# A critique of state-centric multilingual education policy proposals in Myanmar

## Ewan Cameron

## Abstract

Myanmar is home to a huge variety of languages and yet they have largely been absent from the state school system. Non-state and para-state organisations have initiated their own education systems with unique calibrations of language in education. In the 2010s, a space for policy reform was created and the UNESCO-supported MTB-MLE program became a policy that gained some support as an alleged workable compromise for speakers of non-state languages in regards to education. MTB-MLE was never fully implemented in Myanmar, yet many of its claims remain problematic as it presumes a monolingual state not amenable to change. This paper argues that MTB-MLE is often built on problematic assumptions about the dominance of state languages and the instrumental use of minority languages. This paper also argues that effective language policy must take into account the need for the state to be more flexible in its approach to multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** *language, development, Myanmar, ethnicity*

**Suggested Citation**:
Cameron, E. (2024). A critique of state-centric multilingual education policy proposals in Myanmar. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 5(3), 221-243. https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353100

**About the author:**
University of Edinburgh. The author has worked in Myanmar education for over ten years and is currently a PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh.

## 1. Introduction

Transitional programmes are not the only policy option for countries with multiple languages. In Finland, 'language maintenance' has been implemented for the minority Swedish-speaking Finns (Skutnubb-Kangas, 2000). Children from this group may attend Swedish-speaking schools for the entire duration of their schooling life, including universities, while learning Finnish as a second language subject. After graduation, Swedish speakers are accommodated by the Finnish State, which provides government services, legal situations and healthcare in Swedish (Prime Ministers Office, Finland, 2012, p.11). However, such is not the case in Myanmar.

While in years prior to the 2021 coup there were some tentative moves towards decentralisation at the regional state level, Mother-tongue based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) was never wholly implemented in Myanmar. By 2022, amendments to the National Education Law ruled out the use of non-Burmese languages as classroom languages at any level (Salem-Gervais et al., 2023). MTB-MLE style transition programs have come under some criticism in the relevant literature. Skutnubb-Kangas (2000) describes transition/exit programs such as MTB-MLE as fundamentally 'weak' models of bilingualism. Similarly, Nolasco (2016), writing in the Philippines context, has written critically of certain MTB-MLE programs that promote a 'fallacy of subtractive education' as opposed to lifelong learning in mother tongues. Transitional language programs seem to orientate toward seeing minority languages as problems, yet a more positive outlook would see them as resources (Ruíz, 1984). These policies run a high risk of treating minority ethnic languages as obstacles to be overcome rather than valuable in and of themselves.

During the 2010s 'transition' period, MTB-MLE was used by a number of high-level actors in the Myanmar context, yet there were problems with the dominant definition propounded by UNESCO that if it had been implemented may have exacerbated tensions between ethnic groups rather than dissolved them. Despite good intentions that aimed to alleviate the struggles of non-Bamar speaking students and graduates, within the MTB-MLE framework, non-state-led education systems were only ever seen as sub-state entities that would converge with the central state system, and in practice, be obliged to sacrifice their autonomy as educators.

Language is among the most controversial and sensitive areas of education policy. The calibration of the medium of instruction in schooling has implications not only for the individual learning outcomes of students but for the relative position of ethnic groups in their relation to the state. Nonetheless, issues of language in formal education will continue to be an issue in Myanmar. Hence, this paper looks at language policy in Myanmar aiming to draw out some of the underlying assumptions regarding such policy as well as their long-term implications for the reproduction of ethnic culture. In particular, this paper looks at the policy of MTB-MLE and discussions regarding its implementation.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is primarily based on the analysis of power relations between the state and the ethnic minority groups of the region. It begins with an overview of the educational landscape of Myanmar and then moves into a theoretical discussion that looks at work from the region that has de-centred the state within frameworks of power and made space for autonomous entities. This is followed by a discussion that seeks to unpack the implicit assumptions that MTB-MLE makes about a policy and power.

This paper is based on analysis of literature developed in and around discussions on language in education in Myanmar. This is not a systematic review of policy that aims for a comprehensive review of the literature from a bird's eye view, but an inductive approach to theoretical research, one that centres the researcher's own choices and 'process of discovery' in the generation of the central argument (see: Bryman 2016, p.110), taking literature and arguments from a selection of peer review journals, books, NGO reports, and newspaper article. Thus, this paper aims for a diversity of sources rather than a systematic and replicable template. In this, the researcher acknowledges this research to be inevitably incomplete, while at the same time making a valuable intervention in discursive structures (Rose, 1997).

As I am a teacher and active participant in Myanmar education, this has informed my selection of texts and indeed the choice to pursue this topic as a worthy one. Reflecting on the role of researchers in education, Pallas (2001) notes that participation in a community of practice means researchers will 'negotiate' knowledge as it is understood in local terms. My own participation in communities of educational practice in Myanmar means that I have attempted to develop a reflective understanding of local knowledge in my selection of sources, while still acknowledging my role as an outsider. Thus, this paper and its related methodology

is seen as a part of a dialogue rather than an epistemological imposition (see: Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 261).

