

# Palaung orthographies: writing and the politics of ethnicity in Shan State

During the British colonial period (1885-1948), various Palaung groups used the Shan script to write their languages. Since independence in 1948, these groups have come into more direct contact with the Burmese people and their language, through government and educational institutions. Since the 1960s, the influence of Burmese has become stronger, displacing the older role of the Shan language in Palaung intellectual life. As a result, recent efforts to create Palaung orthographies have followed Burmese models.

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TO READ THIS CHANGE as ‘assimilation’ may be misleading. Rather, Palaung elites see themselves as making efforts to establish a ‘standardized’ orthography based on the national language, Burmese. Since the political changes in Myanmar in 2010, Palaung leaders have created Palaung textbooks in anticipation of increased local autonomy in education. Wide differences in the varieties of the Palaung language and several orthographic traditions have posed a challenge to creating a single Palaung orthography. The difficulties in these efforts, together with the challenges posed by creating a standard Palaung language from among the varieties, highlight the evolving internal power dynamics of a diverse ethnic group in democratizing Myanmar.

The Palaung, who call themselves Ta’ang (also ‘Deang’ in China), are an Austroasiatic upland group living in Shan State in Burma (Myanmar) and neighboring countries, and form several sub-groups among whom there is great linguistic diversity. These sub-groups include the Samlong (or Katur), Rumai, Rukhaü, Riang, Thewrai, Palé, Rucing, and Rumau. As an upland people numbering about half a million, the Palaungs have historically been in close contact with the Shans (or Tai), who live in the valleys of Shan State. More recently, Palaungs have come into closer contact with the Burmese through education, the media, and the state. Much previous writing has stated that the Palaung simply imitate or have internalized Shan culture.<sup>1</sup> In the 1910s, Leslie Milne observed that the Palaung chronicles were written in Shan.<sup>2</sup> In more recent times, Palaungs would use Shan texts for teaching and religious purposes, despite the fact that Shan is a wholly unrelated language. Most Palaung groups are Theravāda Buddhist. When praying, many did so in Shan, which they saw as more effective, virtuous, and nicer to listen to. Those praying in Palaung risked being looked down on for using a low-status language.

Palaung groups have made use of a variety of scripts to write their languages. In 1972, a standardized, official ‘Palaung script’ was adopted in Palaung communities. However, in my fieldwork during 2011-2016 in areas of Shan State where the Palaung languages are spoken, Mandalay and Yangon, some people could indeed read the script, but I found few who could also write it. Groups of young people have been working to create an improved *younthounza*, Burmese for ‘office-use script,’ meaning ‘official script,’ to overcome some of the inadequacies inherent in the older systems and in the 1972 script.

I explore some of the reasons for the diversity of scripts among the Palaung and how various groups have coped with this diversity. On-going efforts to revise the script will have to address the continued practice of local communities using their local language and script. Indeed, the creation of an official script is tied to efforts to create a supra-regional Palaung language, called *ḡe porj* [the language of the group]. I suggest a reconfiguration of ethnic relations, both among the Palaung groups, and externally with the Shans and Burmese.

### Creating a ‘united’ Palaung script

The first person to create a script for a Palaung language was a Miss Maclean, an American Christian missionary. As part of a larger phenomenon in colonial Burma, missionaries designed scripts for local languages. Maclean tried to introduce her script in 1912. As Buddhists, the Palaung were not receptive. In the following period, however, many Palaung intellectuals took up the impetus and created writing systems based on Burmese and Shan. These too failed to spread. In addition to the generally low esteem in which the Palaung held their own language, many people already knew Shan writing and thought it enough to simply write in that language, rather than in Palaung.

In the 1950s, the drive to create a script again reemerged. The Palaung *sawbwa* Khun Pan Cing met Thakhin Kodaw Hmaing (1875-1964), one of the great Burmese poets, writers, and political leaders of the twentieth century. He asked the *sawbwa* [chief, prince] whether the Palaung people had their own script. The *sawbwa* replied they did not. Kodaw Hmaing warned him: “ethnic groups which don’t have their own script tend to perish”. The *sawbwa*, hearing Kodaw Hmaing’s nationalist rhetoric, felt ashamed. U Paw San (1909-2005), a Palaung ex-monk who had studied Burmese in Mandalay and Rangoon

and English in Ceylon, heard the story.<sup>3</sup> He too had internalized the idea that ethnic groups which lacked their own script were low-class, undeveloped people. He decided to devise a Palaung script based on Burmese, reasoning that such a system would be easy for people to adopt.

