

# Languages, Identities, and Education – in Relation to Burma/Myanmar

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## Abstract

The ethnic groups that live in Burma/Myanmar possess distinctive national, cultural and language identities. However, the teaching of indigenous minority languages has been prohibited since 1962, and, even though changes are being introduced, that policy largely remains in place today. The paper outlines brief historical background of eight major ethnic groups and, introduces to the ethnic languages and their status in Burmese/Myanmar education. It considers issues relating the teaching of ethnic minority languages, and discusses the question, ‘What should be the policy on language education in Burma/Myanmar?’ The paper argues that there is a need to take into consideration ‘multilingual education’ in the light of the linguistic diversity that exists in Burma. It sees linguistic diversity as a positive characteristic of the country, and safeguarding this diversity as an important task for its citizens.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the following questions:

1. What are the issues concerning the teaching of ethnic languages in schools in Burma/ Myanmar?
2. What should be the policy on language education in Burma/Myanmar?

The use of the terms, ‘Burma, Myanmar, Burman, and Burmese’ constitutes a controversial matter. This paper will use the term ‘Burma’ to refer to the country name, ‘Burman’ to refer to the majority ethnic group living in the country, and ‘Burmese’ to refer to the language spoken by Burmans. The Burmese language spoken by about 69% of the population is the official language of Burma and the medium of instruction at all public schools throughout the country. There are many ethnic languages spoken in Burma. Among them, the top language groups are Burmese 69%, Shan 8.5%, Karen 6.2%, Rakhaing 4.5%, Mon 2.4%, Chin 2.2%, and Kachin 1.4% according to 1983 census<sup>1</sup>. However, ethnic minority languages have not received official recognition by the government since 1962.

The language policy applied by governments from 1962 to 2010 may be considered Burmanisation at the expense of the language and identity of other indigenous nationalities. In other words, it has sought to assimilate other groups in the name of national unity (Thein Lwin, 2000a). Since national independence in 1948, Burmese has been used as medium of instruction in all state schools. Before 1962, children in the ethnic minority areas had a chance to learn their mother tongue as a subject in primary schools. After 1962, the government

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<sup>1</sup> The figures are quoted from ‘Myanmar Population Changes and Fertility Survey 1991’, published by Immigration and Population Department, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 1995 which is stated in Wunna Ko Ko & Yoshiki Mikami (2005). According to the 1931 census stated in Allott, Herbert & Okell (1989), Burmese is spoken by 67%, Karen 9%, Indic languages 7%, Kachin 3%, Mon and Chin 2% each and Palaung 1%.

prohibited the teaching of ethnic minority languages in schools by a centralized decision. It is argued that control of education was a strategy to control the people.

In the following, the paper will give a brief background of ethnic groups and their languages followed by discussion on the status of these languages in Burmese education. However, there are over 100 ethnic groups<sup>2</sup> with their own languages and dialects; this paper does not attempt to cover all of them. It will focus on eight major ethnic groups: Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhaing and Shan, which have been granted administrative states and divisions although the political structure is a unitary system.

After national independence in 1948, the country was divided into 14 administrative divisions based on 1947 constitution. They are seven states (Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah/Karenni, Mon, Rakhaing and Shan)<sup>3</sup> and seven divisions (Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, Pegu, Rangoon, Sagaing and Tenasserim). See the map of States and Divisions in the Appendix 1. In brief, the Burmans have occupied a stronger position than other groups in political and geographical terms since the Bagan era (A.D. 849-1287). The minority seven groups mostly live in the mountainous areas while the majority Burmans live in the seven divisions on the plain. The terms minority and majority are used here in the sense of both population and political power.

## 2. Historical Background of Ethnic Languages and Their Status in Burmese Education

Since Burma is a multi-ethnic nation and its citizens came into the land at different times and by different routes, it possesses a colorful setting of interesting myths, histories and cultures. Although the people of Burma speak different languages and wear different designs of costumes, they all share the same identity of belonging to the same nation and look upon Burma as their homeland. The members of the nation are represented by four large language families: Austro-Asiatic, Malay-Polynesian, Sino-Tibetan, and Tai (Allot, Herbert and Okell, 1989). See the map of Burmese ethnic groups and languages in the Appendix 2.

Table: Language families and their members

Austro-Asiatic	Malay-Polynesian	Sino-Tibetan				Tai
		Tibeto-Burman			Karen	
		Burmese-Lolo	Kuki-Naga	Kachin		
Mon Palaung Wa	Moken Salon	<u>Burmese sub-group:</u> Atsi (Azi) Burmese Lashi	<u>Chin and its dialects:</u> Asho Bawm Bualkhaw	Jingphaw Lachik Lisu Maru (Lhao Vo)	Pa-O Pwo Sgaw <u>Karenni and</u>	Shan

<sup>2</sup> The military government (1988-2010) classified 135 ethnic groups in Burma: 53 ethnic groups in Chin State, 12 in Kachin State, 11 in Karen State, 9 in Kayah State, 1 in Mon State, 7 in Rakhaing State, 33 in Shan State and 9 Burman ethnic groups. This statement may need further study and discussion.

<sup>3</sup> The creation of new states within the Union for Mon and Rakhaing took place in 1960.

