

## Chapter 1

### Burma and Karenni: nation-building and language

#### 1. Introduction

More than 25% of the population of Burma is non-Burman, and although many of these minority ethnic populations are distributed in a complex way throughout the country, it is the ethnic question territorially defined that has shaped the Burman-led attempt to create a unitary nation-state since 1948, and also the various attempts by non-Burmans to forestall it. In its linguistic and ethnic complexity Burma is perhaps not much different from other creations of 19th century European colonialism, but Burma's decline in human development since independence has been striking<sup>1</sup>.

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1 In 1905 Burma was the world's largest rice exporter. It was given least developed country status at the UN in 1987. See World Bank and UNICEF web sites for economic and social data, also United Nations (Yangon) Working Group (1998) for a detailed narrative on Burma's state of human development.

'Linguistic unification', the linguistic aspect of the attempt to create a nation state based on a single language or group of people, has been uncompromising in the case of Burma, and its converse or complement, the recognition of language rights, has been non-existent<sup>2</sup>. Insurgency and counterinsurgency have displaced people in all regions where the conflict has been fought. People have crossed international boundaries to enter all the adjacent countries and have become refugees in camps or have worked as illegal migrants. Between 1996 and 2002 more than 600,000 were internally displaced in the eastern hills of Burma (Burmese Border Consortium 2002a: §4; TBBC 2004: 16), and there are currently estimated to be a minimum of 1m illegal migrant workers from Burma in Thailand<sup>3</sup>.

In Thailand, although the camps are under the control of the Thai authorities, and are supported by international relief organisations, they are to a considerable degree self-governing, with camp leaders, committees and other indigenous administrative structures. Above all, they remain populations in opposition to the Rangoon government, and are led by political organisations whose armed wings have been engaged in military struggle on the Burma side of the border for many years.

These political organisations collaborate with INGOs to provide education and health services in camps, also to a lesser extent in the residual territories they control in Burma. Through the administration of education for their populations they have become involved in language planning, having had to face practical issues such as the status of Burmese, English and other local

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2 For a very strong version of language rights, see Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995); on minority rights in general, Kymlicka (1995); for a view of minority rights that sees no need for language considerations at all, (Hobsbawm 1990: 155; also 116, 36 and 55fn).

3 The figure of 1m is widely circulated and is conservative. A registration process for Burmese illegal workers in 2001 led to more than half a million registrations, not including dependants. A similar registration in 2004, including dependents, totalled 800,000 people (Inter-News Agency reported in [www.burmanet.org](http://www.burmanet.org)).

languages, and the question of the medium of instruction in their schools. They are also part of a broad, informally connected political movement to bring democracy to Burma, the most famous part of which is the National League for Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Through contact with this broad movement local political organisations acquire and rework ideas about democracy in Burma, federalism, and the idea of states based on language and ethnicity that are currently the preferred components of a federal solution to the Burma problem.

Karenni nationalism, one of the many long-standing nationality uprisings in Burma<sup>4</sup>, is built on efforts to create a single Karenni identity, including a single designated national language, Karenni, which is the language of the largest sub-group the Kayah. Components in this attempt at linguistic unification within one opposition cultural-political grouping include: promotion of an orthography with appropriate cultural and political characteristics; language policies which strengthen the designated national language and which serve other desired ends, for example promotion of other languages for wider communication; and neglect of minor local languages which have no role in the nation-building effort. To a considerable degree these activities reflect the parallel effort that has taken place within Burma centred around the national language Burmese.

Karenni nation-building has taken place in a context of the severe displacement mentioned above: one third of the population of Karenni state has been displaced, and about one half of all villages have been abandoned, relocated or destroyed by government forces<sup>5</sup>. Traditionally, villages in Karenni, a mountainous and isolated region, were mono-ethnic and monolingual. Displacement has brought together ethnic groups who earlier

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4 In contrast to the class-based struggle of the Communist Party of Burma 1939-1989.

5 See section *Displacement in Karenni*, below.

knew little about each other. The role of lingua francas has grown more important, and minor community languages have all but lost their role.

This dissertation will present new data on language use in one part of the Karenni exile community, a Thailand refugee camp housing about 83% of Thailand-based Karenni refugees. It will show that language use in this place is dominated by Karenni, Burmese and English, with lesser-used community languages apparently in a state of critical decline. Although Karenni as a spoken language is flourishing, acceptance of the official script is by no means universal, with rival scripts continuing to be used in church settings and elsewhere. Karen, although not widely used in the refugee camp studied, plays an important role in the region, and is a complicating factor in the Karenni nation-building project.