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. The Myanmar State

Since national independence in 1948, state institutions of Myanmar have been dominated by the majority Bamar ethnicity. This prioritisation, in regards to education, language and various other cultural phenomena, is known as 'Burmanisation' (see: Houtman, 1999, p.53, Thein Lwin, 2011; Walton, 2013). The post-independence state did not erase non-Bamar cultures, but subordinated them within a complex discursive and often violent hierarchy. In the 1960s, the concept of the *Taingyintha*, or national 'races' and the claimed unity between them, became a fundamental political and rhetorical tool in attempts to build a multi-ethnic nation-state (Cheesman, 2017 p. 466). President Ne Win saw minority ethnic groups such as the Kachin and Karen as simultaneously of 'pure blood' but also potentially disloyal to the larger nation owing to their ethnicity (Walton, 2013, p.13).

The National League for Democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in contrast to the primordialist rhetoric of Ne Win, offered a more constructivist approach that appeared to paint ethnic categories as more fluid and only as strong as the discourse that built them: '*If we divide ourselves ethnically, we shall not achieve democracy for a long time*' (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991, p.231). While Ne Win and Suu Kyi may come from different political poles, there is also a clear unchallenged assumption of a Bamar-centric State as noted by Maung Zarni:

> '*The dominant Bamas imagine ourselves as a historically cohesive nation, whose organisational integration with minority peripheries only needs to be completed democratically or by force.*' (Maung Zarni, 2009)

Burmanisation, then, may manifest in multiple ways, even ones that appear on the surface to be opposed. Claims of unity from diversity need to be critically probed to see whether they replicate the imbalance of power between Bamar and minority cultures.

### 3.2. Language in Myanmar Education

In the late colonial period of the 1930s and 40s, state-based education in Burma was a tripartite system based on the language of instruction. Vernacular schools taught in Burmese;

Anglo-Vernacular a mix of Burmese and English; and English schools taught in English (Thein Lwin, 2000; Shah & Cardozo, 2019). The provision was far from universal. For those who did manage to gain access to formal education in the state system, those studying in the small number of English and Anglo Vernacular schools were better prepared to access higher education at the country's only University in Rangoon, which taught in English.

There was a high dropout rate at vernacular schools, with up to 75% of students not progressing past first grade (Hillman, 1946, p.531). Contemporary analysts gave pedagogical and curricular reasons for this, noting it was "something imported and culturally alien" (Hillman 1946, p. 532-533) and that pedagogy was "divorce[d] from active life, its monotonous routine, meaningless disciplines and dead knowledge" (Campbell 1946, p. 441). Simultaneously, the Buddhist Sangha maintained its own schooling system, one with a lineage that dated far back beyond the colonial era. Monastic schooling was largely independent from government oversight and operated far more schools than the central government, teaching in the vernacular (Campbell, 1946; Hillman, 1946, p. 528-9).

After 1948, post-Independence governments in Myanmar made education part of their plans for a universal welfare state. The tripartite system was abolished and all schools were made nominally free to all, with Burmese as the official language, although English was initially maintained as the language of higher education. However, despite a large growth in the number of schools under the Ministry of Education's command, the education system was still under-resourced, making universal education provision an unfulfilled aspiration (Sein, 1957). By the early 1960s, still only around a third of eligible students were accessing primary education in government schools (Nash, 1962, p.138). The 'frontier' areas of Kachin, Shan and Chin were especially lacking in terms of educational resources (Bwa, 1953, p.64). The new system included provision for non-Burmese language with mother tongue education of non-Burmese languages being used as a language of instruction at the primary level with Burmese as a compulsory language (Cho, 1949, p. 81). Thein Lwin (2007) characterises this new system as a centralized one and notes that there had been some alternative, though ultimately rejected, suggestions for a more decentralised system during the planning process.

In the 1960s, the Revolutionary Council under Ne Win brought a decisively more Bamar-Buddhist nationalism to governance. Universities taught in Burmese and all previously private schools, with the exception of Monastic schools, were nationalised. This included ethnic-national Christian and Buddhist schools that had taught in mother tongue (Saw Eh Htoo

2022, p. 58). For instance, Karen medium schools operating in Central regions (i.e. Rangoon and Irrawaddy) were nationalised and Karen-speaking teachers replaced by Burmese speaking MOE teachers (Thako & Waters, 2023). Similarly, in Mon regions, many teachers were obliged to resign from their posts (Thein Lwin, 2002, p.5).

The nationalism of the central government caused a counter reaction among non-Bamar groups. For example, in Kachin regions in the 1960s, a new generation of leaders emerged, many of whom had studied at Rangoon university, propounding a nationalism of their own in contrast to the Bamar-Buddhist, one of the centres (Aung Thwin & Thant Myint-U, 1992, p. 71; Sadan, 2014, p.70). By the late 1980s and 1990s, the education system had declined and by 2000, only 30% of children completed high school and public spending was low (Wingfield 2000, p. 206). At the higher education level, in response to fears of student activism, universities were closed for lengthy periods of time and replaced classrooms with programmes of distance learning (Lin-Liu, 2002) leading to a huge drop in standards (Thet Win, 2013, p.13). At universities, the language of education again switched back to English, making things difficult for teachers and especially some students who spoke non-Burmese mother tongues, as entering higher education meant proficiency in two non-native languages, as they needed to take the matriculation exam in Burmese (Lall, 2020, p.155). During this time, private schools also emerged to serve a mainly middle class market, often in a legally grey area. These schools taught subjects such as English, business and computer skills, as well as preparing some students for higher education study abroad (Lall, 2009). During this time, civil wars had a devastating effect on education for those in affected areas. In Southeastern Karen regions for instance, schools and local education systems were systematically targeted by the military (Karen Human Rights Group, 2018).

