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How Many Chin Languages Should Be Taught in Government Schools?

Ongoing developments and structural challenges of language-in-education policy in Chin State

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KEYWORDS: schooling, language policy, Chin State, ethnic minority, decentralization, language standardization, local curriculum

Abstract

Language-in-education policies have constituted an enduring concern under the successive political eras in Burma/Myanmar,¹ with critical implications regarding cultural and linguistic diversity, access to education, as well as the emergence of a nation. While this issue has often been described too simplistically, the overall sidelining of ethnic minority languages in formal education under military regimes is nevertheless patent.

The national language-in-education policy has recently evolved, slowly at first, in the wake of the 2011 political transition towards democratization and decentralization (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020). In 2019–2020, 64 languages were taught in government schools throughout the country, a few periods every week, as subjects. While this shift is insufficient for proponents of Mother Tongue-Based Education (MTBE), the ongoing development of the Local Curriculum gives the possibility to States and Regions to progressively incorporate some local content in the syllabus, including the languages, cultures and histories of the groups living in their respective territories, supposedly up to high school.

Based on an analytical framework developed in previous publications (notably Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020) and series of interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020, this paper deals with the teaching of Chin languages in government schools, with a focus on Chin State itself. We discuss the rationale for including ethnic minority languages in formal schooling in the Chin context, provide a brief historical background of the issue, and examine the latest developments and prospects of language-in-education policy in Chin State, such as the project of promoting a limited number of “major” languages as “common languages.”

The challenges involved in producing a list of languages with official recognition, as opposed to dialectal variations

with a less formal status, constitute a central question in this paper. As noted by linguist Peterson (2017), the classical *language vs dialect* issue is indeed particularly relevant in highly multilingual Chin State, where language politics, underpinned by a multitude of faith-based written cultures, often militates against the idea of two regional varieties being considered two dialects of the same language. Illustrating the fractal patterns often observed by language ideology scholars (Irvine and Gal, 2000), this situation leads to what seems to constitute two opposite threats: the prospect of what could be called “ethno-linguistic balkanization,” on the one hand, and the perspective of giving priority to certain languages over others, which would entail multiple and significant tradeoffs (in terms of maintaining language diversity, improving access to education, and promoting “national reconciliation”) on the other.

Introduction

With 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and an estimated 117 living languages,² Myanmar is a country of complex ethnolinguistic diversity. Managing this diversity and the issue of ethnic minorities’ political representation has constituted a central challenge in the process of building a nation-state, with critical implications in a chaotic contemporary political history marked by decades of multiple conflicts and successive military dictatorships.

Among these issues, the language-in-education policy, and more specifically the place attributed (or not) to ethnic minority languages in formal education, has constituted an enduring concern. The absence (or scarcity) of ethnic minority languages in formal education has indeed regularly been pointed out by actors from multiple ethnic minorities as tangible evidence of a “Burmanisation” process, by contrast to the federal grounds the country was supposedly built on. To this day, choices in terms of language-in-education policy continue to have deep implications in several critical dimensions of the country’s so-

cial life: maintenance of language and culture diversity; performance of ethnic minorities in the education system; and fulfilment of the State’s “national reconciliation” objective.

Until recently, little attention was given to the ongoing shift of language-in-education policy in government schools, attended by a total of nine million children (including five million from primary schools). The current policy, of which the State governments as well as literature and culture committees (LCCs) are critical actors, is largely based on the 2014–15 education law (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020). This legal text was until recently, at best, described as not going far enough, notably for not prescribing mother tongue-based education (MTBE), a model which entails a transition of the medium of instruction from the local “ethnic” language towards the national language throughout primary education, and is used by some of the Ethnic Basic Education Providers (EBEPs—and most emblematically the Mon National Education Committee).

These language-in-education policy conversations are certainly relevant to Chin State, a region of Myanmar where the sheer ethno-linguistic diversity, even by Myanmar standards, creates acute challenges. Historically, the elusive prospect of a common language has been a central aspiration in the mobilization, most notably by cultural elites and various political actors, of a common “Chin” identity, a term that finds its origins, according to Bradley (2019) in a “Burmese collective exonym for a cluster of Tibeto-Burman speaking groups.”³ Meanwhile, the much-disputable (and disputed) official nomenclature recognizes not fewer than 53 Chin groups, and none of the alternative ethno-linguistic classifications appears consensual.

In this paper, through a lens that has been used to discuss language-in-education policy throughout Myanmar (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020), we thus aim at bringing the focus on Chin State (as well as neighboring regions

populated by Chin people). The primary method of data collection used in that perspective is the semi-structured interview, conducted by both authors successively in May–June 2019 and April–June 2020, and including LCCs, Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA) representatives, Regional ministers, members of the Chin State parliament, political party leaders, local teachers, headmasters and educators, retired Chin State education experts, as well as UNICEF representatives.

We will first discuss different aspects of the rationale for including ethnic minority languages in the schools of Chin State, before moving on, in the next section, to a brief historical background of the issue, ending with the description of the ongoing policy shifts in Myanmar in general and Chin State in particular. In the third section, we will describe what seems to be two of the main challenges in the process of including Chin languages in formal education, namely: schools catering to children from multiple ethnolinguistic backgrounds (a situation which is relatively common in urban areas) and the difficulties often attached to the process of determining what constitutes a *language*, to be taught in schools, or rather a *dialect*, with a less formal status. Finally, we will provide a few case-studies outlines, and briefly discuss the implications of prioritizing a small number of Chin languages in formal education.

1. Why include ethnic minority languages in the schools of Chin State?

While the 20th century has largely been characterized by the building of nation-states around single standardized national languages, the 1990s and 2000s, parallel to an increasing consciousness of the eroding world biodiversity, have witnessed a growing awareness of the diminishing cultural and linguistic diversity (Grinevald and Costa, 2010). During these two decades, most countries, including Myanmar, have ratified international declarations initiated by the United Nations or INGOs, aiming at protecting minorities’

cultural and linguistic rights.⁴ These declarations, the latest of which is the 2019 Bangkok statement on language and inclusion, encourage a departure from the largely monolingual education models used to build most nation-states around the world, including in South-East Asia (Sercombe and Tupas, 2014). In this regard, during the last decade, heterogenous and limited, but nonetheless significant developments have occurred among Southeast Asian nations (Kosonen, 2017), including Myanmar (Salem-Gervais, 2018; Bradley, 2019).

The rationale for including ethnic minority languages in education can be described as three-fold: preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, fostering “national reconciliation” and improving access to education. We will now describe these three dimensions and briefly examine their relevance to the specific situations of Myanmar in general, and of Chin State in particular.

Preserving linguistic and cultural diversity

According to a 2016 estimate of the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ Ethnologue database, there are 7,117 living languages spoken in the world today. Out of these, 1,249 are spoken in South-East Asia and 117, including 111 “indigenous,” in Myanmar.⁵ About 50% of these are somewhere in the lower half of *Ethnologue’s* Expanded Graded International Disruption Scale: 41 are vigorous but unstandardized, 16 are *in trouble*, and 4 are *dying* (Lewis, Simons and Fennig, 2016). Some of the languages which were documented in the 1960’s (such as Megyaw and Samang) are no longer spoken today (Bradley, 2015, 2018).

The absence or scarcity of ethnic minority languages in education has been described as “one of the most important direct causal factors in this (process of) disappearance” of languages around the world today, amounting to a form of “linguistic and/or cultural genocide” and “crime against humanity” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar, 2010). These strong terms are sometimes

relayed by ethnic cultural rights advocates in Myanmar (Mon, 2014). Other researchers’ observations lead to somewhat qualifying these statements, as the majority of the children’s language development often happens outside of the schools (Murray, 2016). Nevertheless, a genuine shift towards a more inclusive language-in-education policy is generally considered one of the key aspects to the preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of a country (Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group, 2013).

The ongoing language policy shift in Myanmar is thus liable to have a significant impact in this dimension, which is certainly relevant to linguistically heterogeneous Chin State and its 478,801 inhabitants (2014 census). Out of the 29 Chin languages identified by *Ethnologue* (see later in this paper for a discussion of linguistic classifications), only 5 are described as *dispersed*, or *threatened*, but 20 of them count less than 20,000 speakers, including 8 that are spoken by less than 5,000.

Fostering “national reconciliation”

The most direct and obvious link between inclusiveness in language-in-education policy and the political aim of “national reconciliation,” reaffirmed by successive governments, is maybe the inclusion and participation of the EBEPs (those linked to ethnic armed organizations first and foremost) into some sort of national education framework, in connection with the peace process. While this particular aspect has little direct implications in Chin State, just like in the rest of the country, the overall idea, backed by tangible evidence, that the State is not a threat to ethnic minority identities is likely to induce long term political benefits.