## 2. Linguistic unification in Burma

The nationalist fight for independence from Britain was essentially a Burman movement<sup>6</sup>. The *Dóbama Asi-ayòn* (We Burmans Organisation), which was founded in 1935 and which played a leading role in the events leading to independence, had as a rallying cry the following:

The land of Burma is our land,  
Burmese writing is our writing,  
Burmese language is our language -  
Love our land,  
Promote our writing,  
Respect our language.

(Thahkin Bá Thaùng, quoted in Allott 1985: 140)

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<sup>6</sup> For a different view, and the role of Shan, Kachins and Chins following annexation by the British, see Smith (1999: 36, 91).

This was written at a time when the school final exam and university study were English-medium only, which in effect excluded from higher education students from monastery and Burmese-language government schools. Allott (1985) charts the revival of Burmese in the 1930s, a central plank of the movement for independence, also the decline and later suppression of English in the years following independence, especially after the Ne Win coup of 1962 and the introduction of the *Burmese Way to Socialism*.

The 1931 census, which was the last to publish detailed information about ethnic groups and languages, gives the number of speakers of Burmese as a mother tongue as 67% of a population of 36.7m (Bennison 1933, cited in Allott 1985: 131). Earlier censuses had asked not about mother tongue, but about 'language ordinarily used at home'<sup>7</sup>; the figure for Burmese speakers reported by the 1921 census was 70% (*ibid*: 132), and probably included assimilated Mon, Arakanese and others<sup>8</sup>. Whether or not such counting is problematic depends on your point of view:

Certainly this process can be observed taking place in Rangoon all the time today. Almost all the numerous marriages between Burmans and Karens or Shans or other minority races lead to Burmese-speaking families whose children think of themselves as Burmans.

(Allott 1985:132)

This is one important facet of 'unification' in Burma, but seen from another angle is 'Burmanisation':

When census is taken, any Karen or any other ethnic person, those who cannot speak or write their language, they are counted as Burman. And if

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7 It has been argued (Levy 1938 cited in Hobsbawm 1990: 57 fn16) that requiring respondents to make a language choice when it is likely they are multilingual renders such information unreliable.

8 See South (2003) on the counting of Mons and Mon-speakers in various censuses.

their religion is Buddhist, they are counted as Burman. This is Burmanisation.

(Interview with SYH, a Karen educator, 5 August 2001)

After the Ne Win coup in 1962, the Printers and Publishing Registration established state control of the language of all publications, as well as their subject, the actual texts used and the printing run. By 1999, 'minority languages are rarely taught or used beyond the fourth grade in school; ethnic minority publications are restricted to little more than folksy, housewife magazines, such as the Karen *Our Home* or *Go Forward*' (Smith 1999: 205).

After 1962, languages such as Karen, Shan and Mon, while allowed to be taught in standards 1 and 2 in their home states, were in fact gradually starved of the necessary resources, and the result was a *de facto* ban, although teaching continued in resistance areas<sup>9</sup>. Government support for the teaching of Shan ceased in 1967, and for Mon after 1962. In 1994, before the ceasefire between the New Mon State Party and the SLORC, 30 Mon schools were forced to close following accusations of teaching the Mon language; and even after the 1995 ceasefire the SLORC tried to close 120 Mon-language schools serving 60,000 students (NHEC seminar *Curriculum Development Issues and the Teaching of Indigenous Vernacular Languages*, Chiang Mai, September 2001).

In 1961 Buddhism, previously recognised as having a 'special position' within Burma, was made the state religion, and as a consequence the Public Service Commission was required to give Pali, the liturgical language, equal weight with other subjects in the school curriculum (de Varennes 1999). In the same paper de Varennes makes further claims about the establishment of Burman hegemony, including '[e]xclusive use of the Burman language at most levels of state apparatus' and 'domination [by] ethnic Burmans at all

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<sup>9</sup> SYH, interview 5 August 2001.

levels of government’.

It is important not to create an over-simple picture of ethnic strife between Burma’s ‘ethnic winners’ the Burmans and the rest. United Nations (Yangon) Working Group (1998) contains a long list of countrywide deprivations, including food insecurity, vulnerability of livelihoods, high inflation, increasing impoverishment, social exclusion, urban-rural and gender disparities, and inadequate opportunities for political participation. These have affected all people, although the report cited does emphasise ethnic and regional disparities, with the prolonged conflict (it says) having prevented both development and ‘the integration of the [ethnic minority] states with the rest of the country’.

