

Babel or Behemoth: Language Trends in Asia

Review >
Linguistics

Language is part of what makes us human. Governments' language policies are conscious efforts to make use of this human trait for non-linguistic aims. The result is loss of linguistic diversity due to linguistic pragmatism and political ambition.

By Manfred B. Sellner

Babel or Behemoth: *Language Trends in Asia* is a collection of essays presented at the Asia Research Institute's (ARI) Inaugural Asia Trends Day in Singapore in July 2003. The conference discussed the consequences of language policy in East and Southeast Asia and examined the traditional socio-linguistic questions of 'who speaks what to whom?' and 'when and why?' Eleven case studies responded to these questions; a number of them are reviewed here. The geographical focus is on India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore; Japan gets mention as an exporter of entertainment and as a sponsor of cultural events in Asia, Hong Kong as a media consumer and the PRC as a disseminator of Mandarin Chinese. The function of English in the 'Asian Babel' and the link between language and nationalism are consistent themes throughout the book.



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The editors published the papers before the conference. As they readily acknowledge, this presents difficulties in unifying, complementing, and cross-referencing the contributions. The result is a collection of independent essays

with overlapping coverage of theme and substance. Nevertheless, *Babel or Behemoth* will appeal to people interested in the 'Asian Babel'² and the ways governments attempt to control it.

Reid discusses the impact of the 'three revolutions' (writing, printing and electronic) on the script, structure and (mis)use of Malay in Indonesia. He argues that newspapers printed in Romanised Malay helped to standardize the written language and to create a multi-ethnic reading community; it also served as the basis for Indonesian nationalism in the 1920s. The introduction of the radio contributed to the standardization of the oral language; paradoxically, it also helped to sustain attachment to minority languages in rural areas and in the diaspora.

Lingua franca

Lo Bianco points out that Asia is the birth place of 'transnational generic English' (p. 21). English, formerly perceived as a symbol of linguistic imperialism, is now accepted as the

primary vehicle of economic globalisation. Other transnational codes that supplement national languages include Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Indonesian-Malay and Arabic.

Singh discusses the interrelated causes of language death and convergence and gives an intriguing account of the concept of 'mother tongue' in India's language census. Singh's account is complemented by Tan's detailed overview of ethnic as opposed to linguistic make-up based on census data in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Abhakorn concentrates on the relationship between language choice and education in several Southeast Asian countries, pointing out that only Singapore and Malaysia propagate policies of multilingualism. He argues that languages are often regarded as tools to be discarded once rendered useless (p. 84).

Lindsay discusses the Southeast Asian language barrier in the performing arts, while Iwabuchi illustrates the Japanese lead in this area and describes attempts to circumvent the language barrier in the realm of pop music.

There are few available books providing up-to-date diachronic and synchronic background information on Asian language trends. The editors point out the difficulties of obtaining basic data on language policies and use in Asia. Taken as a whole, the articles comprise a laudable effort to overcome this situation. *Babel or Behemoth* is a well-documented starting point for in-depth analysis on this topic, at the interface of sociology, politics and applied linguistics. ◀

- Lindsay, Jennifer, and Tang Ying, eds. (2003) *Babel or Behemoth: Language Trends in Asia*. Singapore: Asia Research Institute, pp. 210, ISBN: 981-04-9075-5

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Notes >

- 1 The articles by Kuo and Jernudd, Mohamed, and Anderson are reprints.
- 2 The ASEAN-Babel boasts 448 living languages in ten countries.

Chinram: The Evolution of a Nation

Review >
Burma

The Chins are a relatively little known ethnic minority in Burma. They have borne the brunt of colonial 'pacification', missionary efforts to convert them to Christianity, and detribalisation. Hardly passive victims of colonial oppression, the Chins took every opportunity to transform their society in response to a dangerously unpredictable world.

By Donald M. Seekins

In *Search of Chin Identity* is an ambitious and informative book that claims 'nationhood' for the Chins, a people straddling the mountainous borders of modern-day Burma (Myanmar), India and Bangladesh. By 'nation' Sakhong means a people 'who possess the consciousness of a common identity, giving them a distinctiveness from other people', though not necessarily possessing their own state (p. xiv).

