

## Which syllabary did the Kickapoo use in Mexico?

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**Abstract:** A group of Kickapoo have lived in northern Mexico since the 1830's. Some of them have written in a syllabary they identify as created by Sequoyah for the Cherokee. Possible scenarios for how the Kickapoo may have learned the Cherokee syllabary are examined. Evidence is presented that the syllabary they have used is not Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabary, but one that is less known, the Great Lakes Algonquian Syllabary.

The Kickapoo who live near the city of Nacimientto in the state of Coahuila, Mexico<sup>1</sup> have been reported as using Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabary (Latorre & Latorre 1976:30,172,217; Walker 1981:157 and 1996:171). Since a number of Cherokee had moved south from the USA into Mexico from 1839 onward and joined this Kickapoo community (David 1930, Latorre & Latorre 1976:238, Pulte and Altom 1984), it is plausible that the Kickapoo in Mexico learned it from them and used it to write Kickapoo.

If this is true, the Kickapoo in Mexico using the Cherokee syllabary would be a case of adoption of a syllabary designed for one language to be adopted by a language community speaking a language that is only distantly related, an Algonquian language community borrowing a syllabary from an Iroquoian language community. However, this is not unthinkable, since the Great Lakes Algonquian Syllabary (GLAS) used by the Fox, Sauk, Potawatomi, and Shawnee<sup>2</sup> was adopted by the Siouan-speaking Ho-Chunk (previously called Winnebago) in the winter of 1884-1885 (Fletcher 1890:299 and Walker 1981, 1996).

A bit of historical background is required here. The Cherokee syllabary was completed by Sequoyah by 1821 (Scancarelli 1996:587). He later moved to Oklahoma, near the present town of Sallisaw, and lived there until shortly before his death on a trip to Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Sequoyah's syllabary became the inspiration for the Cree syllabary about 1840, which then spread broadly across Canada (Nichols 1996:599) and became known as Canadian Syllabics. There are also reports that the Kickapoo who had moved south into the northern parts of Mexico, used the GLAS in Mexico (Walker 1981:157 and 1996:171).

The GLAS was based on Roman letters, but written as syllables. The sounds represented by the Roman letters do not always match the sounds expected based on the letters.

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<sup>1</sup>The 2010 census counted 423 who still speak Kickapoo in Mexico (Moctezuma Zamarrón 2011:52).

<sup>2</sup>The use of GLAS for writing the languages other than Shawnee is documented in the sources cited by Fletcher and Walker. I have been informed independently by Stephen Self and Samantha Cornelius of the use of GLAS by Shawnee in Oklahoma.

<sup>3</sup>Late in life, Sequoyah travelled to Mexico seeking to contact Cherokee who had moved there. On this trip, he became sick and died in Mexico. The location of his death is the subject of much speculation (Davis 1930:173-175), but no agreement.

Table 1. Partial table of Great Lakes Algonquian Syllabary  
(based on Jones 1906:90, Walker 1981:158)

	a	e	i	o
	<i>u</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>
p	<i>lu</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>lo</i>
t	<i>tu</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>to</i>
s	<i>su</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>so</i>
š <sup>4</sup>	<i>du</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>do</i>
č <sup>5</sup>	<i>ttu</i>	<i>tte</i>	<i>tti</i>	<i>tto</i>

However, Latorre & Latorre (1976:30) clearly and specifically reported that the Kickapoo in Mexico used “the syllabary invented by the Cherokee Sequoyah.” The Latorres did not record any skepticism about the claim that the script used by the Kickapoo had been invented by Sequoyah (1976:30,172,217). They went on to say, “About twelve of the Kickapoo men are able to read and write in the syllabary invented by the Cherokee Sequoyah. One woman knows how to read it but does not write it... The Sequoyah syllabary originally had characters for eighty-five sounds, but the Kickapoos presently use only forty-eight. Those who use this form of reading and writing are aware that it was invented by a Cherokee Indian and profess great admiration for him” (1976:30). At the Latorres’ quarters, viewing “a print of Sequoyah, inventor of the Cherokee syllabary, was popular with the men who read and wrote in it” (Latorre and Latorre 1976:217).