Finally, a few words need to be said about the politicisation of names in Burma. Even the name of the country, Burma or Myanmar, ‘now divides all who refer to it’ (Houtman 1999: chapter 2). The issue is not a new one. In the 1930s the *Dóabama Asì-ayò n*, in trying to reach out to all the nationalities of the country, debated whether to use *Bama* or *Myanma* in the name:

Since the *Dóabama* was set up, the movement always paid attention to the unity of all the nationalities of the country... and the *thakins*<sup>10</sup> noted that *myanma naingngan*... meant only the part of the country where the Burmans lived. This was the name given by the Burmese kings to their country. But this is not correct usage. *Bama naingngan* is not the country where only the *myanma* people live. It is the country where different nationalities such as the Kachins, Karens, Kayahs [Karennis], Chins, Pa-Os, Palaungs, Mons, Myanmars, Rakhines, Shans reside. Therefore, the nationalists did not use the term *myanma naingngan* or *myanmapyi*<sup>11</sup>, but *bama naingngan* or *bamapyi*. That would be the correct term. There is no other term than *bama naingngan*

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10 Literally ‘masters’, the anti-colonial self-styling of the movement’s leaders.

11 formal and informal versions.

or *bamapyi*. All the nationalities who live in *bama naingngan* are called *bama*.

(Sarpay Beikman 1976: 215, quoted *sic* in Lintner 1999: 47)

According to Houtman (1999: chapter 2), the radical leftist politicians of the We Burmans Association were provocatively reversing accepted usage of the 1930s in order to show their dislike for earlier politicians. The *Dóbama's* usage was once again reversed in 1974, when the BSPP government again used *Myanma* (in Burmese usage) as the inclusive term. When the SLORC in 1989 changed the country's international name to Myanmar, and also changed the names of many towns and other places, their argument was exactly the opposite to that of the *Dóbama* politicians (Lintner 1999: 47 fn 63). The new names were announced as being intended to transcend colonial usage and be inclusive, but in fact they were transcriptions of how Burmans pronounced Burmese names for these places.

'Neither *Myanma* nor *Bama*, from which Myanmar and Burma are derived, are neutral terms as both are strongly associated with the Burmese language, the language of the ethnic majority' (Houtman *op cit*). 'Myanmar is a literary word for Burma and it refers only to the Burmese ethnic group' (Aung San Suu Kyi, Marie Claire Magazine, Singapore edition, May 1996 cited in Houtman *op cit*). Okell refers to *Myanma* as 'formal and literary' (*ibid*), and Than Tun points out its strong connection with royal history (*ibid*). Houtman claims that 'since the 1962 coup, colloquial language has been regarded as subversive and associated with undesirable political opposition' (*ibid*).

In 1947, the Reverend Saw Molo, a Karen pastor from Toungoo, wrote to the Frontier Areas Enquiry Committee<sup>12</sup> to point out the connection between place names and political control:

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<sup>12</sup> Britain's opinion-gathering instrument in the ethnic minority areas in the lead-up to independence.

[T]he Karen villages situated over 40 miles [east and south] from Toungoo have single names in the Karen language only. On the other hand, the Karen villages within the radius of 40 miles from the town have two names, one in Karen and one in Burmese. The meaning of the names of these villages are not alike. This shows that the Karen villages having dual names in Burmese were once under the influence of the Burmans whereas the Karen villages with only Karen names were entirely free from all outside control or influence.

(British Government 1947: 177)

He used these observations to argue for autonomy for the Karens following independence from Britain.

### **3. Karenni state, ethnicity and languages**

Karenni is the smallest of the Burmese states, a mountainous, inaccessible and undeveloped area straddling the Salween River, approximately 150km north to south by about 100km east to west. To the north and immediate west lies Shan state, to the south and immediate west Karen state, and further west lie the plains towns of Pyinmana and Toungoo, on the rail link between Rangoon and Mandalay. To the east is the Thai province of Mae Hong Son. The population is about 200,000, of whom about 50,000 live in the capital Loikaw. The main economic activity is agriculture, mostly upland rotational (swidden) agriculture producing rice and maize, and in addition there is one very large tungsten mine. Teak has been important historically and continues to play a role. The political system, before colonisation, was similar to that in other places in south-east Asia, with feudal chiefs or *saophyas* administering local populations, receiving and in turn paying

tribute<sup>13</sup>.

An account of languages in Karenni (including the refugee camps) is difficult to separate from politics, history and a continuing conflict which has lasted for half a century<sup>14</sup>. The Karenni states were, before Burmese independence from Britain in 1948, part of the semi-circle of upland, remote, lightly administered territories, until quite recently without demarcated borders, which enclosed the lowland Burman heartland which was called by the British, Ministerial Burma or Burma Proper. The notion of a continuing and unbroken Karenni independence explicitly agreed with the British imperial power features centrally in Karenni exile political identity, together with betrayal by the British at the crucial moment in modern Karenni history, 1947<sup>15</sup>.

