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Tai identity in Myanmar and beyond

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Tai identity in Myanmar and beyond

The Shan of northern Myanmar speak a language of the Tai-Kadai family found from southern China, across Mainland Southeast Asia, through northern Myanmar and into Northeast India. Names connected with the Shan give us some insight into the historical range and connections between speakers of Shan and its relatives. ‘Shan’ itself is a Burmese name related to the old name for Thailand, ‘Siam’, and the second syllable in the name Assam of Northeast India and the ‘Ahom’, a Tai-speaking people after whom Assam is ultimately named. The Shans call themselves ‘Tai’, as do speakers of many related languages.

Mathias Jenny



Above: Author with two Shan women, Anisakhan, January 2016.

AS A LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL TERM, ‘Tai’ refers to a branch of the Tai-Kadai family, while ‘Thai’ refers specifically to the language of Thailand. Widespread as the Tai-Kadai family is, only two languages have official status as national languages: Thai in Thailand and Lao in Laos. Depending on the definition, many peoples, languages and scripts may fall under the term ‘Shan’, but here I just consider the largest language and script of Burma. Today Shan is a medium of instruction in informal and monastic education, although there is pressure on the central government to change its decades-old policy of only allowing Burmese to be used in government schools. Shan has been a literary medium for a few centuries, for both religious and secular texts. There are a few different writing systems that have been used for Shan, but the most widespread has been in use for centuries, although it was modified to represent all the sounds of the language only in the late 1960s. Today a substantial number of books and journals are published regularly in Shan, together with online magazines and newspapers.

Before being firmly attached to the Burmese state through British colonial policies, Shan speakers in the language’s many varieties tended to live in the valleys of the uplands throughout northern Myanmar (what is now Shan State, parts of Kachin State, and parts of Sagaing and Magwe Regions), where they tended to be at the top of the local sociolinguistic hierarchy. The traces of Shan on other languages, and their traces of influence on Shan, tell us about the history of relations between these groups, and something about their relative positions in terms of prestige

and hierarchy. Relatedly, we find that even today, in the age of ethnicity and nationalist logic, not just speakers of Tai languages, but sometimes even speakers of Austroasiatic languages consider themselves ‘Tai’ or ‘Shan’. The Tai Loi, for example, consider themselves Shan but still speak their Austroasiatic language at home. Such situations give us insights into the process of language-spread and historical identity formation not only in Myanmar, but places like Laos and Vietnam where similar conditions exist.

Forging an ethnicity through language and history

Today many Shans understand themselves, and their position in relation to their neighbors, through ideas that developed during the nineteenth century. At that time, Siamese intellectuals created a narrative of the origins of the Thai people in response to expanding European colonialism in Southeast Asia. They based this account mainly on western ideas and sources, including the travelogues of European missionaries and traders. Some traced the history of the Thai and Tai peoples back to Central Asia, from where the Tai migrated into Sichuan and Yunnan, where they established the Nanzhao (Nan Chao) kingdom in the eighth and ninth centuries AD. When Mongol troops invaded in the twelfth century, the Tai were pushed further into the Southeast Asian mainland, where they split and became the Shan, the Lao, and Thais, some with their own kingdoms.

This narrative lacks historical and linguistic evidence to support it, and in fact there is much evidence contradicting it. Recent scholarship has revised the dates of the Nanzhao

kingdom and has shown that the main body of people spoke a Tibeto-Burman language. Nevertheless, this narrative remains the standard, official view of Thai history in Thailand, and has proven successful in building national pride both among the Thais and among speakers of related languages. Thailand’s Tai-speaking neighbors have a complex relationship with Thailand, but nevertheless see Thai ideas as model.

