) children and foreigners would more easily acquire the language. Nonetheless, change is strongly resisted and various attempts have proven very difficult for those who have already acquired fluency in the existing system.

Whereas ‘g bar’ and ‘n bar’ could be represented on a standard typewriter, albeit the process was quite cumbersome as noted above, in printed materials the italic *g* and *n* were used. This was due to the inability of the Solomons typesetter to represent the bar.

Bosma (1999) noted that besides local rejection, he also later discovered a pattern in the language that went against his suggested spelling. The fricative γ , when ‘strengthened’ (as defined above) becomes the ‘strong g sound’ when marked with the [h]. He proposed that strong consonants (as the people understood them to be strong) be marked with the h. But in this case the orthographic symbol gh was intended by Bosma to be the fricative γ , which was not the strengthened sound. Examples of contrast in the language where this is a factor include / γ o γ a/ ‘to paddle’ and /go γ a/ ‘a paddle’. Thus, the desired representation of /go γ a/ as *gohra* ‘a paddle’ was not discernible because the people were confused as to whether or not the first sound was strengthened due to the influence of the previous orthographic system, and not because of patterning in the language. Bosma (1999) noted that this approach did suit nearby Bughotu language, which he was also assigned to advise concerning linguistic description and translation work. His original reasoning was that if it worked for a neighboring language which was similar, hopefully it would work for CH. But the exception noted here proved to be a major factor contributing to the lack of acceptance.

Bosma acceded to the wishes of the people and the local translators and he encouraged publication with the long-standing orthography. Bosma wanted buy-in on a large scale, and neither he nor White sought to promote an orthography which would not be used. All books published in the language since then have used the original orthography. These volumes include White’s dictionary (White 1988), children’s Bible

story books (Piaso 1992a, 1992b), a book of stories published by the National Literacy Committee (Boswell, F. 1991), pre-reading books (Boswell, B., 1991a, 1991b), the New Testament (Committee 1993), comics (Piaso, 1999a, 1999b), Bible story books (Piaso, n.d.) and Old Testament portions (Committee, 2005).

Currently, people use the bar in letter writing and story writing, but it should be noted that use of the bar is not always accurate. For example, occasionally a bar is put over an 'n' when the 'n' in the text should represent an [n] rather than [ŋ]. Or, a bar might occur over a 'gn', and this reflects total lack of understanding of the use of the bar to represent [g]. Also one might occasionally see an 'h' occur on the wrong side of the stop.

The orthography decision was reached through language use, not by "command" of the community or leaders. While orthography decisions can be divisive, this is an example of an orthography that serves to unify a people. This decision was reached by the community more than 20 years, and still stands. Tradition has won out over initial linguistic analysis, concerns for producing literacy materials on a manual typewriter, and assisting people with the literacy transfer to English from CH.

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