'Karenni' is an anglo-Burmese term meaning Red Karen, an older name for the Kayah, the major Karenni sub-group<sup>16</sup>. Apart from the southern part of Karenni state, which is linguistically dominated by the Karen language, or rather Paku, a close variant of it (Dudley 2000: 98), most of the population of Karenni are Kayah and they speak Kayah, which is also referred to as

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13 Bamforth, Lanjouw and Mortimer (2000) contains useful summaries of basic economic and social data. Grundy-Warr and Dean (2001) contains an account of non-territorial political power in Karenni and other border areas before colonisation. British Government (1947) contains a comprehensive account of the frontier areas, including Karenni, at independence.

14 The fullest account of the insurgencies in Burma is Smith (1999). See also Bamforth et al (2000) for an account of the more recent phases of insurgency in Karenni.

15 During the Japanese occupation of Burma 1942-5, British special forces were assisted and supported by the local population, in Karenni and elsewhere, and promises were made by local commanders that at independence Britain would support autonomy. The heavy price paid by the local population for its resistance, the promises that went beyond the authority of the commanders, and the the botched outcome of the political preparations for independence have all left an indelible mark in the psyche of ethnic minority leaders. See Dudley (2000: 249ff) and Smith (1999). On Karenni's historic independence, see Appendix 1.

16 Karen is an anglicisation of the Burmese *Kayin*, and *ni* is Burmese for 'red'. Red may be a reference to the traditional colour of women's cloth, or possibly skin colour (Dudley 2000: 7, 113).

Karenni. There are several sub-groups with their own languages which are mostly not mutually comprehensible, including Kayan, Kayaw, Manaw and Bre. 'When [non-Kayan] Karenni and Kayan people communicate [in speech], some words are understood, say 40%. I can speak [Karenni] 10-15%, but I can understand 50%' (TK, a Kayan, interview 19 June 2002).

In his autobiography (2002: 186), Pascal Khoo Thwe, a British-educated Kayan, describes the practical difficulties of traversing rural Karenni:

We tried speaking to [some Kayah village children] in Kayah, with our broken accents. At first this made them surly and suspicious, but at least they replied to us. This was the fifth language - the others being Padaung [Kayan], short-necked Padaung, Shan and Burmese - I had had to use within a distance of twenty miles.

It is quite common to hear such remarks when people are talking about language in Karenni. 'One village one dialect' was how a Karenni delegate to a recent education conference summed up the Kayan area where his organisation worked<sup>17</sup>. 'Formerly a single village contained a single tribe; now big villages contain two or three groups together' was another comment (TK, interview 19 June 2002).

There is evidence of earlier linguistic fracturedness in rural Karenni. Pascal Khoo Thwe describes three villages belonging to different Karenni sub-groups: a camouflaged mountain-top village of short-necked Padaung (Kayan), a Kayah village and a 'traditional' (or 'wild') Kayah village, each mono-ethnic and manifesting a different type of housing, dress and lifestyle (Pascal Khoo Thwe, *op cit*: 180, 186, 203). The rugged terrain and lack of modern communications in Karenni underline the reported isolation of different communities. At independence there was a simple T-shaped road

<sup>17</sup> Delegate of the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front at a Chiang Mai conference (Thein Lwin, Barnabas & Nan Lung: 2001a).

system whose trunk led west to Toungoo in Lower Burma<sup>18</sup>. Minor links led north to Shan states and south-east along a difficult Japanese-built war road to Siam. Only jungle trails linked Karenni with what is now called Karen state 150 miles to the south, through the land east of the Salween, described as 'extremely sparsely populated' with terrain 'wild and difficult' (British Government 1947: 200).

Dudley (1999) describes the linguistic and social remoteness of the villages of new arrivals in a Thailand refugee camp, all of them 'traditional' Kayah:

[M]ost recent arrivals cannot speak Burmese and in their villages had no access to health clinics or schools. Before crossing the border, most had apparently rarely, if ever, seen motor vehicles or foreigners. Their villages are remote, permanent hill settlements, sustained by subsistence agriculture. Most have not converted to Christianity and instead follow traditional Kayah religion and curative practices. Village-based spheres of activity and contact are small, and travel to local towns and markets is infrequent. Travel farther afield is rare indeed.