The poor state of affairs set the scene for the 2010s, when transition to an elected government, albeit one where the military retained an effective veto, opened the door for policy reform. Top level policy discussion included the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), The National Education Law (2014/2015), and the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). However, critics have pointed out that the creation of these laws and high level documents largely excluded actors from conflict areas where alternative education systems are in place in favour of international donors (Lall & South, 2018). The influence of international donors and development agencies on the NESP also appears to have centred human capital above other concerns, "channeling education, above all else, towards economic development"

(Heslop, 2019, p.86). In terms of higher education reform, Sadan (2014) noted the focus of reform efforts on Yangon and Mandalay universities seems to come at the expense of universities in the ethnic regions.

The National Education Law of 2015 was the subject of intense debate that spilled out into the streets. Students, unhappy with the law, organised huge protests which were violently put down by police (Irrawaddy, 2015). One of the key demands of the students was more autonomy for universities and schools to set their own rules, with one implication of this being that schools in regions with non-Burmese mother tongues could teach classes in their mother tongues (Groves & Stapnes, 2023, p.11). In 2016, the government's National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) recognised the need for ethnic languages to be utilised as 'classroom languages' throughout the curriculum, but not languages of instruction (MoE, 2016, p. 14). There was also some implementation of a "Local Curriculum", which allowed different regions to develop their own ethnic language classes for schools (Anui & Arphattananonaa, 2021). Despite this limited recognition, there was little forward motion in realising comprehensive changes to the Burmese dominated system (Shee, 2018, p.5) and language issues were mostly absent from the peace process (Lall & South, 2018).

Overall there are some general themes that emerge from Myanmar government-led education. Firstly, resources have never been sufficient for universal coverage. Secondly, where they do exist, government structures are highly centralised. This has created a highly idiosyncratic and brittle education system where aspirations of control are at clear odds with capacity. With the current government system, alternative forms of education provision have emerged: ethnic, private and religious. Nevertheless, when these alternative forms have come within close proximity to the state, they have been subject to sanctions.

### 3.3. Non-State Education Providers

There are over a hundred officially recognised ethnic groups in Myanmar, many of which speak their own distinct languages (Bradley, 1999, p.99), though it is Burmese, the language associated with the majority Bamar ethnicity, that is the sole official language of administration and education. The CIA figures claim that non-Bamar ethnicities account for around 30% of the population (CIA, 2023). As the state education system has never been a universal one, many students in Myanmar, particularly those living in territories controlled by quasi-state entities, have attended schools run by different authorities. These organisations are

sometimes referred to in the English literature as "ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) (e.g. South, 2018; Joliffe & Mears, 2016). While these organisations do indeed organise around ethnic markers such as language, flags and a sense of nationhood, and draw their territorial power from armed struggle, to call them "ethnic armed organisations" begs the questions of why the Myanmar state is not also an "EAO", especially given the well documented Burmanisation strategies it has employed and its use of force directed against other ethnicities. This is not to deny the close relationship of the militaries to the education department, but rather to say that this is not a unique situation for the so-called 'ethnic armed organisations'. This paper uses the term 'para-state' organisation rather than EAG when required to refer to these organisations collectively. Para-state refers to organisations who, through a sense of shared nationhood, have created their own governance regimes in demarcated territories that provide, among other things, health, education and judicial services (South, 2018).

The boundary between para-state governance and civil society is often blurred. Many non-MOE schools in non-Burmese ethnic areas are best described as community schools, and while community-initiated, receive curricula and some financial support from para-state education departments (Joliffe & Mears, 2016, p.14). There are also 'mixed schools', which the Central Government and other authorities work together to provide education services (McCormick, 2020, p.197). Because these para-state regimes are closely connected to military force, it can be difficult to assess the extent to which the official 'departments', represent a democratic will of communities, or having been developed by military institutions, a more minority or elite ideology (McCormick, 2020, p.197). Each department has a different calibration with regards to language. It should be noted that these are not the only mother-tongue education systems in Myanmar, which also includes Shan, Karenni (Kayah), and Chin among others (Thein Lwin, 2002).

While acknowledging the dynamics of civil war and how conflict exacerbates divergence, South and Lall (2016b, p. 150) characterise the KED and KIO education regimes as 'separatist'. They also argue that language in education policy for the para state education departments is a proxy for wider political demands: schools which have a strong focus on mother tongue as the means of instruction are classified as 'separatist' while those with Burmese as means of instruction with some support for ethnic languages as subjects (which broadly aligns with the status quo of government schools) is classified as 'weak federalism'.

Somewhere in the middle is 'strong federalism,' which advocates for a strong focus on both the national and ethnic languages (South & Lall, 2016a, p. 7).

These descriptions of para-state education regimes are based on information from the pre-2021 era.

*Karen Education Department.* Karen Education Department (KED) schools have developed their own S'gaw Karen curriculum that goes throughout primary and secondary levels (Joliffe & Mears, 2016, p.83). At the primary level, the medium of instruction is S'gaw (a Karen language) and at secondary school the curriculum uses textbooks and material in English while retaining S'Gaw Karen as a language of instruction. Burmese is taught only as a language subject (Shee, 2018, p.4).