Parallel to actual language diversity erosion, the theme of linguistic and cultural endangerment, and the necessity to resist it, is central in Chin politics. These views echo wider perceptions of cultural loss, which seem particularly prevalent in Myanmar, and can be traced back at

least to the trauma of colonization, as far as Burmese nationalism is concerned. The subsequent centrality and domination of Burmese identity and language in the independent nation-state has created the conditions for similar perceptions within minorities. Sayings along the lines of “စာပျောက်ရင် လူမျိုးပျောက်မယ်” (“if the written language disappears, the ethnic identity does too”) support language revitalization projects all around the country, and literature and culture committees often strive to avoid resorting to loan words in their oral and written productions, in order to promote what they perceive as a more authentic version of their respective languages, and thereby defending their respective identities (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020).

These perceptions and efforts to protect the language and culture from external threats and influences are prevalent in Chin State too. In 2017 and 2018 for instance, signpost saying “Lai people, speak Lai language”⁶ or “In order to free ourselves from being swallowed by other ethnic groups, let’s no longer include the language of other people when we speak”⁷ could be seen in many shops of Thantlang and Hakha, exhortations primarily directed against the abundant use of Burmese loan words when speaking in Lai. While the multiple and sometimes conflicting implications of a society mobilized for the defense of numerous, often multi-layered and intertwined ethnic identities will be discussed later in this paper, in Chin State just like in the rest of the country, the reintroduction of local languages in formal education is thus likely to constitute an important step towards diminishing the perceptions of a systematic “Burmization” policy, thus contributing to “national reconciliation.”

Improving access to education

Finally, research around the world shows that the inclusion of ethnic minority languages in schooling often improves *access* to and *performance* in education of these populations. This is particularly true for MTBE models, which entail a

transition from the local language to the national language, throughout primary and secondary cycles, thereby alleviating the “language-barrier” faced by children whose mother tongue is not the national language (see for instance, Dutcher, 2001; Malone and Paraide, 2011).

Implementing such system throughout Myanmar and its 47,005 government schools (MoE, 2019) appears particularly challenging for the foreseeable future (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020). Nonetheless, the specific difficulties faced by children whose mother tongue is not Burmese have been explicitly acknowledged by the ministry of education in its National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–2021 which states that: “The ‘language barrier’ is also a significant factor for children from nationalities groups that contributes to their dropping out of school.”⁸

In practice, assessing the relative importance of this particular issue compared to other obstacles to formal education appears complex. The Burmese language-based education system has often been described as a central, if not the main problem in the education of ethnic minority children (Shalom, 2011; South and Lall, 2016; Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center, 2018). It must be noted that the education system has had plenty of pressing issues during the last decades (e.g., with funding, corruption, and teaching method) and that other factors contribute to early drop-outs (including poverty, conflict, topography and distance to schools, student/teacher ratio, attraction of neighboring countries, rural/urban differentiated perceptions, attitudes and practices).⁹ Emphasizing language issues above other educational problems, in resonance with the global trend to encourage the use of ethnic minority languages in education, is habitually associated with a political position inclining towards federalism and/or ethno-nationalism, and away from centralization—an illustration of the fundamentally political nature of language-in-education policy issues.

Access to education is certainly a concern in Chin State which, according to the 2014 census, has the third lowest literacy rate of the country for the aged 15 and over: 79.4%, against 89.5% for the whole country, but with a strong gradient between northern townships—close to 90%—and southern townships—close to or below 70% (as well as an important gap, for older generations, between males and females).¹⁰ According to MoE’s figures, primary completion rate was below 58% in 2017–2018 (against 69% for the national level, and with the lowest figures in Paletwa, Mindat, Tonzang and Thantlang townships). Chin State is also often at the bottom of the ranking regarding success at the matriculation exam, typically under 20% (while Mon State, for instance, is often close to or above 40%). In this regard, according to a recent survey,¹¹ the performance of Chin State’s students is particularly low in English and subjects for which the textbooks are in English, findings that are deeply counter-intuitive to most outsider’s perceptions of Chin State.

While we are not aware of studies focusing specifically on language and access to education issues in Chin State, other factors, such as poverty (Chin State is often described as by far the poorest region of the country, with 58% of its population considered poor)¹², conflict (notably in Paletwa township since the beginning of the clashes between the Arakan army and the Tatmadaw in 2015) and remoteness (many villages do not possess middle or high schools, and access to school is thus often a challenge in the steep terrain of Chin State, particularly during rainy season) are certainly critical elements of explanation of the relatively poor performance of Chin State in education.

Like in other regions of Myanmar, the appointment of teachers from outside Chin State sometimes creates problems, most notably with vacant positions left between postings. However, it should also be noted that villagers do not always favor local teachers, for rea-

sons that include their local language skills, which sometimes prove to be a double-edged sword. While using local languages to “explain” the Burmese language curriculum is often useful for lower levels of primary,¹³ in the absence of clear guidelines for bilingual education and given the inertia of rote-learning teaching methods, anecdotal evidence suggests that in certain situations, overusing or using inappropriately local languages in the classroom may also hamper the process of acquisition of certain skills in the national language. Regardless of this specific issue, in Chin State like elsewhere in the country, the acquisition of literacy skills in the local languages during early grades of schooling is likely to have significant educational benefits.

2. Shifting language-in-education policy in Chin State

Questions linked to literacy and language diversity have constituted an enduring and central issue for the diverse groups inhabiting what is today Chin State and its surroundings. Scott (2009) suggested that during precolonial times, *nonliteracy* may have been part of an overall willingness to keep the lowland States at bay, for the inhabitants of Zomia (a term itself directly rooted in the Mizo-Kuki-Chin context, since it is derived from “*Zomi*”—“Zo people,” understood as “highlanders,” Van Schendel, 2002). Similarly to traditions in other borderland regions of Myanmar, these issues are also rooted in folktales and origin myths of “lost magic letters” or “eaten leather book,” cursing the local populations with babelian disunity, by contrast with the Burmans, whose language survived the “age of darkness,” because it was written on stone (Sakhong, 2003; Hu, 1998).

While local population did possess rich oral traditions and records, the creation of written languages, starting in the mid-nineteenth century through contact with the missionaries¹⁴ (see Fig. 1), is often explicitly presented by the different Chin groups as the beginning of their respective histories.¹⁵ However,

Language	Year	Creator of the written language
Asho	1842	Rev. Lyman Stilson
Mara	1852	Captain S.R. Tickell
	1869	Captain T.H. Lewin
	1908	Rev.F.W.Savidge
	1908	R.A. Lorain
Lushai	1874	Thomas Herbert Lwein
	1891	DJC Mcnabb
Hakha (Lai)	1894	AGZ Newland
	1900	Rev. Arthur E Carson and Rev. Dr. Harry H Tilbe
	1908	Rev. Dr. Herbert Cope
	1891	Captain F.M Rundal
Siyin	1902	Pau Chin Hau
	1910	Rev. Dr. Herbert Cope
Zotuallai	1924	Rev. Dr. Herbert Cope
Tedim (Zolai)	1929	Rev. Dr. Herbert Cope, U Aung Shwe and U Mang Kin
Falām (Laizo)	1930-1949	E.W. Francis
	1930	U Aung Bawi and Lalsuana
Kcho	1933	Paw Khaw Ming
Khumi	1954	Rev. Johnson and Rev. Ngai Tim
Lemi	1960	Rev.Fr. Andre Bareights and Michael Mg. Hre Hmung
Zotung	1976	U Khine Sho and Ms. Halga So Hart Manno
Matu	1998	Rev. Dr. Ral Bawi and Prof.Kenneth Gregerson
Lautu	2014	Rev. Kyaw Kyaw and LSDO- Language and Social Development Organization
Dai		
Zophei		
Hkhongso		

Figure 1: Years of creation of orthographies for certain Chin languages¹⁷

until today, the elusive emergence of a common language appears to be a central missing piece in the process of mobilizing the overarching “Chin” identity, itself largely constructed in relationship with Christianity on the one hand, and the Burmese polity on the other (Sakhong, 2003, 2007). Unsurprisingly and like elsewhere in Myanmar (Taylor, 2006; Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012), the realm of education has played a central role in these processes of identity-building; the shifts in language-in-education policies, throughout successive political eras, have profoundly contributed to shape Chin State’s contemporary society.

Chin languages in education under colonial rule

In the second half of the nineteenth century and most notably following the British annexation of 1890, administrators and missionaries started to create orthographies for some of the vernacular languages of the Chin hills.¹⁶ However, during the early decades of the

20th century, the American Baptist mission judged that Burmese was a better suited language to spread the Gospel. Relying on their previous experience in Thayetmyo (in today’s Magway Region), as well as on already Christianized Karen teachers, they used Burmese, a language often unfamiliar to the locals, as a medium of instruction in the mission schools that they progressively opened, starting in 1900 (Sakhong, 2003; Hu, 1998).