Dudley (1999: 5)

The fracturedness of rural Karenni extends beyond difficulties of communication to issues of ethnic classification and identity. Bamforth, Lanjouw and Mortimer (2000: 15) report of Karenni 'a great diversity of identifications and languages and this makes definitions extremely difficult. ... No consensus has emerged on how the groups should be classified or indeed what exactly is the relationship ethnically between the Karenni and the Karen groups.'

Of the 17 Karen group languages listed by the Ethnologue web site<sup>19</sup>, 9 are

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18 and part of which was a private road.

19 SIL International, available online at [www.ethnologue.org](http://www.ethnologue.org). The data reproduced here are based on the web site in 2002.

described as being indigenous to Karenni state. These are: Brek (16,600 speakers, called *Kayaw* in this dissertation), Bwe (15,700, called *Bre* here), Geba (40,100; not dealt with here), Manumanaw (3,000 or more; called *Manaw* here), Padaung (40,900; called *Kayan* here), Paku (5,300; not distinguished from Karen in this dissertation), Yintale (no figure given; not dealt with here), Western Kayah (210,000 including speakers in Karen state) and Eastern Kayah (77,900 including speakers in Thailand; this dissertation does not distinguish Eastern from Western Kayah). The population estimates (except for Western Kayah, 1987, and Eastern Kayah, undated) are from 1983 and probably derive from the 1983 census (Bamforth et al 2000: 18 fn34)<sup>20</sup>. As an indication of the fracturedness and localness of language (and ethnic) naming systems in the region, Ethnologue lists a total of 44 possible names for the above 9 languages.

It is important to realise that in Karenni state, in addition to Karenni subgroups there are large numbers of Burmans and Shan amounting to 17% and 16% respectively in 1983 (Burma census, cited in Bamforth et al 2000: 19). The proportion of Kayah (a 1983 census category that appears to have included Kayan, Kayaw and other groups) is reported as 56%, or about 90,000 in a total population of 159,000.

In the remainder of this dissertation the following 11 languages feature by name (in approximate order of degree of use within the refugee camp community investigated here): Kayah (usually referred to henceforth as Karenni), Burmese, English, Karen, Shan, Kayaw, Kayan, Manaw, Thai, Pa-O and Bre<sup>21</sup>.

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20 Ethnolinguistic data from the 1983 census figures were not published but have leaked out into some reports, including Bamforth et al (2000).

21 Dudley (2000: appendix) contains a useful language tree based on the data from her refugee informants in the southern Karenni camp. The list in use in this dissertation corresponds to those languages distinguished by observers in the northern Karenni camp.

#### **4. Refugees, camps and Burmese political organisations**

From 1989 on, the Burmese military junta the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), renamed in 1997 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), negotiated ceasefires with the many nationality insurgent groups, and by 1998 more than 23 of about 34 such groups had reached agreements with Rangoon (Smith 1999: xvi, chart 3). The Karenni People's Progressive Party (KNPP), which controls the Karenni refugee camps in Thailand, reached a ceasefire agreement in 1995 which broke down after 3 months. Of the ceasefires, the UN special rapporteur on human rights has written: '[I]n the absence of substantive political settlements and economic growth, the ceasefires have not in themselves been able to change the situation on the ground for most of the victims of previous conflicts' (UNCHR 2002: para 58, quoted by Burmanet.org 4 March 2003).

Non-ceasefire areas remain zones of continuing anti-insurgency activity characterised after 1995 by large and forced population displacements, government-controlled civilian relocation centres and beyond them, zones of extreme civilian insecurity. By 2004, more than half of all villages in Karenni state had been destroyed, relocated or abandoned, with a total of 88,000 internally displaced people, including 7,000 living in free-fire zones (TBBC 2004: 22-23<sup>22</sup>). These figures are in addition to the approximately 23,000 living as refugees in Thailand. The total amounts to approximately 50% of the population of Karenni state.

The first Karenni camps in Thailand were established in 1991, and numbers of refugees grew rapidly after 1995. By 2004 the total population for all Karenni camps was 22,782 (CCSDPT December 2004). Although the first

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<sup>22</sup> On earlier displacements, Bamforth et al 2000: 52, map; Burmese Border Consortium 2002a: §1, table.

refugees were the families of insurgents, by the mid-1990s almost all new arrivals were the victims of the wider conflict, especially the widespread forced relocation of villagers described above. 27% of the 2002 population had been in the camps for more than 7 years, and almost a third had been displaced more than four times before finally reaching the camps. Two thirds had been farmers. Three quarters of them were Kayah, and almost 40% had had no education (64% for the northern camp). (Consortium-Thailand 2002: 14, figures revised by author.)