*Mon National Education Committee.* The Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) has implemented a variant of MTB-MLE, teaching a Mon language curriculum in primary before transitioning to Burmese and the State curriculum in middle school (World Education, 2017). Students in the Mon system are able to transition to government high schools (and thus ultimately, government universities) through unofficial agreements with state officials (McCormick, 2020, p.199).

*Kachin Independence Organisation Education Department.* In parts of Kachinland, an area that encompasses parts of Kachin and Shan State, the para-state Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) runs a number of schools. During a period of ceasefire with Myanmar, these schools had operated with an implicit agreement that students from KIO schools could transition to MOE Universities, which also meant a curriculum that aligned with the state schools. Textbooks were mainly in Burmese (McCormick, 2020, p.199) Yet after the resumption of civil war in 2011, their school regimes began to distance themselves from the state and moved towards a more independent curriculum teaching in mostly Jinghpaw (the dominant Kachin lingua franca) and English (South & Lall, 2016a, p. 5). There is also a network of Kachin community schools (Mears et al., 2016, p. 36) that are developing their own curriculum, in which the language of instruction is Jinghpaw at primary before switching to English at secondary (with the expectation that Jingphaw will continue to be used as a classroom language for assistance similar to the KED system).

### 3.4. MTB-MLE- A Compromise?

While the 2010s in Myanmar were associated with a new space for policy making, it was paradoxically a time where the very idea of transition came to 'police and restrict certain demands-from interventions that might help spur democratization' (Prasse-Freeman et al., 2020, p.5). What is argued here is that the MTB-MLE approach that came to be associated with language policy in schools was, in isolation, one such way in which wider demands of democratization came to be restricted.

During the 2010s, the formal peace process in Myanmar, with participants mostly high level actors, did not achieve much progress and language and education issues rarely appeared at the top of the agenda (Lall & South, 2018). Nevertheless, there was a developing policy discourse on a new calibration of languages in schools between the MOE and the para-state Education departments. MTB-MLE is a policy that has come to be associated with UNESCO in language programs in South East Asia (Curaming & Kalidjernih, 2014; Tupas & Lorente, 2014). It is a transitional program where students begin formal schooling with their mother tongue (L1) as the medium of instruction and then eventually switch to learning in the state/dominant language before or around the time they enter secondary schooling (UNESCO, 2016). Myanmar Civil society organisations such as The National Network for Education Reform and Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center supported its implementation (Salem-Gervais, 2019; ENAC, 2018). During the protests against the National Education Law of 2014, it was among the demands of the student confederations Action Committee for Democratic Education (ACDE) (Takeda, 2020).

Transitional language policies involve learners begin schooling in their mother tongue, before either adding or switching to the state or dominant language at some time during their schooling career. According to a 2013 handbook, the three "non-negotiable" aspects of MTB-MLE are: "effective promotion of oral fluency and literacy in all languages for as long as possible; build upon learners social and cultural knowledge and experience; and empower learners by encouraging students to collaborate and innovate, creating new power relations together" (Multilingual Education Working Group Asia Pacific, 2013). There is plenty of evidence in favour of MTB-MLE that shows that by using mother tongue at early levels, it results in better participation which translates into better overall academic results (MEWG, 2013). However, there is misalignment on what MTB-MLE refers to. The term 'additive' has been used to indicate programs where the mother tongue is not replaced but the dominant

community language is added to the repertoire. For example, Shee (2018) characterises the KED system as 'strong additive MTB-MLE'. Similarly, Nolasco (2016) makes the normative claim that MTB-MLE is an 'additive' programme, meaning that the L2 (i.e. national or link language) should add to the mother tongue not replace it.

The UNESCO's approved definition of MTB-MLE tends to describe it as a replacement programme where the mother tongue is only used as language of instruction at the primary level. UNESCO defines 'early-exit' or 'subtractive' MLE programmes" (seen as less effective) as those that switch to national languages in 'mid-primary'. Conversely, for UNESCO, 'additive' MLE is where mother tongues are supported 'at least to the end of primary school' (UNESCO, 2016, p.7). In UNESCO's formula then, the difference between so-called 'positive' and 'negative' applications is merely a few years. While these few years are crucial for mother tongue learners to develop higher order thinking skills in their L1 (Nolasco, 2016), the MTB-MLE framework advanced by UNESCO does not appear to advocate for space for continued mother tongue instruction at secondary, let alone tertiary, education. It is this formula of MTB-MLE that this paper examines and critiques. Henceforth, references to MTB-MLE will refer to the transitional model not the strong additive one.

Broadly following an MTB-MLE frame, the MNEC's model of language calibration which transitions to Burmese language at the secondary level gives practical advantages for Mon students including competence in the national language and receiving nationally recognised qualifications on graduation (South & Lall, 2016a, p. 37). The Mon system of MTB-MLE has been favoured by international donors and experts as an ideal balance of ethnic culture and integration into national life (McCormick, 2020, p. 199). South and Lall (2016b, p.138-139) describe this 'Mon model' as a 'positive conceptualization of the relationship between a locally owned and implemented education system that preserves and reproduces ethnic national identity and language, and linkages to the central government/Union education system.

For the same reasons that they favour an MTB-MLE approach, Lall and South (2014, p. 318) did not see a future for the Karen or Kachin systems to be maintained as they existed in the 2010s. There are certainly good reasons for this assessment. For instance, due to both a lack of official credentials or employable skills such as Burmese language ability, graduates from the Karen and Kachin systems may have restricted opportunities after schooling. Based on these disadvantages, Lall and South note the direction of the peace process (in the mid-

2010s) will inevitably mean that Karen leaders need to re-think the basis of their school system.