However, in 1922, in the wake of the Anglo-Chin war of 1917–19, the mission school in Hakha was burned down by angry locals. Instead of stirring resentment by taking actions, the British administration sought to appease the defeated chieftains by changing their own education policy towards using a vernacular language as a medium of instruction. In the Chin context, however, selecting that language was a challenge, as stated in an official report:

“The multiplicity of Chin dialects

presents a serious difficulty which is increased by the fact that pioneer educational work began, and the chief educational center is consequently situated, among people whose dialect (khamhow) is not widely used.” (Report on The Administration of Burma for the years of 1923–1924, p. 102)

In 1924, when the British government took over all the mission schools, amidst diverging views regarding which language should be promoted in education, Reverend Cope, the most influential administrator (who also played a central role in the creation of scripts for Laizo, Kamhau/Khamhow/Zolai and Lai) decided that these three languages would be used in the schools (Sakhong, 2003). The priority was thus to produce textbooks in these three languages (see Fig. 2) and spread the Gospel through education, in the 45 schools that were operating in Chin State in 1923 (Report on The Administration of Burma for the years of 1923–1924). According

to Hu (1998), all subjects were taught in these local languages, at least up to fourth standard, while English was the medium of instruction starting in middle schools, Burmese becoming merely a compulsory subject.

In the following years, this linguistic shift away from Burmese contributed to a rapid increase of the number of schools and children receiving formal education, as well as the spreading of the Christian faith, which was soon widely perceived as a marker of an educated person. However, a number of Chin cultural elites and political actors today look back at these developments with mixed feelings, as only a partial realization of the “magic of letters.” From the perspective of building a common Chin identity, the decision of using three languages in education is indeed often perceived as a major missed opportunity to promote a common language for the Chins (Sakhong, 2003; Mang, 2018).

Language-in-education policy in Chin State in independent Burma/Myanmar

Inspired, to a large extent, by Burmese nationalist movements and the patriotic education dispensed in the National schools that existed since 1920, the education system set-up after Burma obtained independence was much more centralized than what General Aung San suggested in the years and months preceding his assassination. In the context of a 1947 Constitution attributing a “special position” to Buddhism without mentioning languages other than Burmese, ethnic languages could be taught in public schools, up to Grade 3 (Htut, 2000; Callahan, 2003).

In practice, the presence or absence of particular languages in the government schools depended on the socio-linguistic situations and readiness of the different groups: while some, including the Mons, Shans and Karens managed to introduce their languages in government schooling, sometimes beyond Grade 3, the lack of trained teachers and teaching materials, the necessity to invent scripts or standardize dialects, as well as the

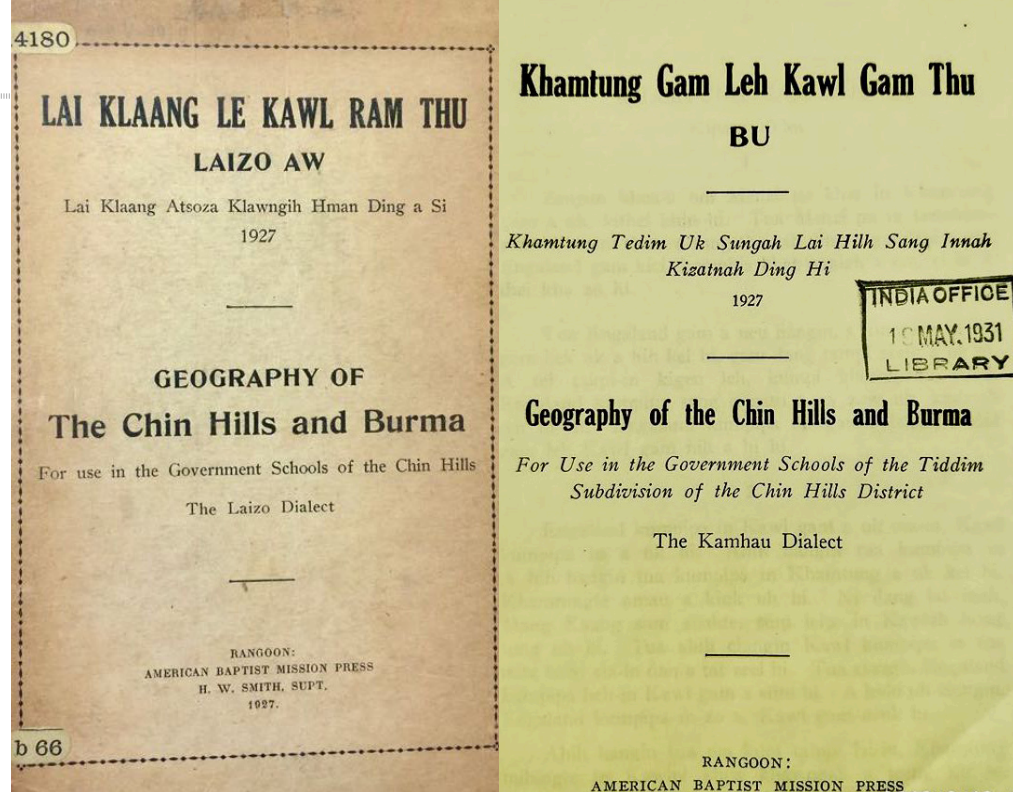


Figure 2: Covers of geography textbooks used by the American Baptist Mission in Laizo and Kamhau “dialects.”¹⁸

complexity of ethnic settings and local balance of demography and power often constituted enduring obstacles, especially for the smaller groups (Hlaing, 2007; Mong, 2004).

In the Chin context, however, Burmese was seldom used in education since 1924, and Pau Chin, one of the Chin representatives in the 1947 Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, requested the lowering of Burmese language standards for the matriculation exam in Chin State, so the students could compete with native speakers of Burmese (Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, 1947, p. 80). According to Hu (2006) as well as several interviewees who attended school during the 1950s, the colonial policy of using some of the Chin languages as medium of instruction up to fourth standard (as well as teaching them as subjects) was continued. According to a current member of the Chin State parliament, Geography was then called “Khuaram,” Science was “Thiliri” and Mathematics were “Kanaan.” Further research would be needed to determine which languages were actually used and in which schools (many Chin languages not possessing an orthography yet) but it seems that

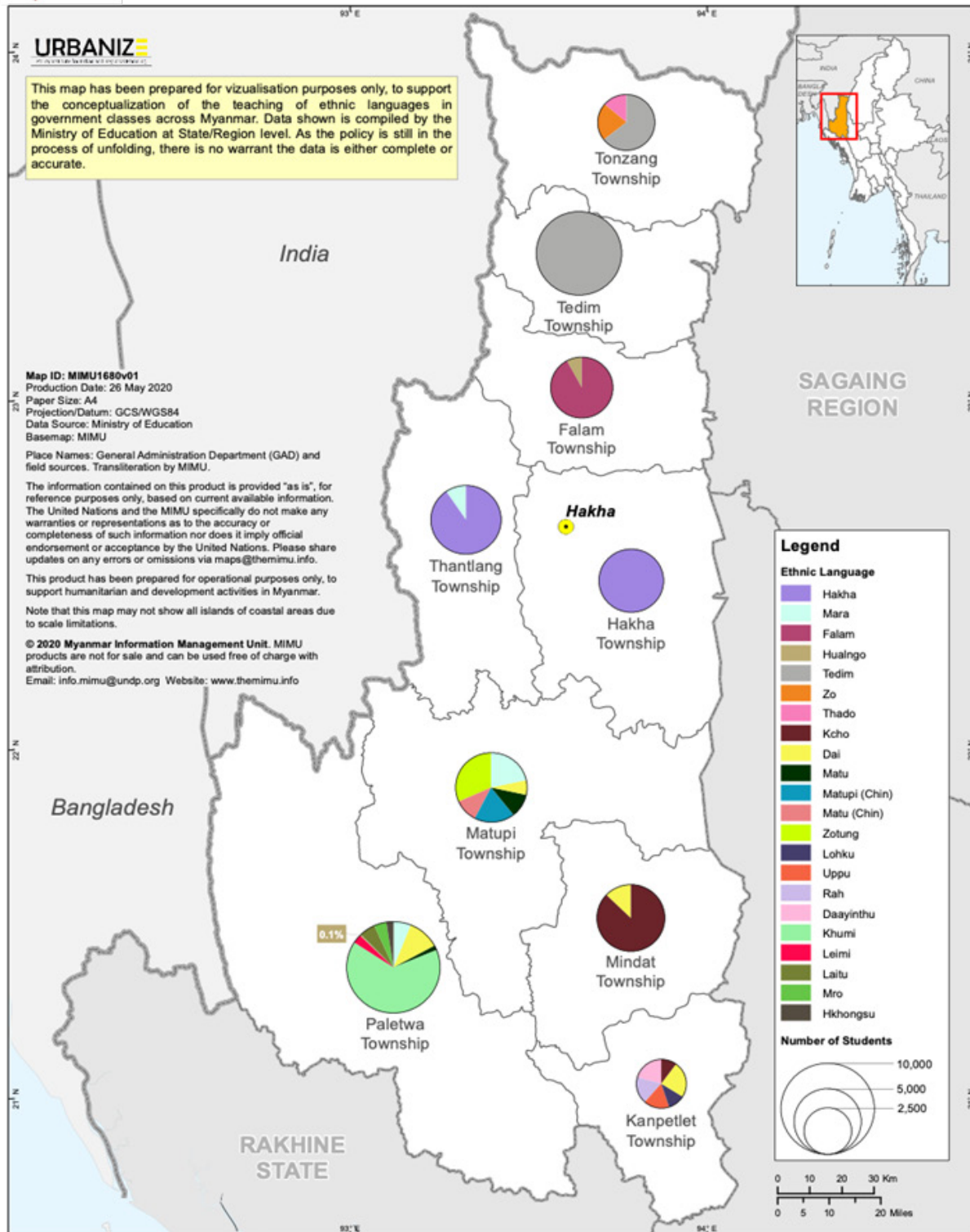
languages such as K’cho and Siyin may have been used, in addition to Lai, Laizo and Zolai. Interviews also suggest that textbooks in these languages were not necessarily available.