		Maru (Lhao Vo) Rakhaing	Chinbone Daai Falam Haka Khumi Khumi Awa Mara Mro Mun Ngawn Paite Senthang Siyin Tawr Tedim Thado Zotung	Rawang Zaiwa	<u>its dialects:</u> Brek Bwe Geba Geko Kayah Kayan (Padaung) Manumanaw Paku Yinbaw Yintale	
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Note: Maru (Lhao Vo) and Lisu belong to both Burmese-Lolo and Kachin language family stated in the table. This paper considers that the people of Maru and Lisu have been living close to Kachin and becoming sub-groups of Kachin tribe although their languages came from Burmese-Lolo language family.

Mon, Palaung and Wa languages belong to the Austro-Asiatic family. Salon and Moken, spoken in the islands of the Mergui Archipelago, belong to the Malay-Polynesian family. The Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family can be divided into three groups. They are (1) the Burmese-Lolo subgroups of Rakhaing, Burmese and its close relatives Maru (Lhao Vo), Lashi, Atsi (Azi) and others, and Lolo, with its relatives Akha, Lahu, Lisu and others; (2) the Kuki-Naga subgroup of Chin and its dialects; (3) the Kachin subgroup of Kachin (also called Jinghpaw) and its dialects. Outside the Tibeto-Burman group in the Sino-Tibetan family is Karen and its relatives, spoken in Karen State, Kayah/Karenni State and parts of the Irrawaddy delta. The Shan language and its relatives, spoken in Shan State, belong to the Tai language family (Allot, Herbert and Okell, 1989). According to the Ethnologue (2009), the number of individual languages listed for Burma is 113. Of those, 111 are living languages and 2 have no known speakers.

Burmese language:

According to recorded history, the Pyus entered the Irrawaddy valley and founded the city states of Sriksetra, Beik-thano and Hanlin during the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. By the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Mon established city states along the Lower Burma coastline. The Burmans moved into the upper Irrawaddy valley about the 9<sup>th</sup> century where they established the Bagan Kingdom (849-1287). The Burmese language and culture came into contact with Pyu and Mon during this period (Allot, Herbert and Okell, 1989).

The earliest written form of Burmese language was found in the ancient capital of Bagan in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Myazedi stone inscription was discovered in 1886 near Myazedi Pagoda in the south of ancient Bagan. It is a quadrangular pillar with each side bearing an inscription in one of different languages: Pyu, Mon, Pali and Burmese. It is believed that the

Burmese script derived from the old Mon script and ultimately from the Brahmi script<sup>4</sup>, which had spread throughout India by B.C. 300. in the reign of King Asoka.

Since Burmese is the official language and medium of instruction in all public schools, the Burmese language has had a greater opportunity to expand in Burma since national independence in 1948. However, Burmese nationalists had to struggle for the survival of the Burmese language during more than one hundred years of colonial rule (Thein Lwin, 2000b). In 1920, Burmese nationalists opened 'National Schools' to promote the Burmese language and encouraged patriotism. One slogan of the Burmese nationalist movement was:

*Burma is our country.*  
*Burmese literature is our literature*  
*Burmese language is our language*  
*Love our land*  
*Value our literature*  
*Respect our language*

The number of private schools in Burma has been increasing since 2000. Private schools mostly focus on the mastery of the English language, and some parents want their children to speak good English - hoping that they will send their children to English speaking countries to work or to continue their studies (Thein Lwin, 2007). The Burmese language is not a priority for those students who attend private schools. Some private schools run by Burmans who value the Burmese language, are trying to promote bilingual teaching of both Burmese and English (Ko Tar, 2011). Burmese children growing up in foreign countries have little chance to learn Burmese. In some western cities (i.e. Washington DC in US, London in UK and Frankfurt in Germany), Burmese Buddhist monasteries teach the Burmese language and Buddhism at weekends and during the summer holidays. There is a large Burmese community living in neighboring Thailand which has created its own schools along the Thai-Burma border and teaches the Burmese language.

While Burmans have been working hard to teach the Burmese language to younger generations, they often have little consideration for the survival of other indigenous minority languages in Burma. The Burmese government education policy does not allow the teaching of ethnic minority languages in schools since 1962. Without official recognition and support, the ethnic minority languages may not be able to survive. Difficulties for the survival of minority languages are explored below.

Chin language:

The Chin people probably came to the Chindwin Valley of Burma in the late 9-10 century. They moved westward and settled in the present day Chin State around A.D. 1300-1400, though some live in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam State in India. There are many

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<sup>4</sup> A History of the Myanmar Alphabet is given in a Myanmar-English Dictionary published by the Department of Myanmar Language Commission, Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, Sixth Edition in 2001.

tribes among the Chin people. Major tribes of the Chin living in Burma include Asho-Chin, Falam-Chin, Haka-Chin and Tedim-Chin.

The Chin people live in different groups of hills and consequently speak different dialects. Twenty different Chin dialects are listed in the Ethnologue (2009) entry for “Languages of Myanmar”. They are Asho, Bawm, Bualkhaw, Chinbon, Daai, Falam, Haka, Khumi, Khumi Awa, Mara, Mro, Mun, Ngawn, Paite, Senthang, Siyin, Tawr, Tedim, Thado, and Zotung. They all belong to Tibeto-Burman language family. The written form of the Chin language was created by American missionaries. According to a Chin scholar, Lian H. Sakhong (2003), the Chins did not learn the art of writing until the time of the British administration. The written language is taught in churches, and the congregations read the Bible in their mother tongue. Apart from religious purposes, the Chin language is not taught at school. Whilst Christian Chins can read the Bible in the Chin language, the author has no information about how the Chin language is surviving among Buddhist Chins.