Transitional MTB-MLE approaches to schooling are not simply top down policy, but can also represent pragmatism from the community level. The pressure for government qualifications has resulted in de facto MTB-MLE systems where students in Mother tongue-based primary community schools transfer to State schooling in secondary school. Indeed, the post-war education arrangements with regards to non-Burmese Mother tongue in Burma also involved a transitional program. However, for schools previously autonomous from the government system, a shift to MTB-MLE obligates changes that go beyond language. Community schools in transition have found their own curricula "immediately restricted in their ability to prioritize local languages or locally relevant curriculum" as time is needed to prepare students for government exams and to translate materials from Burmese language (Joliffe & Mears, 2016, p. 83).

### 3.5. *Not Seeing Like a State*

Two major themes of Myanmar government education can be seen in relation to the aims of this paper. Firstly, language has always been a contentious issue, with the state alternating between English and Burmese as formal languages of instruction while other indigenous languages in the region remain on the periphery. The second, is that in terms of infrastructure, the MOE has never been able to exert total reach and/or control over the nominal territory that the government claims. Alternative systems, including monastic education, private schooling, and the schools from non-Bamar ethnic groups are not just residual organisations filling in the gaps, but are normal, relatively stable, and autonomous institutions. There is thus a need to better understand these institutions through a lens that does not immediately subordinate them to the state.

In Dean's (2005) study of Kachinland borderworlds, Edward Soja's 'trialectics' of space is applied to the Kachin/Myanmar relationship. The three aspects of reality described are the perceived (the empirical and mundane), the conceived (the normative 'mental images promoted by those at power.' (Dean, 2005, p. 810)), and the lived/third space (divergent and marginal and in opposition to conceived space [Allen, 1999, p. 260]). Dean (2005) shows that the Kachin communities who have been bisected by the China-Myanmar border have been territorially trapped (in conceived space) and yet the lived space lens shows that many

individuals continue traditional pre-border practices such as attending rotating markets that occur on either side of the border. Dean argues that there are simultaneous realities at play, and that if one speaks of these Kachin as 'challenging' or 'defying' the border, one privileges an analysis that 'adheres to the modernist State-centric view'. Instead, a 'thirdspace' perspective allows to recognise the lived experiences of these Kachin: they cross the border not to challenge it, but to maintain cultural and economic livelihoods.

Similarly, Sadan's (2013) study of Kachin identity and history introduces the fractal lens as a way of thinking about communities that are on the periphery of larger powers. While not ignorant of centre-peripheral power relations, the fractal lens is about seeing that societies on the periphery are no less complex than those at the centre of the mandala of power. These societies are defined in and of themselves before they are defined as subordinate. This allows Sadan to paint a picture of Kachin agency that goes beyond their position as an 'ethnic minority' and is instead one of a complex community whose existence is self-legitimising.

According to Prasse-Freeman (2023), resistance and refusal in the context of protests following the 2021 coup in Myanmar is useful in conceptualising the practice of non-state actors. These tactics are not mutually exclusive, but occur in a dialectic: resistance contests the sovereign realm, while refusal is the 'work' that goes on in places outside the reach of the sovereign. Resistance tactics may seek 'capture of hierarchical structures' but by doing so, leave themselves open to attacks. On the contrary, those employing the mode of refusal reject the need for sovereign recognition and thus become absent from the field, literally and ontologically. While Prasse-Freeman's focus is more recent political protest, he notes that these tactics did not begin then, but have a historical heritage that includes the alleged transition period of the 2010s which, owing to the numerous struggles over land, livelihood and education reform, may have been better dubbed the 'time of protests'.

## 5. Discussion

The theoretical concepts, *thirdspace, fractal, refusal,* share a common theme in acknowledging that while political and cultural asymmetries exist, those who occupy a subordinate position within hierarchical structures should not be defined wholly by this relationship. These concepts do not ignore power relations but refuse to accept they are totalising. Actions by the objects of study are thus not only conceived as oppositional but also maintenance of autonomy and of governance that is simultaneously reproductive and

prefigurative. In contexts of examining groups operating outside of the state, these lenses help see beyond the realm of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) and instead look towards the meaningful cultural markers, lifestyles and aspirations of those who live both within and against the state project.

The education departments of the Kachins, Karens and Mons cannot simply be reduced to a separatist/convergent binary but are complex and multi-faceted. The choice of teachers and parents to educate children in Jinghpaw or S'gaw is not necessarily in defiance of the Myanmar State nor a refutation of Myanmar citizenship, but can also be a pedagogical and cultural choice that reflects their wishes that their children reproduce Kachin or Karen culture (e.g. South & Lall 2016a, p. 23). Decisions on schooling are often pragmatic and at times non-Bamar communities have welcomed government provision in places where provision is poor (McCormick, 2020, p197).

The fractal lens in particular, by seeing complexity at scale, is also useful for reminding that nominal ethnic communities are not homogenous. For instance, the Karen and the Kachin ethnicities are themselves a mix of multiple languages. The Kachin are a confederation of Jinghpaw, Lachid, Lhaovo, Lisu, Rawang, and Zaiwa groups, each with their own language. However, within this group, Jinghpaw has become the common language, highlighting asymmetries of power at a new scale. The differences between the Kachin groups are not merely linguistic but can also manifest in different political attitudes towards the state (Jap, 2021).