The post-independence language-in-education historical outlines regarding Burma/Myanmar are sometimes overly simplistic, with blanket statement along the lines of “teaching ethnic minority languages was forbidden after 1962,” against an idealization of the parliamentary era language policy (Salem-Gervais, 2018). However, and while further research on this issue would be needed, the data collected for this article does suggest a very significant step back in terms of using Chin languages in formal education under the BSPP.

Following the military coup in 1962, while article 152 (B) of the 1974 constitution officially stated that “Burmese is the common language. Languages of the other national races may also be taught,” the teaching of ethnic minority languages as subjects was largely limited to Grade 3 in government schools, and the nationalization of private education in 1965–66 virtually suppressed the alternatives to Burmese-medium



Myanmar Information Management Unit
 Distribution of students learning languages spoken in Myanmar
 in Government Schools of Chin State, 2019-20



Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 3: (Data collected at the Chin State office of the MoE; cartography by MIMU)



Figure 5: Textbooks used for the teaching of Zotung, Kaang and Mro languages in primary schools and/or summer school programs.



Figure 6: Covers of some of the story books in 27 languages produced by the LCCs, UNICEF and the MoEA.

formal education. In Chin State, a deep shift towards Burmese as the medium of instruction was initiated, Chin languages being taught only as subjects, up to Grade 3 (Hu, 2006; Vumson, 1986). In the 1970s and the 1980s the readers produced by the Ministry of Education for the teaching of some of the main ethnic minority languages in government schools included at least a series of textbooks in Lai (Kio, 2014; Hlaing, 2008), and anecdotal interviews of individuals who attended primary schools during this period suggest that Laizo (for Falam) and Zolai (for Tedim and Tonzang) were also taught.

During the decades following the military takeover, a number of organizations aiming at teaching Chin languages outside of the schools were also created. The Yangon Chin Literature and Culture Committee was founded in 1964, and in March 1979 an Executive Committee of the Hakha Township People's Council formed the Lai Literature Committee, which started to create textbooks for teaching this language in Hakha, Thantlang and Matupi townships, up to Grade 5 (Hu, 2006). In the second half of the 1980s, multiple Christian organizations increased their cooperation and efforts to promote religious and cultural activities, including the teaching of their respective languages, outside of the schools. For instance, after failed attempts to obtain State-approval for their *Lai grammar*, a number of Baptist associations from different townships founded the Chin Christian Literature Society in 1988 (reorganized into the Chin Association for Christian Communication in 1993). Since then, the activities of this organization include tertiary level trainings in theology and the production of material for teaching the Lai language outside of the schools, such as readers, lesson books for Sunday schools, Lai-English dictionaries, as well as hymn books (Hu, 1998).

Meanwhile, with the arrival of the post-1988 military juntas, ethnic minority languages tended to be further sidelined out of government schools. In the

early 1990s the official national program from the Ministry of Education (MoE) indicated that schools could choose to allocate up to two sessions of 30 minutes a week to the subject of ethnic languages, a modest slot that seemed to have disappeared altogether from the updates of the official program at some point during the mid-1990s (Oo, 1999; Htut, 2000). In practice, despite this absence of State support, in Chin State like in other regions of the country, some interviewees (as well as one of the authors of this paper) anecdotally confirmed that they had received basic trainings in literacy in a Chin language in a government school, as late as the early 2000s, seemingly because of the willingness of their teachers and headmasters to provide such teaching, relying on old textbooks.

The return of chin languages classes in government schools

The decade following the dissolution of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in 2011, has witnessed significant developments regarding decentralization in general and the introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools in particular. These developments are based on the 2008 Constitution (articles 22, 354 and 365), as well as, later on, the 2014–15 Education law (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020). While the beginnings of these classes, in the years following their official announcement by the Ministry of Education in 2012, were rather frustrating (ethnic languages could be taught only out of regular school hours by teachers receiving extremely modest salaries), this policy has progressively gained momentum, notably since the 2017–2018 school year, with the appointment of a first batch of more than 5,000 ethnic languages Teaching Assistants (TAs). The mission of these TAs is both to teach their respective ethnic minority languages as subjects, and to help children understand the lessons by using these languages as *classroom languages*, “explaining” the lessons through code-switching, when necessary.

The 2014–15 education law has been

widely criticized (and famously protested against by student movements) for different reasons, including not granting enough “autonomy” in education and failing to establish MTBE. However, this law does constitute an important step in terms of making the States/Regions-level political actors—the Regional governments and local literature and culture committees (LCCs), first and foremost—in charge of decisions regarding which languages should be taught in the schools. In addition, since 2017, the teaching of ethnic minority languages is included in the development of what is called the Local Curriculum, a portion of the syllabus developed in each of the State and Regions, which also includes the teaching of local history, geography, customs and cultures, through *Local Knowledge* curricula.

As of 2020, while frustrations regarding the pace of implementation of this policy on the ground and questions regarding its efficiency in practice remain common, official figures state that a total of 64 languages are being taught throughout Myanmar as subjects, and three to five periods a week, to 766,731 children, by 24,792 teachers, within school hours in most cases.

In Chin State, the teaching of some languages in government schools has slowly started around the school year 2013–2014. In 2019–2020, out of the 1,212 schools of Chin State, a total of 47,354 children in Grades 1, 2 and 3 were being taught one of the 22 languages approved by the Chin State government (see Fig. 3), by a total of 2,499 teachers, including 911 Teaching Assistants¹⁹ (see Fig. 4). Textbooks for most of these languages have been produced by their respective LCCs, often with the support of the MoE and Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA, see Fig. 5) and the Chin State government now has a yearly budget (15 million kyats for each township for 2020–21) to support the LCCs in their activities (such as production of textbooks and training of teachers).

In accordance with the Basic Education

Curriculum Framework, the local curricula, which are in the process of being gradually developed, could include the teaching of ethnic minority languages and cultures, up to high school (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020). UNICEF, in partnership with the MoEA, has also produced story books, which include 27 Chin languages (see Fig. 6), in order to promote early literacy and the development of the children's skills in both the mother tongue and the national language. Other recent measures aiming at including ethnic identities in formal education include the possibility to register students with their ethnic title (Salai or Mai instead of the Burmese *Maung* or *Ma*, for instance) in front of their names.²⁰

Outside of the MoE system, Lai language is also used in theological higher education studies, increasingly taught as a subject and used as “classroom language” in urban private schools, while many groups continue to hold yearly summer school programs. Oth-

er non-state actors, such as the Bawinu Foundation, also promote the use of local languages in education, and media in Chin languages are active, notably in the form of magazines, although language diversity does constitute one of the main challenges they are facing.²¹

3. Language-in-education policy challenges in the Chin context

Despite all these developments and increasing momentum, challenges are many in the process of introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education in Myanmar, and linguistically highly heterogeneous Chin State is certainly no exception. These imbricated challenges include resources, and the cost attached to producing material and hiring teachers for a large number of languages. Certain aspects of language development, such as producing the vocabulary needed for a formal education context is also a concern for some groups, notably in the southern part and beyond the borders of Chin state, where ethnic groups tend to be more diverse

and their written languages less developed and entrenched.

In the following paragraphs, we will focus on two specific challenges that materialize all around Myanmar, but seem particularly daunting in certain Chin contexts: the specific situation of urban areas, which tend to be ethnically and linguistically diverse, on the one hand, and the difficulties and tradeoffs involved in producing a list of standardized languages (as opposed to dialectal variations) that should be taught in the schools, on the other. These challenges thus correspond to answering a question that may seem simple, but which was already boggling colonial authorities: which particular language(s) should be taught in which school?