Kachin language:

The Kachins are also known as Jinghpaw. According to oral history, the ancestors of Jinghpaw lived on the Tibetan plateau and migrated gradually towards the south and settled in the present day Yunnan Province of China. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Jinghpaws continued migrating to the Kachin Hills of Burma. Present day Kachins in Burma consist of Jinghpaw, Lachik, Lhao Vo, Lisu, Rawang, and Zaiwa tribal groups.

The languages of Kachin tribes, including Jinghpaw, Lachik, Lhao Vo, Lisu, Rawang, and Zaiwa, belong to Tibeto-Burman language group. Orthographies for the Kachin languages were introduced about one hundred years ago by American missionaries. Among the six tribes, the Jinghpaw language is used as the language of education and communication among all Kachin tribes. The Jinghpaw language is taught at schools run by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)<sup>5</sup> from primary to junior secondary level. Currently, about 10,000 students are attending KIO schools. Jinghpaw is also the official language in the KIO controlled areas. The Kachin living outside the KIO controlled areas learn the Kachin languages at Christian churches in their region.

Karen language:

Many anthropological studies suggest that the Karens originated in Mongolia and that they were a tribe of Mongolian race (see Rajah, 2008 ‘The Origin of the Karens’). There is no clear historical evidence that explains the time of Karen settlement in Burma. However, some Karens believed that they came into the Salween and Irrawaddy river valleys of Burma before the Mons and the Burmans.

Karen language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family but is outside the Tibeto-Burman language group. The Karen language is tonal and has a subject-verb-object word order, which

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<sup>5</sup> The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is a political organization of Kachins in Burma, which has been struggling for autonomy since the 1960s.

is different from Burmese. The Burmese language features a subject-object-verb word order. However, the Karen languages are written using the Burmese script. The Karen language has three main branches: Sgaw, Pwo and Pa-O. Sgaw Karen language is taught and used as the medium of instruction at schools run by the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>6</sup> and in the Karen refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. It is also used as the official language in the KNU controlled areas. There is a degree of disagreement about the use of Sgaw as the language of education and communication among the Karen tribes. The Karen living outside the KNU controlled areas learn their mother tongue at churches and monasteries.

Karenni language:

The Karennis (literally Red Karen) believe that they settled in the current Karenni/Kayah<sup>7</sup> State in B.C. 739 (Karenni History Research Team, 2006). The Karenni as well as the Karen came from Mongolia. Over centuries, they moved to Turkistan, Tibet and then into Yunnan. In B.C. 1128, they started to move along the Salween River and settled in the Deemawso area in today's Karenni/Kayah state<sup>8</sup>. According to the 1983 census, the tribal groups among the Karennis are Kayah, Kayan (Padaung), Geko, Geba, Bres, Manumanaw, Yintale, Yinbaw, Bwe, and Paku.

The Karenni language is a member of the Karen branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Karenni tribes speak different dialects: Kayah Eastern, Kayah Western, Kayan/Padaung, Brek, Bwe, Geba, Geko, Manumanaw, Paku, Yinbaw and Yintale. There are three different types of written Karenni language. One uses the Burmese alphabet, one uses the Romanised alphabet, and the other uses the Kayah Li alphabet. Kayah Li is now taught at schools in Karenni refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Its script, which is related to the ancient Indian Brahmi script, was devised by Khu Htae Bu Peh in 1962.<sup>9</sup> The Kayah language using the Kayah Li alphabet is the official language of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)<sup>10</sup>. The languages of other Karenni tribes can be learned at Karenni churches and read in the Bible.

Mon language:

A Mon study estimates that the arrival of the Mon in Burma was around B.C. 1500 (Pon Nya Mon, 2007). The Mons were originally from Southwest China from where they migrated to

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<sup>6</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU) is a political organization of Karens in Burma, which has waged war against the Burmese government since 1949. The aim of the KNU at first was independence. The KNU today calls for a federal system rather than an independent Karen State.

<sup>7</sup> The Burmese Government uses the term 'Kayah State'. Dissident groups use the term 'Karenni State'. In some cases both terms present the same meaning. However, Kayah, Kayan and other tribal groups belong to Karenni tribe. This paper, therefore, uses the term 'Kayah' as one of the sub tribes of Karenni.

<sup>8</sup> Kayan Dream Website: <http://kayan.weebly.com/history.html> (accesses 23/7/2011) and Karenni Homeland Website: <http://www.karennihomeland.com/ArticleArticle.php?ContentID=58> (accessed 23/7/2011)

<sup>9</sup> Omniglot, Writing System & Languages of the World <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/kayahli.htm> (accessed 23/7/2011)

<sup>10</sup> The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) is a political organization struggling for independence from the Burmese national government.

upper Burma and then continued moving south to the Irrawaddy valley. Finally, they settled in Lower Burma and founded the Kingdom of Suvarnabhumi in Thaton. They also founded the Kingdoms of Dvaravati and Haripunjaya in Thailand. The Mon Kingdom in Lower Burma was conquered by the Bagan Kingdom in A.D. 1057. After the fall of the Bagan Kingdom in 1287, the Mon consolidated themselves and founded the Hanthawaddi Kingdom in Pegu (Bago). The Hanthawaddi was conquered by the Burmese King Tabinshwehti in 1539.