Following the lenses of autonomy that de-naturalise the state, there are several assumptions that policy makers and experts have made about the state relationship to those with non-Bamar mother tongues. Generally speaking, the application of the UNESCO MTB-MLE policy makes a number of implicit assumptions about the political framework of Myanmar:

1. That Burmese (and sometimes English) will always be the language of state institutions.
2. That the state of Myanmar does or will eventually assume control over all the nominal territory on the map.
3. That non-Bamar ethnic groups can sufficiently reproduce their culture by learning in that mother tongue only until the end of primary school.

4. That universities in Myanmar will use either English or Burmese and there is no demand or feasibility for other languages of instruction.

In a context where 1 and 2 are true, then it follows that UNESCO MTB-MLE would be a pragmatic and instrumental policy. If the state remains committed to a Burmese-centred culture, then MTB-MLE would allow minority ethnic groups to gain the necessary skills to access state services and market livelihoods. In terms of cultural reproduction, assumptions 3 and 4 with mother tongue instruction at the primary level only would be assumed to be sufficient for minority ethnic cultures to be able to sustain their mother tongue languages from one generation to another.

What makes these assumptions problematic is that they start with an end goal (the universality of Burmese language within a unified state) and orientate policy towards that outcome. Thus, the reasoning behind this version of MTB-MLE is primarily instrumental; mother tongue languages are seen as a stepping stone to competency in the national language, what happens with these languages after primary level instruction remains a private matter outside the state's purview. Such assumptions are long held and not unique to Myanmar. As Ruiz (1984, p. 18) writes of the policy debate in America: "*If [transitional] programs are acceptable at all, they are only to the extent that they are effective as transitions*."

Question these assumptions, however, and a different picture emerges. Using a lens of autonomy, assumptions 3 and 4 may be incorrect and that some ethnic groups may wish to maintain their mother tongue as a language of instruction throughout education. If this is true for these groups, then it follows that assumption 1, that Burmese will always be the language of state, is the point of tension where the autonomy of national ethnic groups meets the obstinacy of the state.

What if there was change to the underlying assumptions of a language policy? To proceed from a different assumption: that the state of Myanmar is able to change its institutions to accommodate and allow for the use of non-Bamar and English languages, then the subtractive mode of MTB-MLE becomes not merely the only possible option, but one of many that could also include language maintenance and/or a genuinely 'strong' additive MTB-MLE. In this system, language maintenance would not be 'separatist', but part of a state whose multicultural nature was made through institutional norms and practice not mere rhetoric. For instance, one step would be to officially recognise regional languages at the relevant state level (Takeda, 2020, p.122).

Language maintenance programs would recognise that supporting mother tongue education in schooling will not allow students to fully flourish unless other state institutions also adapt themselves to the needs of the speakers. This links with Young's (1989, p. 259) concept of 'differentiated citizenship 'which calls not just for equal rights, but for the state to provide 'institutionalised means for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups'.

The main argument in support of MTB-MLE has been that in terms of graduate outcomes, students who can speak in the national language have more opportunities to gain employment/livelihoods. Yet this argument falls down when considering that a language maintenance (or a 'strong additive') approach would deliver such a function too, especially in tandem with progressive policies that would allow speakers of non-dominant languages to function in their mother tongue (i.e., the ability to apply for jobs or access services in their mother tongue). A second argument in favour of transitional MTB-MLE might be made that as a developing country, Myanmar simply does not have the resources for schools to develop entire curriculums for each and every language. With many languages not developed for classroom teaching, creating new curricula would take 'time, enthusiasm, commitment and compromise' (Salem-Gervais & Raynaud, 2019). This argument is also weak, given the breadth and depth of ethnic cultures in the country who have already devised and building curricula that meets their cultural needs. While it's true that new curricula would necessitate new resources, surely the decision to pursue such a project or not must come from the communities themselves rather than a blanket top-down mandate. Thirdly, the most important critique in support of MTB-MLE is that the decision to switch languages in schooling may be the choice of some cultures and communities, for various reasons. This is an entirely valid argument but a truly equitable landscape would allow such choices to co-exist with other communities who choose a language maintenance course. That some communities would choose MTB-MLE does not mean all communities must be compelled to.

## 6. Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, communities in Myanmar are organising and advocating for the very same linguistic rights that the Bamar demanded from the British. The adoption of MTB-MLE in government schools would certainly be a step forward for recognition and

possibly even a gateway to broader language reforms, but a worst case scenario could see that just as British colonialism froze the territory of the modern nation state with no regard for the pre-existing diverse polities, then MTB-MLE may similarly freeze the development of ethnic languages and make them officially second-class without the capability to be used at anything higher than a primary level. MTB-MLE is not simply a language policy abstracted from other issues of power. Its advocacy has come with baked-in assumptions about the Myanmar State. These include the idea that Myanmar will only ever use Burmese (and perhaps English) as an official state language, as well as the idea that minority languages are not suitable for higher education.

While policies transition programmes may indeed be the choice of some communities who wish to balance cultural reproduction with the pragmatics of navigating a multicultural society, the current understanding of MTB-MLE promotes minority languages only insofar as they allow a bridge to the single national language. The lens sees language in education as a distinct domain and minority languages as problems that need a singular solution. On the other hand, a language maintenance approach sees policy more holistically, identifying that medium of instruction alone will not reproduce culture and language. Rather than forcing minority cultures to adapt themselves to the state, a language maintenance or a strong additive approach could see the state adapting to minority cultures.