Until the final Anglo-Burman war in 1885, the Shans had lived in small principalities with allegiances to the Burmese court, China, and sometimes other powerful neighbors. The British allowed these principalities to retain their traditional leaders, the *cao pha* [lords of the sky] (or *sawbwa* in Burmese), a privilege they kept during the first decade after independence in 1948 (Supposedly fearing the disintegration of the country, the Ne Win government finally abolished *sawbwa* rule in the 1960s). With their close incorporation into Burma, many Shans resisted and resented first the close association with Burma and thereafter direct Burmese rule.

Shan elites sought to write a Shan history independent of Burma, Burmese institutions, or if possible Burmese connections. Ready-made narratives from the neighboring Thais were useful in this process. No doubt they saw being part of a larger Tai nation as preferable to being part of a Burman-led Burmese nation.

Shan in relation to other languages: Shan as a donor

Shan language is widespread in Shan State and neighboring areas, including a sizeable Shan community in Thailand. For political, social, and economic reasons, its use is weak in some formerly Shan-dominated places, such as Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State. By law, Burmese is the sole official language of the country (although the government also makes extensive use of English), so that Burmese tends to compete with, if not always displace, other languages in the cities. Furthermore, sizeable numbers of people of Burmese, Chinese, and Indian and descent live in Taunggyi (as in most other capitals of the ethnic states), all of whom tend to use Burmese.

Even if the position of Shan language and culture is not quite as extensive today as it once was, the numerous Shan loanwords in smaller languages, such as Palaung and Pa-O, show the historical dominance of Shan. Speaking generally, social relations between speakers of various languages, and the position of given groups in a hierarchy (that is, which languages and associated cultures have greater prestige and power), have a direct influence on the outcomes of language contact. Languages in a lower position in the language hierarchy generally replicate the *matter* (words) and *patterns* (grammar and syntax) of languages in a higher position. In the Palaung and Pa-O languages, even numerous words for everyday objects and activities come from Shan.

The exact phonetic shape of Shan loanwords in these languages tells us something of the history and timing of when these words were borrowed, hence revealing how long speakers of the various languages have been in contact. We know that a wave of sound changes swept through many of the languages of Southeast Asia, perhaps beginning as early as the thirteenth century. One aspect was that such voiced initial sounds as /g ʒ d b v z/ became voiceless /k c t p f s/. Shan has undergone this change, but Hsam Long (Shwe) Palaung has not. The fact that some Shan loanwords in Hsam Long preserve the old sounds suggests that they entered the language quite early on. The Hsam Long word *နာက* [follow] apparently reflects an earlier Shan pronunciation **နက*, now *နဝ်* in modern Shan. Other loans, however, are more similar to modern Shan, suggesting more recent borrowings. For example, Palaung *ပဲ* [be able], is nearly identical to modern Shan *ပဲ* [win, able], which comes from a Tai root, **bé*! Another interesting example is the Palaung word *တဲ*, meaning ‘arrive’, which in modern Shan is *တဲ*. We know that the sound /r/ has changed to /h/ in languages like Shan and Lao (although the sound is preserved in Thai), and so this loan must date from before that sound shift happened.

Although lexical influence from Shan is strong in Palaung, we cannot detect much structural borrowing, probably because of the typological closeness of the two languages. One possibility is the use of the third person plural pronoun (‘they’) to make nouns plural. Palaung *ပျဲး-ဂေ* [bees], literally ‘bee + they’, is an obvious calque of Shan *ပျဲး ကျဲး*, meaning the same thing.

Shan vocabulary also shows up in languages outside of present-day Shan-speaking areas, suggesting the power of the language to reach beyond where its speakers are, or perhaps a wider sphere of influence in the past. In Jinghpaw, for example, Shan loans are found throughout the language, including everyday vocabulary. As other authors in this Focus discuss, Jinghpaw itself is a dominant language in Kachin State and functions as *lingua franca*.