The Mon language is part of the Monic group of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic family (Ethnologue, 2009). The Mon script is derived from Indian Brahmi script. The Mon script was again the source of Burmese script, which was created during the reign of King Kyansittha (1084-1113) in the Bagan era. Kyansittha valued the Mon culture and language and he left many inscriptions in the Mon language (Nai Pan Hla, 1988) including the Myazedi Stone with its identical inscriptions of a story in Mon, Pyu, Pali and Burmese carved on its four sides.

Historically, Mon culture and language used to be dominant in ancient Burma and Thailand. Mon was the leading language in the creation of Burmese. Today, the Mon language is a significant example of assimilation into the Burmese and Thai languages. According to Watkins (2007), the number of people who speak Mon is small compared to the large number of people who identify themselves as Mon but who do not speak the Mon language. A Mon scholar, Pon Nya Mon (2007) points out that the population census of 1856 showed that nearly half of the population in Henzada district in lower Burma was ethnic Mon; after 55 years, the 1911 census showed that only 1,224 out of a total population of 532,357 described themselves as Mon, of whom only 399 could speak the Mon language. It is thought that the Mon had effectively been assimilated into the Burmans at that time.

However, Mon Buddhist monks, Mon scholars such as Nai Pan Hla, and New Mon State Party (NMSP)<sup>11</sup> have been actively promoting Mon language and culture. The Mon language is taught at Buddhist monasteries inside Mon State and at schools run by NMSP. There are about 10,000 students currently attending NMSP schools.

Rakhaing language:

According to oral history, Indo-Aryan people reached the Arakan/Rakhaing<sup>12</sup> region from India's Ganga delta and settled in Kaladan valley in very early times (Nayaka, 2008). Before migrating to Rakhaing, those Indo-Aryans were thought to have mixed with a migrant Mongoloid tribe in eastern India (ibid.). According to a Rakhaing archaeologist, U San Shwe

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<sup>11</sup> The New Mon State Party (NMSP) is a political organization of Mon people in Burma, which have waged war against the Burmese government since 1958 for independence. The NMSP today call for a federal system rather than an independent Mon State.

<sup>12</sup> Both words Arakan and Rakhaing come from the same meaning and the same Pali root (Aye Kyaw, Dr., 2002). The word Rakhaing is used by the majority. Many western literatures use the word Rakhine rather than Rakhaing. Phonetically speaking, the Rakhaing people prefer the word "Rakhaing". The name Rakhaing is derived from a Pali word, Rakkhita, which means cherish or take care of. The paper therefore uses the word "Rakhaing" rather than "Rakkhine" or "Arakan".

Bu (stated in Nayaka, 2008), the Indo-Aryans came to Rakhaing from Majjhimadesa and lived on the banks of river Gangha. The ancestral home of the ancient Rakhaing was in the Magadha region. They later settled in the Rakhaing region and subsequently founded their first capital city at Dhanyawadi (ibid.). According to oral history, the Rakhaing Kingdom began with King Marayu who founded the first Dhanyawadi dynasty in B.C. 3325-1483. The successive Rakhaing kingdoms were Waithali, Laymro and Mrauk-U. Some 234 kings ruled Rakhaing over a period of 5108 years. Dr. Aye Kyaw (2002), a Rakhaing and a historian, claims that the long historical period of the Rakhaing Kingdom was possible due to the existence of a Neolithic culture in Thandwe, a city in Rakhaing State.

According to the Ethnologue (2009), the Rakhaing language belongs to the Burmese-Lolo group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The modern Rakhaing script, aside from a few vocabulary differences, is essentially the same as Burmese script. Rakhaing is taught mainly at the Rakhaing Buddhist monasteries in Rakhaing State. Exiled political organizations also use the Rakhaing language in their communications. The northern Brahmi-based Rakhawunna script found in stone inscriptions in the Waithali era is no longer use.<sup>13</sup>

Shan language:

Some studies suggest that the Shans belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Tai ethnic group. According to Sai Aung Tun (2005), intensive field research was carried out by Chinese and foreign scholars and reported that the original home of the Tai people had been in the south-western part of China. Then they moved along the big rivers, including the Brahmaputra, Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Shweli, Salween, Mekong and Menam, to Assam, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Another study (Sao Noan Oo, 2005) suggests that the first entry of the Shan into Burma took place before the Christian era, founding the ancient cities of Ta-gong, Mongnai, Hsenwi and Hsipaw. Sao Noan Oo continues that a second migration took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. However, scholars differ in their opinion that when exactly the Tai entered into Burma.

The Shan language is a member of the Tai-Kadai language family which is related to the Thai language. According to Brown (1965), the Shan dialects spoken in Shan State can be divided into three groups: Eastern, Southern and Northern. The Eastern Shan dialect is somewhat closer to northern Thai dialect. The Southern Shan dialect has borrowed some Burmese words. The Northern Shan dialect has Chinese influences. The Shan have adopted Mon script for their writing system (Sao Noan Oo, 2005).