The active role played by the ethnic nationality insurgent groups in the establishment and management of the camps appears to have suited the Thai government, which until the late 1980s had good relations with the KNU (Smith 1999: 196ff), and which had actively discouraged UN involvement in earlier refugee crises along the Lao and Cambodian borders.<sup>23</sup> Although the Thai government ensured the security and containment of the camps, it left the rest of the burden of administration to indigenous political organisations and their funders. When the INGOs moved from the Lao and Cambodian borders as refugee crises there passed, these organisations cooperated with the indigenous Burmese political organisations, providing money and technical expertise for shelter, food, and health and education services. Thus the indigenous political organisations were recognised as the *de facto* representatives of the camp populations by both the various Thai authorities and international relief organisations<sup>24</sup>.

A committee of 19 INGOs (CCSDPT, 2002) coordinates official camp-based relief efforts including food, shelter, health and education. Beyond this core there is a considerably large unofficial presence, channelling funds and

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<sup>23</sup> Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees, and that is why a local consortium of donors (now called the Thailand Burma Border Consortium), not the UNHCR, provides basic relief services.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with DT, 24 October 2002.

expertise into projects and activities of all kinds – reconciliation programs, education and training, documentation of human rights abuses, drug rehabilitation, AIDS awareness and counselling, dealing with gender-based violence, media projects including publishing (in Karen), cultural preservation, the environment, and so on.

The KNPP was founded in 1957, shortly after the death from malaria of the Karenni rebel leader Sao Shwe, who played a central role in the start of the Karenni insurgency, leading the call to arms after the murder by Rangoon forces, in 1948, of U Bee Tu Reh, who had ‘championed the [Karenni] separatist cause during the independence negotiations with the British’ (Smith 1999: 112). This connection forms the basis for the KNPP’s continuing claim to represent the Karenni people, and indeed to continue that representation in an unbroken line of succession originating with the *de jure* pre-independence Karenni government. The KNPP is the largest of the Karenni insurgent groups, the others by and large having arisen as breakaway movements. The KNPP website [www.karenniland.org](http://www.karenniland.org) contains a blow-by-blow account of the events of 1947-8, together with some statements about bringing ‘genuine democracy’ to Burma and cooperating with other nationality movements and the democracy movement inside Burma. It is worth bearing in mind that the KNPP, like all the other insurgency groups, is part of the wider Burma culture complex, and may therefore have more in common with its enemy the SPDC than it does with western pluralistic democratic organisations (Fink 2001: 5, cited in South 2003: section *The ethnic nationalist reaction*). Examples of Burmese political culture to be seen in many opposition groups, cited by South, include factionalism, the monopolisation of political initiatives and intolerance of dissent.

## 5. Opposition language policy

In September 2001 a Burma opposition seminar entitled *Issues in Curriculum Development and the Teaching of Indigenous Vernacular Languages* took place in Thailand. It was sponsored by the National Health and Education Committee (NHEC)<sup>25</sup>, and contained policy presentations and reports by nine ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups<sup>26</sup>, as well as papers from education specialists from the Philippines, India, Norway and Britain.

On the Burma side, presentations were made by organisations ranging from large ceasefire groups such as the Kachin Independence Organisation and the New Mon State Party, with about 140 and 120 schools respectively under their administration, and many years of administrative experience, to small organisations such as the Lahu Education Committee, responsible for 3 small schools on the Thai border (Thein Lwin, Barnabas & Nan Lung 2001a; also author's notes).

Issues raised by the presenters included the following:

- difficulties involved in finding teachers who have the right training and language skills. For example, in Kachin state urban college-trained teachers did not have knowledge of the language of their own ethnic group, whereas local teachers who knew the local language were untrained as teachers. Similarly, the ABSDF<sup>27</sup>, almost all of whose members are native speakers of Burmese, ran several schools in camps,

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25 a coordinating committee of the National Council of the Union of Burma, a 'congress' attached to a group of exiled National League for Democracy MPs elected in 1990.

26 Relations between ceasefire and non-ceasefire insurgent groups are complex and depend on local conditions and history. To the knowledge of this author, only the KNPP and the KNPLF operate schools, and only the KNPP has debated and made public a language policy. See Bamforth et al (2000: 38).

27 All Burma Students Democratic Front, one of several student organisations to play a leading role in the urban democracy uprising in 1988. Many students fled to the border and continue to play a role in camps.

with Burmese as the medium of instruction, although most of their students were native speakers of Karen and found it difficult to handle Burmese as the medium of instruction. In some areas, for example Lahu schools on the Thai-Shan border, teachers were not only untrained but had very low levels of general education and had difficulties dealing with Thai, Burmese and English.