This paper does not advocate for any one policy, nor advocate against MTB-MLE. Instead, the presumptions of a state that communicates only in Burmese and English must be confronted before an effective evaluation of MTB-MLE in Myanmar is possible. Education systems represent aspiration. Teachers, leaders and students in these regions are developing systems that teach their Mother Tongue, English and Burmese in a calibration that suits them. If peace is to finally come to Myanmar, then it is not these systems that must be dismantled, it is the State that must begin adapting itself to these vital aspirations.

# References

Allen, R. L. (1999). The socio-spatial making and marking of 'Us': Toward a critical postmodern spatial theory of difference and community, social identities. *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 5:3, 249-277. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504639951482

Anui, & Arphattananon, T. (2021). Ethnic content integration and local curriculum in Myanmar. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 14(2), 155-172. https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0060

Aung San Suu Kyi (1991). *Freedom from Fear*. Penguin: London.

Bradley, D. (1999). Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. In M. Ball (Ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Sociolinguistics Around the World*. Routledge. Oxfordshire.

Aung Thwin, M., & Thant Myint, U. (1992). The Burmese ways to socialism. *Third World Quarterly*, 13(1), 67-75. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3992410

Bwa, B. (1953). Burma. Educational Developments in 1951-1952. In: *International Yearbook of Education 1952*. UNESCO Geneva. International Bureau of Education.

Campbell, A. (1946). Education in Burma. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 94 (4719), 438-448.

Cheesman, N. (2017). How in Myanmar "national races" came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia,* 47(3), 461-483. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

Cho (1949) Burma. Educational Developments in 1947-1948. In: *International Yearbook of Education 1948*. UNESCO. Geneva. International Bureau of Education.

CIA (2023). Burma. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/

Curaming, R.A. & Kalidjernik, F. (2014). From sentimentalism to pragmatism? Language in education policy making in Timor-Leste. In: Sercombe, P. and Tupas, R. (eds) *Language, Education and Nation-Building. Assimilation and shift in SouthEast Asia.* Houndmills. Palgrave and Macmillan.

Dean, K. (2005). Spaces and territorialities on the Sino-Burmese boundary: China, Burma and the Kachin. *Political Geography,* 24, 808-830. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2005.06.004

Ethnic Nationalities Affair Centre (ENAC) (2017). *မိခင္ဘာသာစကားအေျခခ့ပီဘာသာစကားစ့ံုပညာေရးစနစ္.* [Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education System]. http://www.burmaenac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ENAC_EducationPaper_Burma-Version.pdf

Groves, T., & Stapnes, T. (12 Apr 2023). Prefiguring a democratic state: student activism and the National Education Law in Myanmar. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2195047

Heslop, L. (2019). *Encountering internationalisation: Higher education and social justice in Myanmar.* Doctoral Thesis. Brighton. University of Sussex.

Hillman, O. (1946). Education in Burma. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 15 (3).

Houtman, G. (1999). *Mental culture in Burmese Crisis Politics.* Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Tokyo.

Irrawaddy (2015). *Timeline of student protests against education law*. Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/timeline-of-student-protests-against-education-law.html

Jap, J. (2021a). Understanding recent survey data on Kachin's heterogeneous attitudes toward Myanmar. Tea Circle. https://teacircleoxford.com/policy-briefs-research-reports/understanding-recent-survey-data-on-kachins-heterogeneous-attitudes-toward-myanmar/

Joliffe, K. & Mears, E.S. (2016) *Strength in diversity: Towards universal education in Myanmar's ethnic areas*. Asia Foundation. https://asiafoundation.org/publication/strength-in-diversity/

Karen Human Rights Group (2017). *Foundation of fear: 25 years of villagers' voices from southeast Myanmar*. https://khrg.org/2018/05/chapter-3-education#ftn9

Lall, M. & South, A. (2014). Comparing models of non-state ethnic education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(2), 298-321. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.823534

Lall, M. & South, A. (2018). Power dynamics of language and education policy in Myanmar's contested transition. *Comparative Education Review*. 62 (4). 482-502. https://doi.org/10.1086/699655

Lall, M. (2009). Evolving education in Myanmar: The interplay of state, business and the community. In: Skidmore, M., Wilson, T. (eds) *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar*. ANU Press.

Lall, M. (2020). *Myanmar's education reforms. A pathway to social justice*. London. UCL Press.

Lin-Liu, J. (2002). Searching for an education in repressive Myanmar. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 48(39).

Maung Zarni (1999). *Confronting the demons*. The Irrawaddy. https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=17011

McCormick, P. (2020). Ethnic education systems in Burma: Possibilities for harmonization and integration. In: Chachavalpongpun, P. Prasse-Freeman, E. Stefford, P. (eds) *Unravelling Myanmar's transition. Progress, retrenchment and ambiguity amidst liberalization*. Singapore. NUS Press.

Mears, E.S., Rasmussen, P.E., Liza May Thet Thet Oo, & Zaceu Lian. (2016) *Analysis of Education Services in Contested Regions of Myanmar. Myanmar Education Consortium*. https://mecmigration.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/mec-contested-areas-report-july-20151.pdf

MEWG (Multilingual Education Working Group, Asia Pacific) (2013). *Mother tongue-based multilingual education. Lessons learned from a decade of research and practice*.