Shan Buddhist monasteries are the main source in the promotion of Shan language and culture. Shan educators and university students also play a key role visiting Shan communities and teaching Shan language during the summer holidays. In schools run by Shan dissident groups on the Thai-Burma border, the Shan language is taught and used as the medium of instruction. Shan nationalists choose not to teach Burmese in their schools. For some, this is for the practical reason that students need to learn Shan, Thai and English rather than

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<sup>13</sup> <http://minbargyi.blogspot.com/2010/07/golden-land-of-arakan.html> (accessed 25/7/2011)



Burmese because of their location; others have political reasons for not wishing to speak or teach the Burmese language.

Other Minority Languages in Shan State:

The Akha, Lahu, Pa-O, Palaung, Wa and other minorities within Shan State face much more difficulty in keeping their languages alive. In the Wa region, however, the United Wa State Army (UWSA)<sup>14</sup> has taken on responsibility for promoting the Wa language. The UWSA sends teachers into schools in areas they control to teach the Wa language at primary level. However, the Chinese language is predominant among Wa people, and only a small number of Wa speakers are literate in Wa (Watkins, 2007). Tellingly, the working language of UWSA is Chinese not Wa (ibid.).

### 3. Discussion on the Teaching of Minority Languages in Burma

Current language policy and its implications for minority languages: conflicts and challenges

In the Basic Principles of the Union, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), Section 22 (a) states that: “The Union shall assist to develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the National races”. This is encouraging for the development of indigenous national languages. However, Section 450 of General Provisions of the Constitution states that the *Burmese*<sup>15</sup> language is the official language. The Constitution does not recognize the indigenous national languages as official languages in their states or regions. This does not help sustain or encourage the development of ethnic minority languages.

The teaching of ethnic languages has been recently discussed in parliament. The Upper House of the parliament at Naypyitaw<sup>16</sup> passed a Private School Bill on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2011 which permits the opening and operating of secondary schools, and the teaching of ethnic languages. The Bill would allow ethnic groups to teach their language as an additional subject in private schools. However, the Bill does not allow opening and operating at primary school level. It is an odd situation that, according to the Bill, ethnic minority children cannot learn their mother tongue at an early age in primary school. They should learn at school in their mother tongue from an early age. Besides, private schools usually operate in the cities and often only provide for the children of well-off families. This is not a fair policy for all children.

What should be the policy on language education in Burma?

This paper argues that there is a need to take into consideration ‘multilingual education’ at all public schools in the light of the linguistic diversity that exists in Burma. The term ‘multilingual education’ was adopted by UNESCO in 1999 to refer to the use of at least three languages: the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language in

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<sup>14</sup> The United Wa State Army (UWSA) is a political organization of Wa people in Burma. It was formed in 1989 after they separated from the Communist Party of Burma. The UWSA has an estimated 30,000 Wa soldiers.

<sup>15</sup> In the constitution, it is written the term ‘Myanmar’ rather than Burmese.

<sup>16</sup> The new city of Burma (Myanmar) established in 2005 by the military regime headed by General Than Shwe.

education. According to UNESCO (2003), between 6,000 and 7,000 languages are spoken in the world and at least half of them are in danger of disappearing in the coming years. In Burma, linguistic diversity is our wealth, and safeguarding this diversity is an important task for us to shoulder. If a language disappears, we lose a significant connection to the origin of the people who once spoke that language. The history, legends and myths, handed down generation to generation that embody their origins, may be lost. Furthermore, language is not only a tool for communication and knowledge but a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group (ibid.). However, finding a way to safeguard these valuable languages is a challenging task given the geographical and political complexity of the Burmese context.

After national independence in 1948, Burma chose the Burmese language as its official language although many other national languages such as Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni/Kayah, Mon, Rakhaing and Shan are spoken in Burma. In 1947, one year before the independence, the leaders of Chin, Kachin and Shan, and the representatives of the then Executive Council of the Governor of Burma had signed the Panglong Agreement. The agreement showed that the Chins, Kachins and Shans would co-operate with the Burmans in building a unified Burma after national independence. The ethnic minority groups together with majority Burmans had struggled for the independence of Burma. The languages of these ethnic national groups should be recognized as official languages.

Some other countries have chosen more than one official language. For example, India has 19 official languages while South Africa has 11 (UNESCO, 2003). An official language is ultimately imposed in administration, education and other formal domains in a state. When the official Burmese language became compulsory in education, other indigenous minority languages were initially allowed to be taught in schools. That remained the case until 1962 when the military regime of General Ne Win prohibited the teaching of minority languages in schools. That policy remains in place today. However, some indigenous groups have fought to maintain their language practice and rights for over fifty years and will continue to associate this struggle with issues of independence and self-determination.

Education policy, then, needs to be reconsidered with regard to the teaching of minority languages in schools (i.e. all public and private schools). Here, the term ‘minority’ means a relatively small number of speakers in a region compared with the majority language as spoken by a larger number of people. Relatively, Kachin can be considered a minority language in Burma, but Burmese is a minority language in Kachin State.