There are at least three possibilities to explain the assertion of the Cherokee syllabary being used by the Kickapoo in Mexico. First, it is possible that the Kickapoo in Mexico had learned the Cherokee syllabary, probably from Cherokee who had also moved into Mexico. The Kickapoo population in northern Mexico (centered at Nacimiento, Coahuila) had been joined by a group of Cherokee in 1843 (David 1930, Latorre & Latorre 1976:238, Pulte & Altom 1984:35). It is possible that these Cherokee brought and taught their syllabary to the Kickapoo and that the Kickapoo then used it for their own language.

The second possibility is that the Kickapoo of Mexico used the GLAS, but incorrectly attributed it to Sequoyah. This scenario could have been prompted by a genuine misunderstanding about the origin and originator of their script; it would be easy to assume that the syllabary invented by the famous Sequoyah was the syllabary they were using. Or, the claim that it was created by Sequoyah could have originally been a knowing but wishful distortion of the truth, a desire to link their script to the famous Sequoyah rather than to some unknown, obscure creator. Later Kickapoo, in good faith, reported it to be Sequoyah’s creation, not surprising since communities have more than once wanted to claim a more glorious origin for their script (Unseth 2005: 23). It would not be surprising that the Kickapoo in Mexico knew the GLAS since there is solid evidence that the Kickapoo further north, in Oklahoma, used the GLAS. In describing the GLAS, Jones listed the users as including the Kickapoo, citing their locations as “in central Oklahoma, in eastern Kansas, and over the Texas border in Mexico” (Jones 1906:88).

<sup>4</sup>This symbol is equivalent to the IPA [ʃ].

<sup>5</sup>This symbol is equivalent to the IPA [tʃ].

The third possibility in identifying the script used by the Kickapoo in Mexico is that the Kickapoo in Mexico used two different syllabaries, both the Cherokee syllabary and the GLAS. This is highly unlikely for multiple reasons. For one, it is unlikely that they would have maintained the active use of two minority<sup>6</sup> scripts in the face of Spanish, writing in both the GLAS and also the Cherokee syllabary, because “heavy and continuing investment is required to maintain a writing system that is used for a range of functions. Even very limited systems absorb much of their practitioners’” attention (Baines 2008:357).

However, the Kickapoo in Mexico labeled their syllabary (that they identified as Sequoyah’s) by using the same name used by other groups to refer to the GLAS. The Latorres recorded the Mexican Kickapoo’s name for the syllabic writing system they used: “This syllabary is commonly known as Ba Be Bi Bo, from the first series of sounds of the syllables, the Kickapoos assert that it should be called Pa Pe Pi Po, since they do not have a *b* sound in their language” (1976:30).<sup>7</sup> Also, “One clan leader kept a record of his extensive family in Ba-Be-Bi-Bo for many years” (1976:227).