Urban areas and multiethnic settings

The first challenge observed all around the country is the situation of schools in urban settings and close to main roads where—as a general rule in a country of striking diversity—populations tend to

Townships	(Ethnic) Teaching Assistant (TA) (hired in 2017–2018 or in 2019–2020)	(Ethnic) Language Teacher (LT) ²²	Total ethnic languages teachers
Thantlang	89	149	238
Paletwa	182	280	462
Matupi	221	34	255
Kanpalet	91	112	203
Mindat	52	162	214
Tonzang	75	113	188
Tedim	113	142	255
Hakha	56	155	211
Falam	32	441	473
Total	911	1,588	2,499

Figure 4: Number of (ethnic) Languages Teachers (LT) and (ethnic) Teaching Assistants (TA) for each township of Chin State. (Data collected at the MoE and MoEA offices of Chin State)

be more diverse in terms of ethno-linguistic background. These populations also tend to have better skills in the national language and to be particularly eager to formally learn languages perceived as higher values in terms of life and economic opportunities, including Burmese and English. Beyond the question of their self-identification in “ethnic” terms, in many instances, these populations also possess a lesser command of their (supposed) mother-tongue(s), the language(s) attached to a particular “ethnic” identity.

These types of situations, where students from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds are attending the same school, create challenges when developing a language-in-education policy, and the magnitude of these challenges is proportional to the ambitions of the policy. Understandably, making these languages available as subjects, a few periods every week, is logistically less complex than using them as media of instruction, following an MTBE model. This second prospect, which would entail separating, at least to some extent, children according to discrete ethnic identities within urban primary schools, would have considerable repercussions in terms of resources, but also debatable political implications, in already fragmented societies.

One of the specificities of the Chin context, in that regard, is multilingualism. If the mastering of Burmese seems to be well-correlated to a rural/urban gradient (urban population being, as a general rule, more proficient in the national language), moving towards urban centers does not necessarily entail a process of language loss throughout generations, and mastering four or more languages is common among Chins.

Regardless, the unfolding language-in-education policy, despite being much less ambitious than an MTBE model, already has logistical implications for schools located in certain multilingual urban centers. Being able to offer all the relevant languages, as subjects, requires

the hiring and training of teachers, the printing of textbooks and the availability of classrooms, which all come at a cost. Interviews in Chin State also suggest that in some cases, locally dominant groups may try to impose the learning of their language to others, in specific towns or schools.

This kind of challenge appears more common in the more multilingual towns of southern Chin State, such as Kanpalet, Paletwa and Mindat, where up to three or four languages are taught in certain schools (No. 1 Basic Education High School in Paletwa, for instance, offers Khumi, Dai and Rakhine languages). In reality, however, the more complex situations are to be found outside of Chin State, in neighboring towns such as Tamu and Kalaymyo (Sagaing Region) or Gangaw (Magway Region), which gather highly diverse populations, often originating from Chin State.

In neighboring Sagaing Region, a total of 21 languages, so far, are taught or in the process of being included as subjects in government schools, including Chin, Naga, and Shan languages. In townships such as Tamu and Kalaymyo, where populations from different parts of Chin State have settled, respectively eight (Shan, Thado, Falam, Hakha, Tedim, Lushai, Kante and Zo) and six (Lushai, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Zoton, Hualngo) languages are already being taught, and other LCCs are in the process of getting ready. Situations in which children from up to five to six different ethno-linguistic backgrounds are present in a single school are relatively common, not only in the towns themselves, but often also in surrounding villages.²³

Offering classes in several ethnic languages in a single school is often manageable, but usually entail compromises—which can negatively impact the number of children attending—such as lessons out of school hours in order to deal with classroom availability, or aggregating students of different levels because of the shortage of teachers. In particularly complicated cases, such

as schools offering five languages and above, the local LCCs interviewed are sometimes considering reverting to teaching outside of the school year, in order to simplify logistics for everyone. Some of them suggested that using the school premises—a strong political symbol of recognition—but for summer classes, could be an effective compromise.²⁴ The Chin State Government and Hluttaw (Parliament), as well as the Chin State MoEA, also seem wary of situations where many languages are being taught (see next sections); over the last few years, these institutions have been trying to push toward a simpler framework, such as a single language per township, or at least a single language per school.²⁵

Challenges and tradeoffs of language standardization in Myanmar

The second challenge, that was dubbed “the minority language standardization conundrum,” in earlier publications (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2019, 2020), corresponds to the philosophical contradictions underpinning the standardization of ethnic minority languages, notably in the process of introducing them in formal education (as opposed to less formal “community” teachings). This prospect, especially in the more ambitious perspective of MTBE, indeed strongly suggests using written and standardized languages, in order to produce curricula and train teachers. This endeavor of transforming what in Myanmar is frequently a variety of dialects and scripts into common, written and somewhat standardized languages, each attached to single ethnonyms, also corresponds to the nation-building agendas of a multitude of actors who wish to defend, mobilize and strengthen a particular ethnic identity.

However, while the official list of 135 ethnic groups remains contentious, producing a list of discrete languages attached to their respective ethnonyms is, to a significant extent, an arbitrary exercise, directed by considerations that are often more political than linguistic. Agendas of the actors involved tend

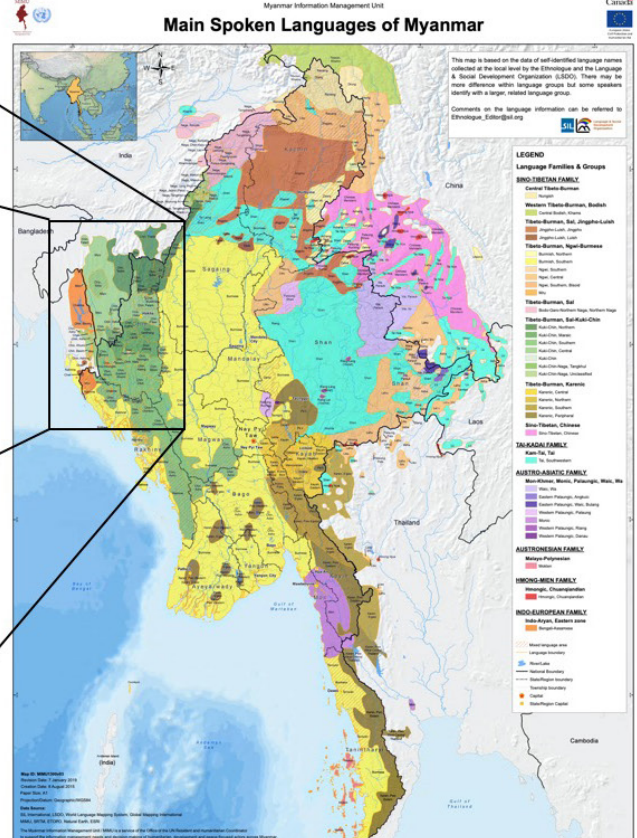
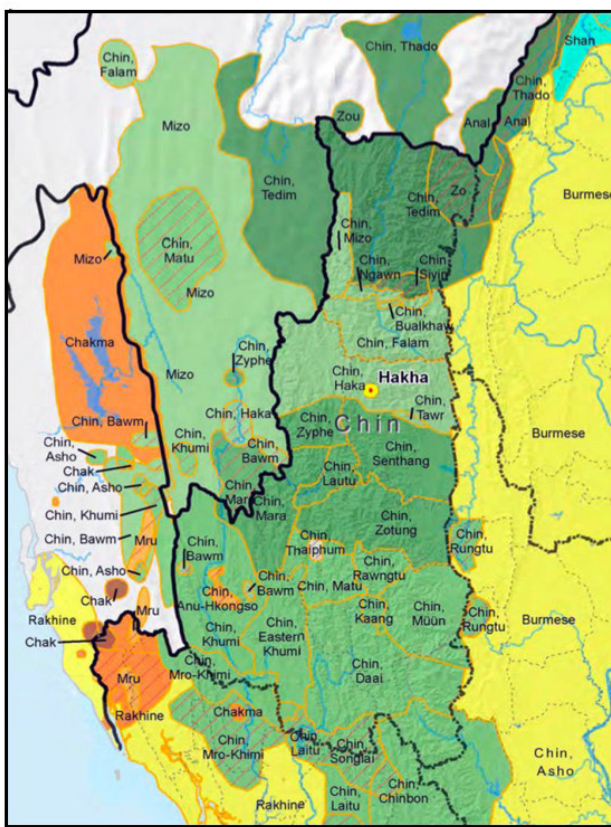


Figure 7: Focus on Chin State of Ethnologue's language mapping

to conflict, in a pattern that was described through the image of “Russian dolls” (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2019, 2020), but may also be depicted through the mathematical analogy of a fractal: “a shape made of parts similar to the whole in some way” (Mandelbrot, 1982), which has been used to describe certain aspects of Kachin societies (Sadan, 2013), as well as phenomena observed by language ideology specialists, describing “fractal recursivity” in various cultural contexts (Irvine and Gal, 2000).