When we consider multilingual education giving a space for minority languages, it may not be an easy task for educators. Chins, for example, speak twenty different dialects. If there is to be one chosen as the school language, the selection of a language or dialect may not be straightforward. It may raise issues concerning the ‘justification of the choice’ (Simpson, 2007 p.7). Nevertheless, all dialects should be kept alive for their language rights and safeguarding the valuable indigenous languages.

The Kachins have already chosen Jinghpaw as a language of administration and education in Kachin State. Jinghpaw is the majority language among the Kachin tribes. Other Kachin languages remain active in social and religious domains.

For Karen, the two main branches of Sgaw and Pwo languages link with their religions and political beliefs. The Sgaw Karens are Christians while the Pwos are Buddhists. There is a political dispute between the two groups (i.e. Karen National Union and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army), both of which belong to different religions and different dialects. Agreement on the selection of one dialect for use in schools is likely to be difficult.

As stated above, the Karennis speak different dialects and practice three different written scripts, Romanised, Burmese and Kayah Li as stated above. Whilst there may be a need to choose one common dialect and one written system for a school language, all dialects and scripts should be safeguarded to trace back to each group's heritage. It is interesting that the Kayah might have had a link with Hindu culture in the past, although most of them are Christians today. The Kayah's mythological creatures of *Kinnari* and *Kinnara* also appear in Hindu culture.

For Mon, it is a serious task to maintain and develop their language because the number of Mon speakers is gradually declining since the Mon Kingdom was conquered by the Burmese Kingdom. However, Mon civilization had flourished in history and Burmans themselves learnt from and developed their language and culture from the Mon. The ancient Burmans spoke Mon and engraved their words in Mon language. King Kyansittha (1084-1113), for example, engraved his words about religion, prosperity of his kingdom, his victories and even his wives in Mon language, which were found on more than a dozen big stones (Nai Pan Hla, 1998) as well as the Myazedi stone inscription.

The Rakhaing civilization was well-founded and had a rich culture. The Burmans also learnt from the Rakhaing. A Burmese saying expresses "*thadar manaing Rakhaing ko mae*". The literal meaning is "if you do not have a mastery of knowledge in grammar, you better ask a Rakhaing". Although the Rakhaing and Burmese languages are similar in both spoken and written forms, some of the vocabulary and sounds are different. Another issue arising in the discussion of Rakhaing language is 'Rohingya' which claims that the Rohingyas historically belong to Rakhaing State giving the reason that Rakhaing was ruled by Muslims from 1430 to 1531. The Rakhaings do not accept this point saying that Rakhaing is the original homeland for Buddhist Rakhaing people. The language issue is also linked with cultural and religious identity. The Rohingya are Muslims who speak a language which is similar to the Chittagonian language spoken in the neighboring southern Chittagong region of Bangladesh. However, the Rohingya is a minority group within the Rakhaing State of Burma and minority rights should be given respect.

The settlement of Shan people, a branch of Tai family, dates from the early history of Burma, and they possess distinctive national, cultural and language identities. Through the tireless efforts of Shan monks, scholars and politicians, the Shan language is active. This language must be a school language at all public schools in Shan State. However, the minority

languages spoken in Shan State such as Akha, Lahu, Pa-O, Palaung and Wa which do not belong to Tai family, should be taken into consideration and safeguarded.

Apart from the indigenous national languages stated above, a significant number of Chinese and Indians are living in Burma. According to the CIA World Fact Book, 2010<sup>17</sup>, the Chinese population is 3% and the Indian is 2% of the total population of 53.4 million. Young Chinese and Indians mostly learn their languages at Chinese or Hindu Temples or at (Muslim) Mosques. Although Chinese and Hindu are majority languages in their own countries and throughout the world, Chinese and Indian people are in the minority in Burma. These minority languages should be given respect.

However, some may argue that if the minority languages are given attention at school, a heavy learning burden is being imposed on students and that may produce a low level of academic performance. Besides, the impact of globalization and media expansion may affect traditional cultures and minority languages. Also the spread of modern Western culture has already resulted in the loss of traditional culture in some parts of Asia (Simpson, 2007).

The English language is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools and the medium of instruction in many universities. Learning the English language may lead to economic advantages, help in dealing with the outside world, and improve prospects of study abroad and employment. A potential threat among rising generations is that they prefer the pragmatic value of learning English rather than the cultural value of indigenous national languages.

Some other difficulties encountered by the use of mother tongues (indigenous minority languages) as languages of instruction may include the following:

- The mother tongue may be an unwritten language.
- Sometimes the written language may not even be generally recognized as constituting a legitimate language. For example, Karenni have different types of written forms and they are recognized in different regions and different political perspectives.
- The language does not have sufficient vocabulary for education purposes and it may still have to be developed.
- There may be a shortage of educational materials in the language.
- There may be a lack of appropriately trained teachers.
- The multiplicity of languages may exacerbate the difficulty of providing schooling in each mother tongue.
- There may be resistance to schooling in the mother tongue by students, parents and teachers (UNESCO, 2003).