Chief-land-god

In the first of the book's three parts, Sakhong describes Chin identity before the colonial era: a common mytho-history, a homeland (*Chinram*, the 'land of the Chins') and a unifying body of practices and institutions (*phunglam*, way of life, culture) best understood in terms of the 'unitary functional pattern of "chief-land-god"' (p. 80). Part two narrates the Burmese Chins' encounter with British imperialism and missionary Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part three discusses the integration of the Chins into Burma following the 1935 Government of Burma Act (which separated Burma from India, dividing Chinram

between two, later three states), World War II (when the Chin Levies fought on the side of the British against the Japanese), and the February 1947 Panglong Conference which brought together the Chins, Shans and Kachins and lowland Burmese in a future independent state. Here Sakhong discusses Aung San's vision of a multi-racial, secular Burma and criticizes U Nu's promotion of Buddhism as the state religion (p. 216).

Traditional tribal society was exclusivist and tightly knit, with a hierarchy of nobles, commoners and slaves. At its apex, chiefs (*ram-uk*) were not only

hrum and *Khua-chia* (evil spirits, causing accidents and disease), conversion to the new faith was eased by the old belief in *Khua-zing*, a Supreme God to whom the chiefs did not sacrifice, because He, viewed as the source of all life (*zing*), is 'good, never cruel and never harms people' (p. 46).

Detribalisation

The British 'pacification' of Chinram between the first invasion of the country in 1871 and the Anglo-Chin War of 1917-19 cleared the way for 'detribalisation', the breakdown of the old 'chief-

identity based on a community of worshippers in a wider world where they could relate as equals to 'civilized' lowlanders.

The aftermath of the Anglo-Chin War was an important turning point, since the British revised the 1896 Chin Hills Regulations to restore the authority of the *ram-uk*. Young men were recruited for the colonial army. Chin dialects replaced Burmese as the language of instruction in mission schools, made part of the colonial educational system under the able but authoritarian supervision of Rev. J. Herbert Cope (a more sympathetic missionary figure was Laura Carson, who criticized British brutality during the Anglo-Chin War and organized relief work). The school system expanded, and because most teachers were Christians, converts grew rapidly before and during World War II when Chin preachers and teachers replaced American missionaries. By 1999, over 80 percent of the Chin population were Christian (p. xvii). However, Sakhong points out that the failure of the missionaries to foster a common Chin language has impeded Chin unity.

The author does not carry his narrative through to the Ne Win (1962-88) and State Law and Order Restoration Council (1988-) periods. This is unfortunate, since there is limited information in Western languages on how the

Chins maintain their identity in the face of military-enforced 'Burmanisation', including the post-1988 junta's aggressive promotion of the Buddhist religion. While the SPDC builds new pagodas nationwide, it discourages the construction of new churches and mosques and the renovation of old ones.

The book's assumption of a unitary Chin identity may be problematic, especially in describing the pre-colonial period when the many tribes were isolated from each other by geography and exclusive rituals. But *In Search of Chin Identity* provides a good case study of how indigenous peoples, rather than being passive or alienated victims of colonial oppression, took the opportunity, with the help of a small handful of dedicated missionaries, to transform their society in response to a dangerously unpredictable world. ◀

- Sakhong, Lian H. (2003) *In Search of Chin Identity: a Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma*. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Monograph Series, no. 91. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, pp. xxi, 280. ISBN 0-7007-1764-1 (European edition).

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'detribalisation did not result in dehumanisation, as the Christianity preached by American Baptist missionaries provided the Chin with the basis for a new way of life'

owners and distributors of land, heads of their communities and commanders in war, but also high priests, responsible for offering sacrifices to the *Khua-hrum*, locally rooted guardian deities whose good will was believed necessary for prosperity. When Baptist missionaries challenged the power of the *Khua-*

land-god' nexus. Sakhong, however, argues that detribalisation did not result in dehumanisation, as the Christianity preached by American Baptist missionaries provided the Chin with the basis for a new way of life. The latter overcame the traditional isolationism of the tribes, creating a new Chin