Ministry of Education (MoE) (2016). *National Education Strategic Plan 2016-21*. http://www.moe.gov.mm/en/?q=content/national-education-strategic-plan

Nash, M. (1962). Education in a new nation. The Village School in Upper Burma. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 2(2), 135–143. https://doi.org/10.1163/156854261X00147

Nolasco, R. (2016). *Languages my mother gave me*. Inquirer. https://opinion.inquirer.net/93279/languages-my-mother-gave-me

Prasse-Freeman, E., Chachavalpongpun, P. & Strefford, P. (2020). Introduction. In: Chachavalpongpunm P. Prasse-Freeman, E. Strrefford, P. (eds) *Unravelling Myanmar's transition. progress, retrenchment, and ambiguity amidst liberalization*. Singapore. NUS Press.

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2023). *Rights refused. Grassroots activism and state violence in Myanmar*. Stanford University Press.

Prime Minister Office, Finland. (2012). *Strategy for the national languages of Finland*. Prime Minister's Office Publications. https://oikeusministerio.fi/documents/1410853/4734397/Kansalliskielistrategia_EN.pdf/

Ruíz, R. (1984). Orientations in Language Planning. *NABE Journal*, 8(2), 15-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464

Salem-Gervais, N. & Raynaud, M. (2019). *Ethnic language teaching's decentralisation dividend*. Frontier. https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/ethnic-language-teachings-decentralisation-dividend

Salem-Gervais, N. Summer Aung, Amber Spreelung, Ja Seng, Jung Benatar, & Chan (2023) *Amendment of the National Education Law and other language-in-education developments following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar (Part 1).* Tea Circle. https://teacirclemyanmar.com/education/

Sadan, M. (2013). *Being and becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the state in the Borderworlds of Burma*. Oxford University Press/British Academy. Oxford.

Sadan, M. (2014). Reflections on building an inclusive higher education system in Myanmar. *British Academy Review,* 24.

Saw Eh Htoo (2022). Ne Win's echoes: Burmanization policies and peacebuilding in Myanmar today. In: Schmidt-Leukel, P., Grosshans, H., Krueger, M., (eds) (2022) *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar*. Contested Identities. London Bloomsbury.

Shah, R. & Cardozo, M.L. (2019). Myanmar's education system: Historical roots, the current context, and new opportunities. *Education and International Development Working Paper 34*. University of Amsterdam.

Shee, N.K. (2018). Karen Education Department's multilingual education for language maintenance. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 41(2), 389–394. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2018.07.007

Skutnubb-Kangas, T. (2000*) Linguistic genocide in education—Or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. New Jersey.

South, A. (2018). Hybrid governance and the politics of legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48(1), 50-66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1387280

South, A. & Lall, M. (2016a). *Schooling and conflict: Ethnic education and mother tongue-based teaching in Myanmar.* Asia Foundation. https://asiafoundation.org/publication/schooling-and-conflict-ethnic-education-and-mother-tongue-based-teaching-in-myanmar/

South, A. & Lall, M. (2016b). Language, education and the peace process in Myanmar. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 38(1), 128-153. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916598

Takeda, M. (2020). Language rights, ethnic identity, and conflict in Myanmar: A prospect for multilingual education to bridge the divided society. In: *Women, Children and Social Transformation in Myanmar*. Palgrave Pivot, Singapore.

Thako, H. & Waters, T. (2023). Schooling, identity, and nationhood: Karen mother-tongue-based education in the Thai–Burmese border region. *Social Sciences,* 12, 163. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030163

Thein Lwin (2000). Education in Burma (1945-2000).

Thein Lwin (2002). *Issues surrounding curriculum development in the ethnic nationality areas of Burma*. Burma Studies Conference. Gothenburg.

Thein Lwin (2007). *Education and democracy in Burma: Decentralization and classroom-level educational reform*. International Forum for Democracy Studies.

Thein Lwin, (2011) *Languages, identities, and education – in relation to Burma/Myanmar*. Thinking Classroom. https://www.thinkingclassroom.org/resources.html

Thet Win (2013). *Comprehensive education sector review higher education in Myanmar*. Ministry of Education/UNESCO.

Tupas, R. & Lorente, B. (2014). A 'new' politics of language in The Philippines: Bilingual Education and the new challenge of the Mother Tongue. In: Sercombe, P. and Tupas, R. (eds) *Language, Education and Nation-Building. Assimilation and shift in SouthEast Asia*. Houndmills. Palgrave and Macmillan.

Sein, U. (1957). Union of Burma. Educational Progress in 1955-1956. In: *International Yearbook of Education 1956*. UNESCO Geneva. International Bureau of Education.

UNESCO (2016). *MTB-MLE RESOURCE KIT Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education*. UNESCO Bangkok Office.

Walton, M. (2013). The 'Wages of Burman-ness:' Ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 43(1) 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.730892

Wingfield, T. (2000). MYANMAR: Political Stasis and a Precarious Economy. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 203-218. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27912252

Wimmer, A. & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks,* 2(4), 301-334. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043

World Education. (2017). Community driven convergence: MNEC community survey results. https://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/inc/common/_download_pub.cfm?id=19385&lid=3

Young, I, M. (1989). Polity and group difference: A Critique of the *Ideal of Universal Citizenship*. *Ethics*, 99(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381434