Considering the enormous challenges involved, this paper strongly suggests that indigenous national languages should be taught at schools. Studies have shown that, in many cases, instruction in the mother tongue is beneficial to language competencies in the first language, achievement in other subject areas, and second language learning (UNESCO, 2003). In

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<sup>17</sup> Source: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm> (accessed 13/7/2011)

addition, learners learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual education approaches (ibid.). In addition, cognitive neuroscientist, Ellen Bialystok also supports bilingual education. Arguing that bilinguals manifest a cognitive system allowing individuals to attend to important information and ignore the less important (Dreifus, 2011).

#### **4. Concluding Comments**

Every child should begin their formal education in their mother tongue. It is their language right. This paper, however, suggests a multilingual language policy in education with a view to the preservation of cultural identity since Burma is a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural society. We can start with three languages at primary level: the mother tongue, the official language (Burmese) and an international language (English). If a child becomes literate in his/her mother tongue, it would be easy for them to learn other languages and other subject areas. This will empower them to identify with their cultural identity.

If the mother tongue and the school language are the same for a child, the child can choose one of the indigenous minority languages available at the school. For a child whose mother tongue is Burmese, he/she will be required to choose to learn one of the indigenous minority languages. It is a good idea that learning another language opens up access to other value systems and ways of interpreting the world (UNESCO, 2003 p.17). This may also encourage inter-cultural understanding and help reduce xenophobia (ibid.). Particularly, the Burmans should learn the Mon language to trace their own history because the ancient Burmans spoke Mon and engraved their words in Mon language.

With a pragmatic view, only the majority languages, such as Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhaing and Shan, and the majority dialect of each language can realistically be the school language in their respective regions. The choice of a school language should be made by local authorities rather than being a centralized decision. In reality, it may not be possible to teach many other languages and dialects at school. However, local authorities should give support in safeguarding all languages and dialects in their region, as far as is practically possible. For example, in Kachin State, Jinghpaw might be the language in school, but it may not be possible to teach Lachik, Lhao Vo, Lisu, Rawang, and Zaiwa languages at school. These minority languages should be given the support needed to create a learning environment outside the formal school system - weekend and summer schools, for example – and through community involvement and empowerment.

Since the utilization of indigenous minority languages is gradually declining and they are in danger of disappearing, systematic maintenance is an urgent need. Policymakers should consider the major ethnic nationality languages as official languages in their respective states. This should also be endorsed in a constitution amendment using the example of the Indian Constitution (2007). The potential pragmatic utility of acquiring proficiency in an ethnic language is a major factor in assisting its spread throughout a population (Simpson, 2007). Further, language issues cannot be separated from issues of ethnic identity and the realization of political, social and economic aspiration of ethnic groups which have characterized recent Burmese history.

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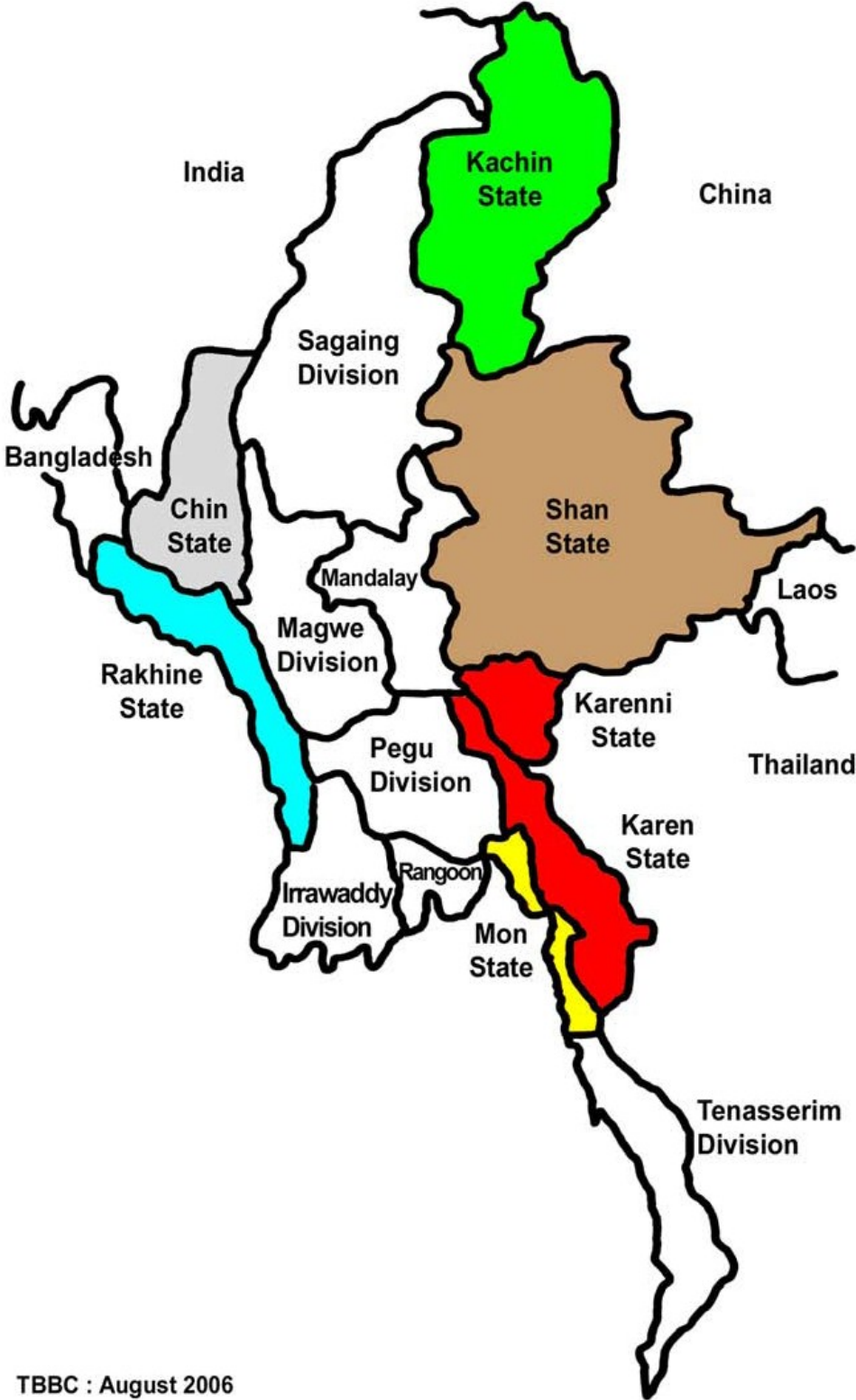
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Appendix 1