In a variety of situations in Myanmar, actors seeking to represent and mobilize a particular identity (such as literature and culture committees, religious institutions, armed groups, political parties, ethnic media) wish to promote linguistic and political “unity” (စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်မှု) as a remedy to the “division/difference/heterogeneity” (ကွဲပြားခြားနားမှု) within what they perceive as their group. However, these discourses on “unity” between “brothers and sisters” often have a lot in common, both in terms of philosophy, narrative and vocabulary, with the propaganda of the former military government, and its own cult of “uni-

ty” within what has been described as a “Burmanization” project.

A variety of similar actors, associated with different components of the said perceived groups, do not fail to notice these similarities and inherent contradictions. Appealing to their own “ethnic rights” (which are now inscribed in the law), they often seek to consolidate their own ethnolinguistic identity by affirming their distinctiveness, emphasizing cultural and linguistic differences from the group that they perceive as trying to “swallow” them (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2019, 2020).

Standardizing ethnic minority languages in order to introduce them into the schools is thus liable to amount to suppressing diversity, in the very name of diversity. This underlying “Faustian bargain” (Lane, Costa and Korne, 2018) is not conducive to compromises, especially in a point and time of Myanmar’s political history where a multitude of actors are mobilized to defend their particular “ethnic rights.”

Echoing the accusations of “Burmanization,” words (or corresponding percep-

tions) starting with an ethnonym and finishing in “-ization” (such as Sgawization, Jinghpawization, Shanization...) seems to be appearing or strengthening, denouncing cultural and linguistic situations, projects or aspirations perceived as hegemonic. In a number of situations, the aim of helping pupils understand their teachers better indeed seems to take a backseat to the nation-building objectives of the actors involved (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2019, 2020).

In other words, this seemingly unavoidable “discretization” process—going from a situation where a virtually uncountable number of variations of a large number of languages are spoken in the homes of primary school pupils across Myanmar to a situation where a limited number of standardized languages are taught in government schools—is much easier said than done. This process, which seems particularly relevant in the case of Chin State, is also likely to entail significant tradeoffs in the three dimensions of the rationale for introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education (cultural diversity preservation, reduction of the

language barrier and “national reconciliation,” see section two of this paper).

How many Chin languages?

In contrast with the relative fluidity of identity and language practices in the mountainous borderlands of what progressively became British Burma, through colonial census categories and the development of written languages by missionaries, language has been widely perceived as the critical marker of a “race” (a concept that evolved into “ethnicity”) in Burma/Myanmar (McCormick, 2016, 2019; McAuliffe, 2017). Bennison, the author of the 1931 census report, striving to approach the “true racial classification” of the “indigenous races of Burma,” identifies 44 Kuki-Chin languages, although he does state that this classification “is a matter of some difficulty,” which would require further study, and that “there does not appear to be any unanimity of opinion” (Bennison, 1931, pp. 246–184).

And indeed, beyond the lack of research at that time, the classic quip “a language is a *dialect* with an army and navy” is a good reminder of the arbitrariness of the distinction between *language* and *dialect*. Establishing a definite and official list of *languages*, especially for a linguistically highly heterogeneous mountainous region such as the one inhabited by Chin people, is always, to some extent, an arbitrary endeavor, underpinned by political considerations, at least as much as linguistic ones. While a religion-based written culture appears to be a critical feature of *languages* in the Chin context, trying to compile a double entry table, associating ethnonyms with the creator of their respective orthographies and their year of creation (such as Fig. 1), is often a tricky exercise, as different components of the said group may refer to different written traditions, corresponding to different dialects and/or different denominations.

Linguists, such as VanBik (2009), DeLancey (2015) and Peterson (2017) have nevertheless offered useful classifications, to make sense of the diversity



Figure 9: Covers of the textbooks created by the Matu (Chin), Matu, and Matupi (Chin) literature and culture committees

among Kuki-Chin languages, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in what is today western Myanmar, northeastern India and western Bangladesh (see Fig. 7 and 8). These classifications propose slightly different overarching categories from one another (such as “Northern,” “Southern,” “Central,” “Maraic...”). Interestingly, the speakers of some languages, such as Anu-Hkongso, self-identify as “Chin,” while their language seem rather related to a different, Mruic branch (Peterson, 2017). Inversely, some Zolai speakers, whose language is generally classified as part of the Northern Kuki-Chin branch, often refuse to be identified as “Chins” in political life, arguing that “Zo” is in fact the authentic name for “Chin” (Vumson, 1986; Lehman, 1963).

Peterson (2017) explicitly states the particular relevance of the issues we have

described for Myanmar in general, in the case of Chin languages:

The Kuki-Chin group includes dozens of named varieties for what may number as many as fifty independent languages, although the usual issues regarding the language vs. dialect are very much relevant in the present context. For instance, there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility between Hakha Lai, spoken in Hakha, and Laizo (or Zahao) spoken in Falam; nevertheless, language politics militate against recognizing these as mere dialects of a single language. (p. 190)

Myanmar’s official nomenclature, which attributes a list of ethnonyms to each of the eight overarching ethnic categories (corresponding to the seven states’ names + Bamar) has 53 categories for Chin groups alone (out of a total of 135).

This classification is widely described as inaccurate and problematic, and ahead of the 2014 census, a *Chin National Action Committee on Census* has produced a list of what they regard as its mistakes and incoherencies:

- Some of these ethnonyms have never been considered belonging to “Chin” (Naga, Thangkul, Malin, Anun, Lhinbu, Meithei)
- Some do not seem to have ever been understood as ethnonyms (Saline, Mi-er, Laymyo)
- Many are spelled, either in Burmese, in English, or both, in a way that is different from common usage (Khami/Khumi, Khawno/Khuan, Khaungso/Hkongso, Gunte/Gangte, Zo-pe/Zophei, Tiddim/Tedim...)
- At least one name corresponds to what is today regarded as two separate groups (Dai (yinthu) for Dai/Daai and Daa Yinthu)
- The overarching ethnonym “Chin” is itself a category, with a code, just like other categories
- In some cases, two categories correspond to what the committee perceive as a single group (Lushai and Lushei for Lashai, Khaungsai and Thado for Thadoukuki...)
- And finally, some well-identified groups are totally absent from this list (Ng’gha, Hlawn Ceu, Sometu, Larktu, Laisaw, Laitu, Mayin, Lungpaw, Minkya, Bawm).

Despite this classification being indeed problematic, the Union Minister of Labor, Immigration and Population has reaffirmed, in 2019, that the government had no plan to change this nomenclature.²⁶ In the post-SPDC political context, the process of producing a list of State-approved Chin ethnic identities (each conceived as corresponding to a single language and a single written tradition) is indeed likely to be contentious. While some of the groups have relatively well-established ethnic identities, corresponding to entrenched written tradition and fairly standardized languages, these attributes may be more debatable

for other, less structured groups, which are often grappling with fault lines and competing claims over what should constitute their “official” ethnic identity. These fault lines may involve the mobilization of endonyms and exonyms, be linked to variations in the *languages/dialects* (depending on who is making the claim), to different denominations and churches, which may have different written traditions, or to political affiliations and various networks of influence of personalities trying to mobilize a particular ethnic identity.