The large number of Shan loans, together with the absence of Jinghpaw elements in Shan, show that Shan was dominant over Jinghpaw at least at some point in the past, even in areas where Shan has long ceased to be spoken. As in Palaung, Shan loans into Jinghpaw form layers of borrowing, in some cases combining elements of the two. In the word for ‘coconut’,



In another twist, some Burmese words have entered Jinghpaw through Shan. Many of these words uphold older Burmese pronunciations, still preserved in Burmese spelling. One example is Jinghpaw *panglai* [sea], ultimately from an early pronunciation of Burmese pinle, written /PAŃLAI/ (in his Focus article McCormick discusses the role of Written Burmese in reconstructing the history of sound changes in Burmese). Another is *kawngmu* [pagoda]. The fact that the word has the same meaning as in Shan, which in turn slightly shifted from the Burmese source, shows that it came through Shan. The Burmese word *kàun-hmú* – written /KOŃH̃ MHU/ [merit, good deed] – refers to donations, including pagoda building.

Shan in relation to other languages: Shan as a subordinate language

Throughout its history, Shan has been in greater and lesser contact with Burmese, the language of the powerful lowland courts and the more recent central government in Myanmar. However, politics has never been the sole reason for contact between Shan and Burmese. The Burmese language also has close associations with court culture and Buddhism, and so has long been a prestigious language in the region. Taking part in a larger Burmese linguistic and cultural sphere does not necessarily mean that other peoples, like the Shan, who participate in Burmese networks of prestige, agree to current political arrangements.

The linguistic influence of Burmese can be seen on all levels of Shan vocabulary, and can incidentally be found far afield, even in places that today are not, or no longer, connected to the Burmese sphere, such as Meuang Sing in Laos. When comparing Shan to other closely related languages such as Thai Kheun (the language of Keng Tung, closely related to Lanna Thai), some of the sound differences are striking. While all those languages have an ‘imploded’ /d/ and /b/ sound (as McCormick also discusses in this Focus), and the ‘fricative’ /f/, Shan lacks these sounds, just as Burmese does. Shan does have the sound /sʰ/, an ‘aspirated fricative’, which is quite rare throughout the world, but which is also found in Burmese.

Structurally, it seems likely that Shan speakers have replicated certain Burmese patterns. For example, to say ‘in the house’, Shan speakers say *ti néj h̃n* (literally ‘at + in + house’), which is exactly the same (if in a different order) as the Burmese *ʔein d̃é h̃ma* (literally ‘house + in + at’). The same phrase in Lao (which may be closer than Thai) would simply be *naj h̃euan*.

Today, Burmese influence is clearest in borrowings. Burmese terms abound in all domains of the Shan lexicon. While this was already the case in older classical texts, the number of Burmanisms has increased in modern prose, especially in formal and academic texts. Burmese is the sole language of state education and administration in the country, and the main language of media and commerce.

Based on our project research, many Shan – especially younger people – are more at ease talking about professional or official affairs in Burmese, even though they describe Shan as their first language and the language of choice for

personal conversations. Books and popular music, videos, and movies are much more widely available in Burmese than in Shan. While such media do exist in Shan, their production and distribution is more restricted. As is the case for many Burmese minorities, many Shan in Burma are therefore more fluently literate in Burmese than Shan.

Shan is a medium of instruction in non-formal education, for example in monastic schools. Shan-language textbooks and readers are often translations of Burmese government textbooks. As sometimes happens in these cases, the Shan has been translated following the Burmese a bit too closely. Not only can the Shan be awkward, but such texts foster language which converges ever closer to Burmese models.