Burma: States and Divisions

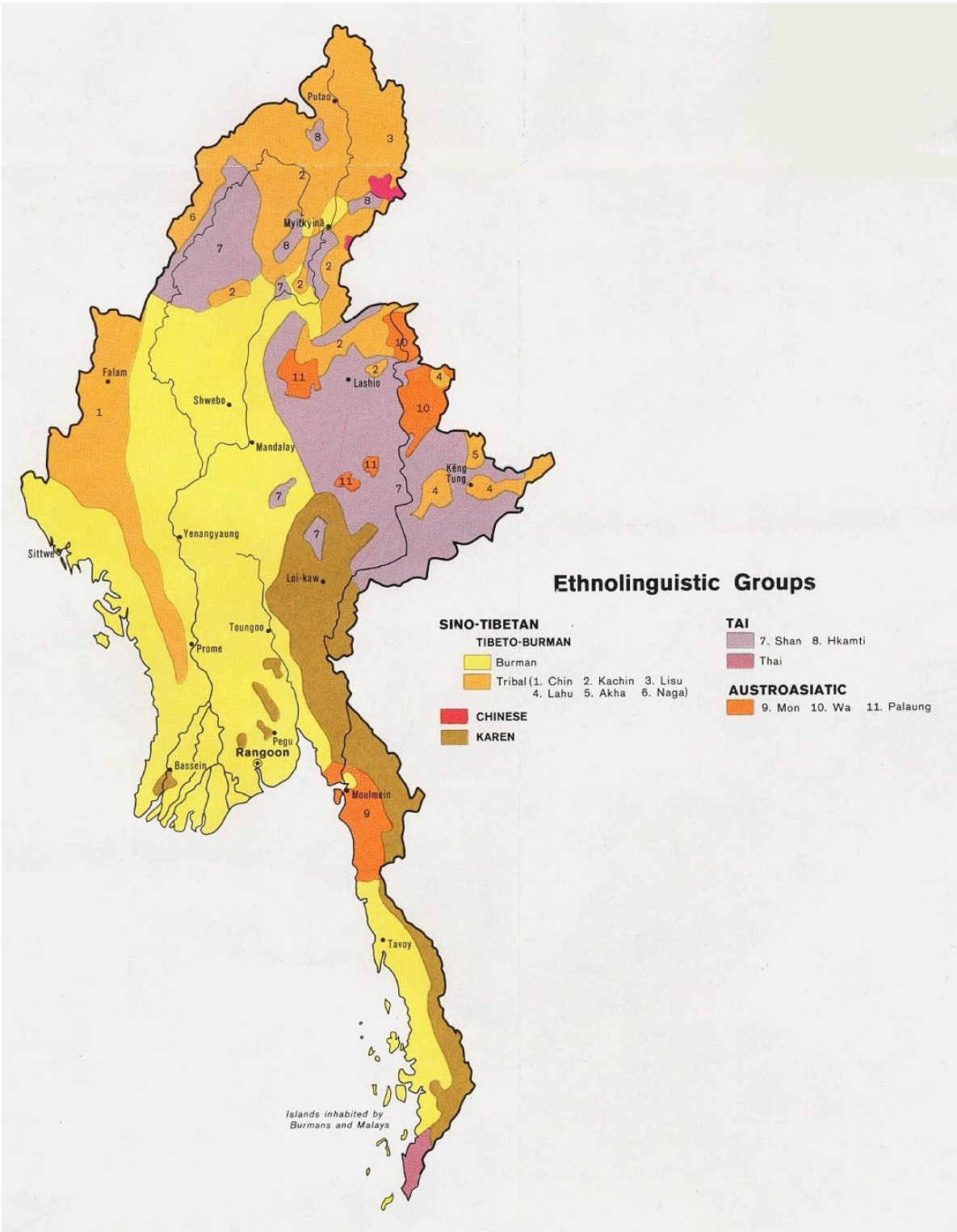


Source: Google Images (accessed 30/9/2011)



Appendix 2

A map of Burmese ethnic groups and languages



Source: Language Maps and Ethnicity Maps <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/clpp/images/langmaps/index.html> (accessed 30/9/2011)