It is important to note that Central Algonquian languages like Kickapoo have a voiceless bilabial stop phoneme, but not a voiced bilabial stop as a phoneme (Fox, Bloomfield 1925:219; Potawatomi, Hockett 1948:1; Kickapoo, Moctezuma Zamarrón 2011:56). For example, Walker reports that the Potawatomi sounds Hockett analyzed as fortis and lenis *p* “but they are voiceless” (Hockett 1948:1) are both written with the same symbol in the top row of the GLAS, while the current Roman orthography uses the symbols <b> and <p> for the two consonant sounds represented by in this top row of the syllabary chart (1981:160). Jones, explaining the shape of the syllabary for all the Central Algonquian languages, described the consonant sound represented in the first row as “almost like the sonant *b* in *bun*; or most often it may be like the *p* in *pit*” (1906:90). In other words, whether the bilingual Spanish-speaking Kickapoo called their syllabary “Ba Be Bi Bo” or “Pa Pe Pi Po”, the name matches the first consonant row of the GLAS. Other language communities using the GLAS also named the script by referring to it by the names of the characters in the first consonant row: the Ottawa called it “paw-pa-pe-po” (Blackbird 1887:31), the Fox called it “paapeepiipoohani” (Walker 1974:403), the Potawatomi called it “babebibo” (Clifton 1977:446), and the Bo-Chunk (Winnebago), who speak a Siouan language that has a voiced and voiceless distinction for stops, called it “babebibora” (Walker 1981:161). This practice of using the first consonant row to name the GLAS syllabary goes back at least as far as 1887, as first described by Andrew Blackbird for the Ottawa use of GLAS. (The strange-seeming pattern of a bilabial stop in the first consonant row of all GLAS tables being represented by the symbol <ℓ> is explained by a slight reduction on the right side of the handwritten consonant <ℓ>, reducing it to <ℓ>, e.g. *ℓa* > *la*.)<sup>8</sup>

However, the Cherokee syllabary was never called anything like “papepipo” or “babebibo”. Since the Cherokee language does not have /p/ or /b/, the syllabary composed by Sequoyah does not include syllables with the consonants *p* or *b*. Instead, the first row of the Cherokee syllabary is built with the symbol for initial vowel or *ʔ*, and the second row of consonants is built with the symbol for the consonant *k*. The Cherokee syllabary could

<sup>6</sup>“Minority” here is seen in comparison to the Roman scripts used around them by Spanish speakers.

<sup>7</sup>The Latorres must have been discussed this matter with the Kickapoo in Spanish, which has both /b/ and /p/.

<sup>8</sup>There is evidence of the bilabial stop being written with <b> instead of <ℓ>, found in a table comparing four sets of handwritten forms for GLAS, each written by a different Mesquakie speaker (Walker 1996:170). Two of the four forms in the first consonant row written by Alfred Kiyana (sample written “probably between 1912 and 1914”) show the script shape for *b* rather than *l*.

conceivably be named as “kakekiko” (though it is not), but certainly never “bebebibo”. Therefore, the name that the Kickapoo use to identify their syllabic script very strongly links it with the GLAS and not with the Cherokee syllabary.

Though he was not trying to address the question of a possible link between the Cherokee syllabary and the Mexican Kickapoo, Walker indicated that the syllabary used by the Mexican Kickapoo was the same GLAS as used by the Fox and the more northern Kickapoo, pointing out that aside from minor differences, “it is identical to the Fox syllabary, although the Kickapoos living in Coahuila have acquired some Spanish spelling conventions, such as <cu> for /kw/ and <ll> for /y/” (Walker 1996:171).

In conclusion, the reports that the Kickapoo in Mexico wrote using the Cherokee syllabary are incorrect. The facts are better explained by interpreting the claims to a link with Sequoyah as mistaken and instead identifying the Kickapoo’s script as the GLAS. Presumably their ancestors had learned the GLAS when they had lived further north and then brought this script with them to Mexico.

As a postscript, it is worth noting that all of the GLAS variants available to me<sup>9</sup> have a bilabial stop in the first consonant row of the syllabary, and all but one have *t* in the second consonant row. This seemingly minor point takes on major significance when one compares the first consonant rows of the various Canadian Syllabics charts, since most of them also have *p* as the first consonant in their charts, and *t* as the second (Nichols 1996, Walker 1996). This striking similarity between the Canadian Syllabics and the GLAS is another part of the puzzle in the mystery concerning who created the GLAS, strongly suggesting that the creator of the GLAS knew the Canadian Syllabics.

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<sup>9</sup>I must note one exception, a handwritten manuscript by Robert Simmerwell, dated 1832. The Newberry Library of Chicago was kind enough to scan some pages from this, and page 2 shows a version of the GLAS with the consonants presented in standard alphabetical order, except that the row built with the consonant *y* is written after the *z* row.

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