- in some areas without school support for the mother tongue, monks and missionaries provided weekend mother-tongue teaching for students; in a few areas, for example one group of Pa-O in Burma under the control of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organisation, monks and missionaries provided the only education available.
- high levels of illiteracy in some areas: up to 95% in some Pa-O areas without formal schools.
- lack of texts; or texts only available in Burmese from SPDC [government] schools; in some areas, eg Karen and Karenni camps, there are curriculum development projects in collaboration with INGOs.
- a high level of drug abuse (30%) in one Pa-O area on the west bank of the Salween River (within Burma)<sup>28</sup>.
- the large number of dialects. The KNPLF delegate reported that in the Pa Dawng [ie Padaung or Kayan] area of Karenni State where the KNPLF operated there were many different dialects - 'one village one dialect'.
- language status issues. The ABSDF advocated Burmese as the national language, whereas the KNU and NMSP advocated equal status for Burmese and English within a federal system, with other languages given

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<sup>28</sup> The narco economy, embracing Thailand, the southern Shan state and parts of Laos is a serious complication for communities in the Thai borderlands, whether displaced Burmese, 'hilltribe', or 'Thai', in their attempts to access mainstream Thai prosperity.

official status in their areas. In 2000 the Kachins, whose state includes 7 main groups of languages, created a new official language, Wun Pawng, 'in the interests of equity'<sup>29</sup>. In NMSP schools, Mon language and Mon history are taught in Mon, otherwise the language of instruction is Burmese. In the Shan and Lahu schools on the Thai border, Burmese is not taught at all.

The seminar included group discussions with the aim of creating an agreed framework for teaching, and included a joint policy on language. Languages to be taught included mother tongue (or tongue of school catchment area), Burmese and English. The seminar suggested that the medium of instruction should be local (ie mother tongue of the majority of children) at primary; local or Burmese or English at lower secondary; and English at senior secondary. The rationale for using English at higher levels was that 'the level of knowledge of children in every region would be the same [ie no ethnic group would be privileged by having its language as the universal medium of instruction] and children could access international knowledge' (Thein Lwin et al 2001a: §5.2d).

## **6. Language policy of the Karenni National Progressive Party**

At the above seminar, the KNPP presented its language policy in the following terms:

- the national language is Karenni (ie Kayah), although the linguistically fragmented nature of Karenni society and the current state of education mean that this is more of a goal than a reality, and at present both Burmese

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<sup>29</sup> In fact Wun Pawng has been developed from the majority language in Kachin State, Jinghpaw.

and, to a lesser extent, Karen are widely used as lingua francas<sup>30</sup>.

- Karenni and Burmese are taught in schools only up to grade 8<sup>31</sup>, whereas English is taught at all school levels and becomes the focus of language teaching in high school.
- English is stressed for its international importance.
- the KNPP has no plans to cater for ‘linguistic minorities’, who will be left to teach and learn their own languages out of school<sup>32</sup>.
- the target medium of instruction in schools above primary level is English, but where proficiency among teachers or students is low, not always in the earlier grades, Burmese is used.
- the target language of classroom texts is English, but in practice most texts are in Burmese and are those used in SPDC schools; some curriculum projects are creating English-medium texts which are culturally Karenni-centred, or at least not Rangoon-centred.

The main recent changes in KNPP policy have concerned the practical role of English. In early 2000 the KNPP announced a policy of English-only instruction in schools after primary school (ie after grade 4), with the teaching of Burmese restricted to primary school. This position was criticised by some education professionals as both politicised and somewhat impractical given the generally low English language proficiency of teachers and students and the undeniable role of Burmese as the lingua franca at the

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30 However, proficiency in Burmese is higher in Karenni schools after 8 years of study than it is in the linguistically more homogeneous Karen schools after 10 years of study. This is probably because Burmese plays an important role in Karenni areas, whereas in Karen areas the Karen language dominates (Thein Lwin, Barnabas & Nan Lung 2001b). For more on the role of Burmese in Karenni areas, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

31 See Appendix 2 for an brief description of the Karenni (Burmese) education system including its numbering system.

32 This is not consistent with the ‘mother-tongue instruction’ conclusion of the seminar: see previous section.

northern camp<sup>33</sup>.

In the face of criticism, and following a household and education survey in all Karenni camps in 2001, the KNPP relaxed its position on the languages to be used and taught in schools: first in 2001 - Burmese and Karenni to be taught up to 8th grade, then only English to be taught; and again in 2003 – the language of classroom instruction to be English where practicable, otherwise to be Burmese.