While a discussion of the very concept of State recognition for ethnic identities and languages is beyond the scope of this paper, the number of Chin languages to be taught in the government schools is thus dependent on the settling of these debates, within ethnic communities. Linguists, looking primarily at linguistic criteria, have produced different figures of the number of Kuki-Chin languages within and beyond Chin State (such as 65 for Bareigts (1981), 23 for VanBik (2009), and 54 for the *Ethnologue* website). Other typologies include the one presented by Sakhong (2009), with six overarching categories (Asho, Cho, Khuami, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi) and 63 sub-categories. In 2014, the *Chin National Action Committee on Census* suggested a typology with six similar overarching ethnic categories of Chins (Laimi, Zomi, Khumi, Asho, K’cho, and “being discussed,” ဆွေးနွေးခံ) for a total of 51 sub-categories.²⁷

As of 2019–2020, 22 languages are being taught in the government schools of Chin State, after being approved at township, State and Union levels, be-

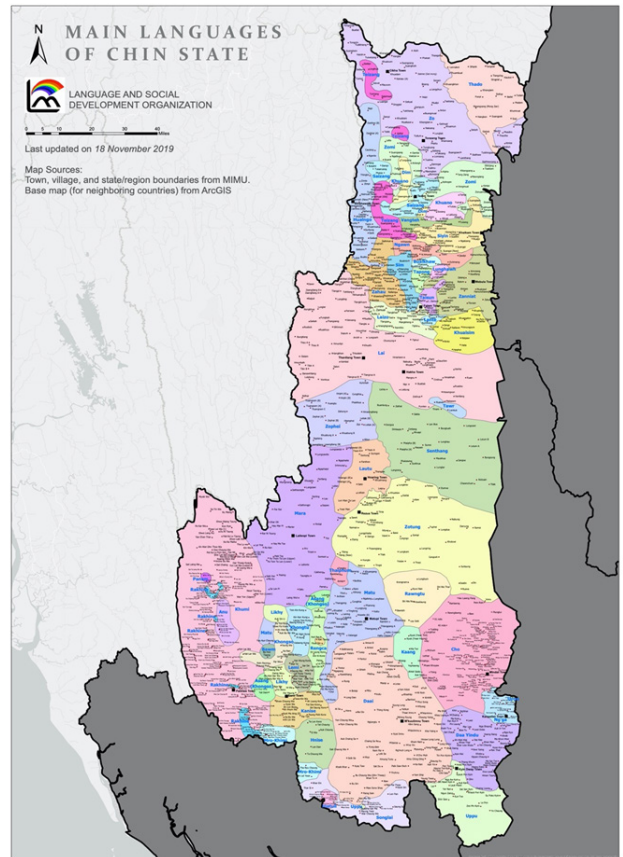


Figure 8: Chin State language map elaborated by the Language and Social Development Organization (LSDO).²⁸

tween 2013 and 2016. This list, however, is likely to evolve. Other groups (such as Lautu, Asang Hkongso and Kaang) are in the process of seeking the introduction of their languages in government schools and relatively well-identified groups, such as Zyphe, are not yet teaching their languages within formal education. In addition, the differences between some of the already recognized 22 languages appear much more political than linguistic (see for instance the case of the different Matu languages in the next section) which could set a precedent for further factionalism. As opposed to Kayah, Kachin, Mon and Karen States, where UNICEF has supported the development of primary school textbooks in a total of 25 languages (in the frame of the Local Curriculum), the UN agency is not yet involved in such a project in Chin State, precisely because of the difficulties involved in selecting languages.²⁹

Daai, Matu, Lautu, Zophei and Paletwa township: a few case-studies outlines

Different groups present very different situations in the process of agreeing on a standard language corresponding to an ethnic identity. The term “Daai” (Dai), for instance, refers to populations designated by multiple ethnonyms that have been shifting over time, speaking multiple dialects (seven according to Kheng, 2017), with several written traditions, and scattered over the four southern townships of Chin State. Despite these multiple challenges, these populations seem to be having successes in the process of structuring a common linguistic project. Further research would be needed to understand this process in-depth, but regular conferences were held in the different townships, after the foundation of the *Daai Literature and culture committee* in 2008, leading to the production of textbooks, and the introduction of Daai in government schools of the four southern townships in 2014–2015.³⁰ Other cases of agreement over a common project seem to include the Mara, despite the existence of several, not always mutually intelligible, dialects.³¹

Compromises have been harder to reach in the case of Matu, which used to be described as a single language, for which an orthography was created in 1954. The Matu LCC, founded in 1963, split in 2003, over a disagreement regarding the replacement of “y” and “o” by “ue” and “oe.” To this day, actors speaking the same language (also known as Doem) and inhabiting the same regions are divided between the Matu LCC, which refused the orthography change, and the Matu (Chin) LCC, using the new script. Later on, in 2013, a Matupi LCC was also created, for the promotion of a closely related dialect (known as Ngala) mostly spoken in the town of Matupi itself. The three committees have managed to produce their respective textbooks (see Fig. 9) and introduce their respective languages in government schools (see Fig. 3). They strive to mobilize resources and influence, through their respective networks, including churches, political

parties and contacts in the local administration. Meanwhile, some of the actors associated to Lai (Hakha) language, are also advocating for the continuation of the promotion of this language in Matupi township, with more or less success in convincing the different local LCCs.³²

Other groups, whose distinct written language is still young, such as the Lautu (1960s) and Zophei (1997), are in different positions regarding the teaching of their languages in schools. The different Lautu groups agreed in 2015 to a common literary standard, and they are reportedly ready to teach soon, unlike the Zophei, who may favor the teaching of Lai in formal education (as opposed to religious context). These groups also often face internal divergences, which seem only superficial so far, on issues such as the spelling of their ethnonym, with some actors advocating for an orthography corresponding to the sound in their own language (Lutuv instead of Lautu, Zyphe instead of Zophei).

Diverging views seem numerous in the southern townships of Chin State, such as Paletwa, which present a diversity of groups with multiple endonyms and exonyms, and various understandings of what constitutes the *language* (ဘာသာစကား) of an ethnic group (လူမျိုး, or *Miphun* in Lai), as opposed to a *dialect* (ဒေသိယဘာသာစကား၊ ဒေသန္တရဘာသာစကား), associated to a “sub-group” or a “clan” (မျိုးနွယ်စု, or *phun* in Lai). While ten languages (including Rakhine) are being taught, so far, in the government schools of Paletwa (see Fig. 3), interviews suggest that there are significantly more LCCs in this township (estimates range between 12 and 22), which have been appearing, merging, splitting and shifting their names during the last decades.³³ and often seem to be working towards teaching their respective languages in government schools.

Paletwa has jokingly been nicknamed “Literatures City” (စာပေများရဲ့မြို့တော်) by some locals,³⁴ and mapping the languages of this region is certainly a complex endeavor. While further study

is needed to make sense of that diversity, there seems to be, for instance, not fewer than six to eight Khumi LCCs. The term “Hkongso,” too, is used by different groups. The Anu and Hkongso, who speak similar languages, tried to unite into a single LCC with a common literary project, in 2004. However, the small differences between these two languages/dialects proved to be a challenge, and the organization split again in two “Anu” and “Hkongso” LCCs, around 2007. Meanwhile, another group, previously known as “Kasang,” speaking a different language (which seems related to Khumi) also claim to be “Hkongso”; this group is currently known as “Asang (Hkongso).”³⁵

Towards (a) common language(s) for Chin State?

As described earlier in this paper, the elusive emergence of a common language for the Chins has often been perceived as an unfulfilled promise of the “magic of letters,” and the central missing piece in the process of mobilizing and strengthening a common identity. Within Chin’s highly multilingual context, some of the northern languages are used beyond the population of their native speakers (such as Lai, which is understood not only in Hakha and Thantlang townships, but also to some extent in Matupi) and can serve as *lingua franca* in certain situations. However, promoting a single Chin common language today is more than likely to be contentious, and in practice, a meeting gathering representatives of different parts of Chin State today generally takes place in Burmese.

In other contexts around the world, one possible answer to the political problems, which often come with the choice of a particular “prestige” language/dialect/script over the others (Trudell and Young, 2016), is to mobilize a committee of experts to devise a common language, combining features of the different languages involved in the project. Similar to other endeavors among the Palaung and Naga, the *All Chin Society* has been working towards such Chin

“Esperanto” (called “Chin language”) but, like elsewhere, this enterprise appears extremely challenging in practice.

In 2019, the Chin State Government and Hluttaw, reportedly responding to Union government calls to try to reduce the number of languages to be taught in the schools, started to discuss the prioritization of five (sometimes referred to as “major,” အဓိက, or “common” ဘုံသုံး) languages: Zolai (for Tedim and Tonzang), Laizo (for Falam), Lai (for Hakha and Thantlang), Khumi (for Paletwa), and Kcho (for Mindat and Kanpalet).³⁶ The exact implications of this prioritization are not clear: among our interviewees in the Hluttaw, some went as far as stating that only the teaching of these five languages will receive direct support from the Chin State and Union governments, while others said that the project was indeed underpinned by the idea that a small number of common languages would benefit Chin State, but that other languages could nevertheless continue to be taught in school, with some kind of support.

Some of the stakeholders were apparently ready for certain compromises during the discussions of November 2019 at the Chin State Hluttaw, however, a number of complaints have also been submitted to the Chin State Government by the representatives of several LLCs in the following months. They argue that this prospect is not in line with the *Ethnic Rights Protection Law*, that primary school students should learn their mother-tongue, that in some cases the “major/common” languages are totally unfamiliar to the students and that the whole project is a denial of the existence of 53 Chin groups, which is likely to cause tensions between them. Some of the LCC explicitly state that they will refuse to teach these five languages. Others suggested that these languages could indeed be taught as common languages, but only starting in middle schools, while preserving more diversity at primary level. The latter prospect, which may be a step towards constructive compromises, still raises questions

regarding the overall political acceptability of two levels of recognition for Chin languages, as well as the feasibility of a policy entailing the teaching of four languages within the course of schooling (1. local, 2. “major/common five” 3. Burmese and 4. English).