When U Paw San completed the script in 1955, Khun Pan Cing recognized his work, awarding him a gold medal. This did not, however, ensure that the script was accepted as the standard. This new system vied with older ones, such as that of Shin Nagatheina, a powerful monk, who had created a system based on the old Shan script with which he and many others were more familiar. The Shan Council at the time also wanted to ensure that the old Shan script continued to be used.

The role of the Shan Council in the development of Palaung writing systems continued. In 1967-1968, they held a council in Taunggyi and invited the creators of the competing Palaung systems. Scripts were based on old Shan, Yon Shan (a variant of the Tham script also used in Lanna and Laos), the ‘Chinese’ Shan script, and Burmese. The participants decided to use the Burmese-based script. They thought that since most Palaung are Buddhists, they should have access to Pāli texts, most of which are written in the Burmese script. Moreover, people could make use of Burmese typewriters.

Nevertheless, the other scripts continued to be used locally. Six Palaung university students formed a commission and created standards. They feared that continuing differences in scripts could split the Palaung people into factions, which could lead to their eventual disappearance. This narrative stresses the importance of unity and the critical role they thought a shared orthography could play in promoting it. The commission incorporated elements from the many different systems in an effort to reach a compromise. They composed a sample textbook in the language of the Samlong spoken in Namhsan, the traditional center of Palaung political power. In 1972, representatives of various Palaung groups met and decided to adopt the students’ conventions.<sup>4</sup>

### Creating an official language for the official script

The script adopted in 1972 is still used in non-formal education in northern Shan State and Mandalay. A crucial restriction to the spread of its use was that under the Ne Win regime (1962-1988), no language other than Burmese could be used in government schools. In the 1990s, lay education for high school graduates gained some momentum. Yet literacy levels in the standard script is still low. Among many Palaung groups, literacy in their local script tends to be higher.

The question remains, why do so few use the standardized scripts and textbooks? The wide differences in the Palaung language are largely responsible. A textbook in Samlong will be difficult for speakers from other subgroups to understand, even if they are familiar with the script. The lack of a common, standard language has meant that if people do create a textbook, they use their local dialect. The Rumai use the same script as the Samlong, but have created textbooks following Rumai usage. The Rucing use a Yon-based script and the

Above:  
Rucing textbook (left), Rumai textbook (right).

Below:  
Palaung women of various subgroups.



Rucing monk who originally created it did not stop using it himself even after the 1972 conference.

One young Palaung working on the promotion of the *younthounza* today says, “People are aware of the linguistic and social realities which prevent the adoption of a common script. Older people, however, do not want to change the current system because of the loss of pride. Current committee members could take suggestions from the people. That way it will be more likely that they will adopt it.”

Starting in 2011, greater autonomy in education has become possible for many Burmese minorities. Palaung have been able to teach their language in government schools after school hours. The new National League for Democracy government, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, has raised hopes that teaching minority languages as part of the regular government curriculum will be possible. In 2014, members of local organizations, including the Ta’ang Student and Youth Union (TSYU) and the Ta’ang Women’s Organization (TWO), agreed to create a textbook to be used in government schools, with the goal of introduction in 2017. Members of the TSYU, which provides education about human rights and the rule of law, have made it a point to communicate only using Palaung languages in their offices, rather than Burmese. They say that it was difficult at first, but that they got used to each other’s dialects over time. Based on their experience, they came to think it possible to create a standardized *language*, not just a script.

With the agreement of the Palaung Literature and Culture Committee, they have translated two books into each of the six Palaung languages. They are comparing the vocabulary of each language and choose the words common to the most. This list of common words will be the basis of the ‘official’ Palaung language. For example, the word *haw* [go] is the same among five of the Palaung languages, so it will become the official word. This is a straightforward example. Depending on the word, some subgroups may have very little input, even though they had greater control over their language in the past.

The biggest question now is whether the Rucing, who are the largest group and already have their own script, will accept the new official language. My conversations with Rucing speakers suggest that while young people may be more used to the idea of a standard language and script, even people only over thirty prefer their Yon-based script and the Rucing language. One Rucing monk in his forties explained that for political reasons, adopting a Burmese-based script in the Rucing area would be difficult. The Shan State Army is powerful there, and there are only four government schools among the 104 Palaung villages.

The obstacles on the road to creating a standard script and language suggest the continued importance of small, local Palaung communities, their own connections, and their older writing systems. The response among younger generations has been flexibility. As one young person said, “If the Rucing want to keep using their Yon script, they can study it in the monastery and learn the *younthounza* in the government schools. We don’t want to stop them from using the Yon script”.

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