As was the case with Shan loanwords in Palaung, Burmese loanwords tell us a lot about how long Shan and Burmese speakers have been in contact, and approximately when the word was adopted. In many respects Shan and Burmese have rather different sound systems, but it is obvious that Shan phonology has been able to preserve sounds from earlier stages of Burmese. The Shan word *pré.kri* [capital] preserves an earlier pronunciation of Burmese *pyigyí*, one fairly close to that of Rakhaing today. Similarly, Shan has *cén.cá* for Burmese *sin.zá* (written <CAŃ.CĂH̃>), which suggests that the loan came into Shan around the eighteenth century, when Burmese /c/ had not yet shifted to /s/ and when /aŃ/ had not fronted to /in/, but was /en/, as is found in British sources of the time.²

‘Little brother’ Thai and its influence on ‘older brother’ Shan

In Thai, the name for Shan is *Tai Yai* [Big Tai], in contrast to one of the historical names for the Thai, *Tai Noi* [Little Tai], possibly in reference to historical relations and settlement patterns. Today, however, Thailand is very much the big brother to the Shan: large numbers of Shan speakers in Burma know Thai from their experience as migrant workers in Thailand. Being culturally and linguistically closer to Thai than to Burmese, Shan has been under increasing influence from its ‘big brother’ to the south. The huge Thai entertainment industry, producing soap operas, movies, and popular music and karaoke videos, has long been a welcome alternative to Burmese State TV programs. Thai has become the language of choice for many Shan when it comes to globalized culture. Burmese influence enters Shan mainly through official channels like education, administration, and commerce, and historically also through religion.

A number of Shan political and cultural organizations, including online news magazines, are based in Chiangmai. Many Thai words for scientific and political concepts, which are often already phonologically and structurally close to Shan, can easily be turned into Shan-like words. Some of these loans may be difficult to detect, especially if they consist of indigenous Tai elements, like Shan *kán m̃ỹ* [politics] from Thai *kan muəŋ*, or *t̃s̃.su* [fight] from Thai *t̃s̃-sú*.³ We know these are Thai loans because one of the parts exists in Thai but not Shan. More obvious are Thai loans from Khmer, which are otherwise all but absent in Shan. Structurally, Thai influence on Shan would be much harder to detect because the languages are very close grammatically.

In Shan areas close to Thailand, especially where there are substantial numbers of returned migrant workers, there may be some phonological convergence at work; one case is the reversal of the historical shift of Proto-Tai /f/ to Shan /pʰ/. We find this shift in the Shan word *pʰéj* [fire], which many young people now pronounce *féj*, following the pronunciation of the Thai cognate /faj/. As one young Shan migrant worker explained, “it sounds old fashioned to pronounce such words as *féj* with pʰ. Maybe some old people in the villages still speak like that”.

Positioning Shan

Shan, while an important language of administration and education in the past, has itself long been situated between two powerful languages, Burmese and Thai. Both languages have at different times exercised influence on Shan on different levels and in different domains. The pull towards Burmese has been increasing, with the greater integration and acceptance of the Shan into Myanmar, while Thai remains an attractive alternative that, at least superficially, strengthens a sense of pan-Tai identity. Shan cultural and political elites may be more interested in Thai connections, although common people may take a much more pragmatic approach, adopting whatever language they see as being useful in their daily lives.

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Above: Map of Tai land (in Shan).

Below: Shan School children. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of the European Commission on flickr.

m̃-ū si, the *m̃* part represents the Shan generic term *m̃k* [fruit] and the Shan pronunciation of an earlier Burmese loan *ʔoun* [coconut], here combined with Jinghpaw *si* [fruit]. Jinghpaw and Shan have a different ‘constituent order’, referring to the ordering of words in a sentence. Shan, like Thai and English, has subject-verb-object order, while Jinghpaw, like Burmese (and Turkish and Japanese), has subject-object-verb order. This difference has implications for how compounds are formed. Some Shan loanwords have been rearranged to follow Jinghpaw order: the Shan expression for ‘food market’, *k̃at kʰew* (literally ‘market + food’) has been switched to form Jinghpaw *k̃hau kat*. Other words are kept just as in Shan, although the sounds are adopted to Jinghpaw. The Shan word for ‘oil’, *ñem m̃en* (literally ‘liquid + fat’), is *nam man* in Jinghpaw.



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