Conclusion

The (re)introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools (both as subjects and “classroom languages”), which has gained momentum in Myanmar over the last few years, has also made significant progress in Chin State since the 2013–2014 school year. Despite not going as far as the mother tongue-based education demanded by some political and educational actors, this policy seems more manageable for the foreseeable future, and is likely to bring some benefits in different dimensions of Chin State’s social life, such as preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, access to education, and “national reconciliation” within the Myanmar nation-state.

Chin State and the neighboring territories inhabited by Chin populations, however, constitute a linguistically highly heterogeneous region, and the process of composing a list of languages with official recognition, to be taught in the schools, is particularly complex. Currently, 22 languages are being taught, but this list does not seem exhaustive and it is likely to evolve as multiple ethno-linguistic projects obtain recognition, split or merge.

Meanwhile, the project of selecting a handful of languages (five as it stands at the time of writing this paper) to be promoted as common Chin languages through education raises concerns. While the desire to spare public resources and avoid what could become a process of “ethno-linguistic balkanization” are certainly understandable, the prioritization of these five supposedly “major” languages also entails deep tradeoffs in the three dimensions of the very rationale for introducing ethnic minority languages in education.

First, this process could arguably backfire on language and culture preservation, by transforming the “main” languages into the most direct threats to the survival of the “smaller” languages. Second, in terms of accessibility of education, this project is very different from the prospect of using the mother tongues as “bridge languages,” and the “common languages” might even be perceived as additional burdens, as far as non-native speakers are concerned. And third, from a political, “national reconciliation” standpoint, this project could contribute to shift the perceptions regarding a political will of assimilation (the Lai term “*a kan dolh*” is often used in the Chin context), from the Myanmar state (i.e. “Burmanization”) to the dominant Chin groups.

Just like Lai and other Chin languages and identities are frequently perceived as threatened by the domination of Burmese culture in the national frame, actors belonging to smaller Chin groups often fear the additional threat of being “swallowed” by bigger or more influential groups, that they perceive as trying to impose their domination over the different townships. Elites associated with the dominant groups may dismiss the resistance of smaller groups as “primordialist” and “localist” (ဒေသစွဲ, or *phuntanh* in Lai) attitudes – an argument that could easily be turned against them in conversations regarding language policy at the national level. On the other hand, actors claiming to represent less influential and structured groups appeal to the protection of their own “ethnic rights” (တိုင်းရင်းသားအခွင့်အရေး), which are now inscribed in the law, but may also provide ground for unrestrained factionalism.

The particularly complex case of Chin State thus constitutes an additional illustration of the intrinsically political nature of language-in-education policies, of the fractal patterns often observed in language ideology (Irvine and Gal, 2000), and of the tradeoffs involved in the selection of *languages* to be used in formal education, as opposed to

dialects, especially when their written forms are involved. Nevertheless, the last few years have witnessed significant and positive developments, and while challenges are many, one can hope that through the policy of gradually introducing locally produced content in formal education, the post-junta ethnic identity renegotiation process will tend towards compromises and consensus, in Chin State like in other regions of the Union of Myanmar.

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ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, we use “Burma” to refer to the country prior to 1989, and the official name, “Myanmar” afterwards.
2. www.ethnologue.com
3. According to Lehman (1963, p. 5) “No single Chin word has explicit reference to all the peoples we customarily call Chin, but all—or nearly all—of the peoples have a special word for themselves and those of their congeners with whom they are in regular contact. This word is almost always a variant form of a single root, which appears as Zo, Yo, Ysou, Shou and the like.”

4. Such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) or the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996).
5. Latest estimates by *Ethnologue* give a slightly higher figure, with 114 “indigenous” languages.
6. “Laimi, Laiholh in Holh.”
7. “Miphun dang nih an kan dolhnak in kan ih-lihphuah khawh naklai kan holh tikah miphun dang holh telh ti hlah usih.”
8. Ministry of Education (2016), National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021, p. 48.
9. Ministry of Education (DERPT), UNICEF, UNESCO. (2018). Myanmar report on out-of-school children initiative; မိခင်ဘာသာစကား သင်ကြားရေး မျှင်လင်ချက် (2019, December 30). *The Myanmar Times*.
10. *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, Chin state, Falam district, Tedim Township Report*. (2017, October). Department of Population, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population.
11. Conducted by Chinbridge Institute in January 2020 for Chin Education Initiative.
12. *Poverty report - Myanmar living conditions survey 2017*. (2019, June). Myanmar Central Statistics Organization, UNDP and the World Bank.
13. See for instance Paing, T. H. (2019, December 9). Mother tongue helps learning in Chin State. *UNICEF*.
14. An important exception is Zotuallai, a script linked to the Laipian religion, which was invented in the early 20th century by Pau Cin Hau, based on the Tedim language.
15. Dr. Luke Sui Kung Ling, from the Chin Christian University writes, for instance: “Do Lai people have a history before AD 1800? In other words, do Lai people have history before we became Christian? We didn't have any, why? Because we don't have any literature. The history we have today emerged only after we became Christians and after we have had literature. So, our history began with Christianity.” (Translated from Lai Chin). Ling, L. S. K. (1999). Laica Kong Ah Kan Ruahawk Pahra (Tran. “Ten Things We Should Think About Lai Literature,” in “Lungrawn.”) <https://lungrawn.wordpress.com/kan-ruah-awk-pahra/>
16. Surgeon Major Newland's A Practical handbook of the language of the Lai was for instance published in 1897 in Rangoon (Hu, 1998).
17. This information is incomplete and indicative only. Multiple groups linked to a single ethnonym may have different conceptions and references regarding what constitutes their respective written traditions, which may have been elaborated in successive steps.
18. The authors wish to thank Van Cung Lian (UK) for sharing these illustrations.
19. Appeared in 2017–2018, the “ethnic” Teaching Assistant positions, with a salary of 4,800 kyat per day, is a comparatively better position than the Language Teacher (LT). See Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020.
20. Students can use ethnic titles but adults must use Burmese titles. (2020, May 28). *Mon News Agency*.
21. Bik, R. (2017, October 24). The Chin media is in a poor state. *Frontier Myanmar*.
22. Language Teachers (LT) positions entail only the teaching of ethnic minority languages, a few periods every week, and for a much lower salary (30,000 kyats/month) than the TA. These LT positions seem to be in the process of slowly disappearing, as more TAs are being hired (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020).
23. Interviews with local LCCs and local offices of the MoE and MoEA, 2019, 2020.
24. Interviews with local LCCs and local offices of the MoE and MoEA, 2019, 2020.
25. Interviews with Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (Chin State Office) and members of Chin State Government and Hltuttaw, April 2020.
26. No plan to change list of Chin sub-tribes, says Union Minister. (2019, September 12). *Khounumthung News*.
27. 19 groups for Laimi, 10 for Zomi, 4 for Khumi, 5 for Asho, 3 for K'cho and 10 “being discussed” including Hkongso, Mro, Dai, Daa Yinthu, Matu, Rongtu, Mara, Cumtu, Larktu, Laisaw and Laitu.
28. Although details could certainly be discussed (see for instance the case of Matu, detailed below, which corresponds to multiple projects) this map is useful to provide a general idea of language distribution in Chin State. For a discussion regarding the utility, limitations and inherent biases of language mapping, see Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020.
29. Interviews with UNICEF, Hakha, 2019, 2020. UNICEF has, however, supported, with the MoEA, the production of story books for early literacy in 27 Chin languages.
30. Interviews with the Dai LCC of Kanpalet township, May 2020.
31. This success, however, appears less surpris-

ing, since the Mara are among the first groups who received an orthography (see Fig. 1), and the Tlosai dialect already constitutes a sort of *lingua franca* (Bhatia, 2010).

32. Interviews with the Matu (Chin) LCC, Matu LCC and Matupi (Chin) LCC, May 2020.
33. According to a map produced by the Language and Social Development Organization (LSDO) and an interview of the chairman of the Khumi LCC and Paletwa Township Literature Committee, June 2020.
34. Title of a post by Ro Sang (LSDO) in May 2020. As noted by McCormick (personal communication), there is often sort of a confusion between “literature” and the idea of “literacy” in English translations of Burmese.
35. Interviews with the Hkongso LCC, Paletwa Township Literature Committee, Department of Ethnic Languages and Cultures, and LSDO, June 2020.
36. Chin languages approved for school curriculum. (2020, February 5). *Khonumthung News*.

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“Outside of the MoE system, Lai language is also used in theological higher education studies, increasingly taught as a subject and used as “classroom language” in urban private schools, while many groups continue to hold yearly summer school programs. Other non-state actors, such as the Bawinu Foundation, also promote the use of local languages in education, and media in Chin languages are active, notably in the form of magazines, although language diversity does constitute one of the main challenges they are facing.”