One of our first windows into Palaung society was Leslie Milne’s monograph, *The Home of an Eastern Clan: A study of the Palaungs of Shan State*, published in 1924 after an extended stay in what is now Shan State. Through her writings, we learn of an upland people who were deeply integrated into the Shan world – practicing Buddhism, producing tea and paying tribute to their own sawbwa. Like the Palaung, many other Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) speaking groups across the region maintained close relationships with their nearby lowland Tai (T'ai-Kradai speakers, including the Shan) neighbors. The conventional wisdom is that the Tai dominate the Austroasiatic in these relationships, sharing the benefits of lowland civilization with the uplanders. The more we learn about these relationships from the perspective of the uplanders, however, the more complex these interactions appear.

Nathan Badenoch
Discovering, decoding and deliberating diversity

at the Rumai efforts, saying they will only make it harder for Ta’ang literacy to take root in society. Rumai music, however, is popular among young Palaung people, suggesting a possible source of prestige and legitimacy among the upcoming generation of speakers.

A further hurdle facing literacy efforts is that the Samlong language is itself undergoing significant changes. Spoken language is constantly in the natural processes of change. Even as the written language preserves older pronunciations, the language of young people changes. Today, some sounds are being lost. For example, the first syllable of two-syllable words are being reduced, and final consonants are also being lost, or changing. A young speaker of Samlong may pronounce the word kyrgo (to chat together) as kygro. Similarly, a word like kha’brown (to be hungry) might be reduced to kha’roun. There are also words that only have a simple kyu-syllable, such as kya’roun (egg). A young writer may pronounce the first syllable the same, and will have a difficult time knowing how to spell the words correctly. When the spoken language diverges from the idealized forms in the written language—or more accurately perhaps, when a written language is based on a form of the language which is much more conservative than that of the majority of speakers—a situation of ‘diglossia’, can arise. In situations of diglossia, the difference between written and spoken language is so great that people learning to read and write the language in effect learn another language. Such is the classic case between written Arabic and the spoken varieties.

Changing lingua franca

In the process of studying Palaung, I have been involved in many conversations that move freely between Palaung, Burmese and Shan. These are the pillars of the typical Palaung linguistic repertoire. Many Palaung people are able to use more than one Palaung variety, in addition to Burmese, Shan, Chinese, and even Jinghpaw. This type of multilingualism is common among upland groups that find themselves embedded in webs of political, economic and religious influence and opportunity. The Palaung are just one example of the dynamism of multilingualism. When we talk of an area such as the Shan state as being multilingual, we are often talking of a situation where many languages are spoken by groups living in close proximity to each other. More interesting than this, is the fact that local people use more than one language in daily life, making language use choices based on their networks of communication. Without the dynamism implied here, the value of the diversity is often overlooked; worse, with a lack of understanding of dynamic multilingualism, diversity is often seen as a hindrance to social organization.

The social context for these decisions is changing quickly. These changes have to do with increased opportunities for formal education, economic development, the attraction of cities and new connections to regional, national and global communities. Young Palaungs commonly speak of two points of change in their language use. The first has to do with their preference for using Burmese with speakers of other Palaung languages. The current generation has usually been educated in Burmese, and tend to have less experience in working out linguistic differences between themselves and speakers of other Palaung varieties. They therefore tend to prefer Burmese as a common language.

The second is the concurrent decline of Shan as a lingua franca among the younger generation. I have observed that with the increased exposure to Burmese, there seems to be an inverse correlation with exposure to Shan. There are many Shan borrowings in Palaung, but competence in the language seems to be in decline. This could be a matter of convenience, but it also likely reflects changing ideas of language prestige. For young Palaung, Burmese is the language of economic opportunity. More and more, they hear of Ta’ang—together with its written form—as a source of cultural pride.

A calendar and ethnic categories

Early in my study of Rumai, a young speaker taught me the saying, “the Palaung people (khri ta’ang) all eat sour bamboo shoots”. The word khri means ‘descendants’ or ‘relatives’, and represents the idea that there is a large grouping of people that share a common history, and if we follow from the references to bamboo shoots, a common social and cultural background. The common folk classification of Palaung sub-groups includes thirteen types of Palaung. For someone who is starting to learn about Ta’ang and Palaung, the explanation may be in a look through a calendar with pictures of traditional Palaung clothing, each with the name of a subgroup. It is probably no coincidence that the number of Palaung subgroups perfectly matches the number of pages in a calendar, plus the cover. The Shan do a similar thing throughout Southeast Asia and in Myanmar in particular; ‘traditional’ dress often marks ethnic groups, and is considered to be especially useful as a visual cue when criteria such as language are so complex. Societies perceive and express internal diversity in a number of ways—language, dress, ritual, kinship, political and economic relations with other groups, and residential patterns, among others. The Palaung sub-group names on the calendar do not correspond, for the most part, with the language varieties known from linguistic research. The calendar highlights the differences in local and international classification schemes based on different criteria and interests.

The principles involved in linguistic classification offers insights into history. Initial efforts to classify Palaung languages provided a picture of how Palaung subgroups were related. Sound changes may relate to movements of people, language contact, or shifting economic or political conditions. The diversity of the Palaung languages has been a focus of the few, but major, efforts to describe the language. This diversity has also featured greatly in evolving ideas about how to create a unified Ta’ang community in contemporary Myanmar; that is, a community that can respond as a group to political and economic opportunities.

The more we learn about the Palaungs and their languages, the more complex the linguistic picture becomes, as does the political project of standardization. We also get a better picture of the depth of diversity within ethnic categories that may or may not be officially recognized. The trade-offs between standardization on the one hand and maintaining diversity on the other are delicate, yet critical matters not only for the Palaung, but for other ethnic groups of Myanmar and the region. Elites may try to push forward standardization in a rush to create unity, but in their efforts, alienate and create ill will among those whose languages are left aside.

The creation of dictionaries is essential to the standardization and codification of any language that has aspirations for official use or as a medium of instruction and writing. A dictionary can be a vital source of information about a language, a culture, a people’s history and their knowledge systems. At the same time, a dictionary is emblematic of the political need to reduce diversity in order to engage with official institutions. Milne’s Palaung and Burmese-Ta’ang dictionaries demonstrate these dynamics. Future dictionaries—be they of a standardized and unified Ta’ang or of spoken varieties—will highlight the rich diversity of the languages themselves, but will also reflect the difficult decisions made to create them.