## **7. Karenni orthography**

There are several scripts for Karenni, and a summary of their history shows them to be a locus of contention.

- a romanised script introduced by Roman Catholic missionaries in Taungoo, taught in some private schools and used in the Roman Catholic liturgy. Although the script was devised for Kayah, it has been used for Kayan.
- a Burmese-like script based on Karen orthography (itself based on Burmese script and introduced by John Wade, an American Baptist missionary, in the 1840s). This ‘west Karenni’ script was created by a Roman Catholic living in Pruso in 1962, with encouragement from the then BSPP [Burmese government] authorities in the following reported terms: ‘A romanised script is for Europeans; have your own script’ (TK, interview 19 June 2002). The script was not used in government schools, where there was no teaching or use of Kayah or any other minority language, but its use was allowed in Sunday schools, school holiday programs and literacy programs (TS, interview 11 January 2003).

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<sup>33</sup> Karen is the lingua franca at the southern Karenni camp.

- a script somewhat resembling Thai, created by Hte Bu Phe before he became General Secretary of the KNPP in 1977, while he was working in Loikaw (the Karenni capital) for the then BSPP government. This script, now called 'camp script', and sometimes 'rebel literacy', has been taught for 20 years in the camps and some other places inside Burma (TK, interview 19 June 2002). 'The Karenni language [ie the camp script] is for revolutionary purpose' (KNPP education official at the education seminar described above). Reports about the degree of penetration of this script vary. The KNPP claims that two thirds of the (camp) population can use it, but see the next dot point below. Bamforth et al (2000: 18 fn 35) include a note that for speakers of Kayah dialects different from Kyebogyi [ie western Karenni], on which it was based, it is 'reportedly difficult to learn'. Four books of the New Testament have been produced using the script<sup>34</sup>.
- According to a 2001 survey containing self-reported data from adult household representatives (Consortium-Thailand 2001, figures revised by this author), 48% of the camp population know a Karenni script: 10% the roman, 13% the Burmese-like, and 25% the camp script. Since the camp script is only about 25 years old and is taught in schools, it is probable that the access rate for school students is higher than for adult household representatives.
- a Bwe Karen<sup>35</sup> dictionary, using a roman script, was published by the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in 1977 (Bamforth et al 2000: 18 footnote 35). This script is not known in the camps.

The scripts have produced some friction. An adult literacy program for the refugee camps, proposed in 1997 by the (KNPP's) Karenni Literature

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<sup>34</sup> by John Bryant, then at Payap University.

<sup>35</sup> the same as the language referred to as *Bre* in this dissertation.

Committee<sup>36</sup>, was cancelled following disagreement about which script to use. The KNPP wanted the camp script, but the funder wanted the roman script, citing the greater number of people in Karenni state using both the roman script and the Burmese-like script. In the end the funder withdrew support, citing its 'do no harm' policy. A second potential funder was willing to fund the program in camp script, but by then things had become too difficult. A letter written at the time describes the situation as 'a very controversial political situation', adding that the second funder was advised (by some Karennis) 'against taking a stand so openly (by supporting the Adult Literacy Training [in camp script]) as this could cause conflict among the Karenni people'. A literacy program took place in the camps in 2002, in camp not roman script.

Many Kayan are Roman Catholic and have learned the roman script at Sunday school. For older people especially, this is a barrier to learning a newer script. The Baptist church, whose congregation includes about 20% of the camp population, uses Karen texts on the whole, with singing and speaking sometimes in Karen and sometimes in other languages. Church congregations in camps are sometimes recreations of communities from a single village – in the northern camp there are at least 5 separate Baptist churches. Some of them have adopted the Karenni camp-script New Testament (replacing a Karen version), while others have not. 'Reading of Bible is in Karenni, singing is in Karen; some of them [the pastors] read in Karenni and preach in Karenni, but some read in Karen and preach in

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36 The three core aims of the project were described as follows (in uncorrected English, two slightly different versions merged): '(1) Karenni tribe from all camps to be literate in Karenni literature. (2) To maintain and reveal of the ancient Karenni physical and mental customs and heritages by Karenni literature. (3) To be strongly appreciate and loving in Karenni literature is cause to become and increase the patriotic person among the Karenni nationalities' (Karenni Literature Committee, draft of unpublished project proposal, 1997).

Karenni' (TS, interview 11 January 2003). And some pastors read from a Karen bible and translate into Karenni as they go. The complicated patterns of language use in acts of worship are one of the themes of the research reported in Chapter 2.