

TRADITIONAL MINORITIES AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THAILAND

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the educational problems and needs of traditional minorities in Thailand,¹ especially related to their ability in Thai, the national language. The various groups involved are quite diverse; their degree of integration into Thai society also differs, as does the strength of each group's separate identity. In Thailand, traditional monastery education has virtually been replaced by schools teaching the tightly-structured nationwide Ministry of Education curriculum. However, few of the schools in minority villages are provided by the usual central authority; rather, a large number of ad hoc arrangements have been made. None of the schools in remote minority villages even reaches the legal minimum, Pratom 6, so most minority children who want to complete primary education must do so outside their villages, at considerable expense. Of course all secondary and tertiary education is located in or near Thai towns.

The effects of this situation are unfortunate, both for the minorities and for Thailand as a whole. Starting with the handicap of curriculum entirely in another language and studying in less than ideal conditions throughout their school career (which may be very short), the level attained by minority students is generally low, though there are individual exceptions. Capability in written Thai is often very limited, though spoken Thai ability may be somewhat better - a tribute to the utility of Thai and the learning ability of the students. In this situation the minority languages remain the first languages of the minority villages, and the minorities will remain separate from the mainstream of Thai society.

A great deal of excellent research on minority languages has been done by the Tribal Research Center in Chiangmai, the Indigenous Languages of Thailand Project, and the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development (formerly Southeast Asian Language Center). However this research has not yet been applied to solving the educational problems of helping minorities. I am certain that it soon will be.

My own recent fieldwork in Thailand provides data on an excellent example of the educational and linguistic integration of a minority, and could serve as an example for programs with other minorities; though the transition could be made more quickly and less painfully with appropriate cultural and linguistic inputs.

CHINESE, MALAYS, KHMERS AND THAIS

Firstly, I would like to outline briefly some groups I am *not* considering. As in many countries of this region, Thailand has a large Chinese population

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from various regional areas, especially Teochiu. This is mainly an urban or town group, though there are some Yunnanese (south-western Mandarin) living in villages in north-western Thailand. Their educational needs are met in part by private primary and secondary schools; many such children would be lugin, descendants of a Chinese father and a Thai mother, or second and later generation migrants, and thus bilingual.

Another very large group is the Moslems in the southern provinces of Thailand. Some, the 'Thai Malay' Moslem Thai-speakers along the west coast, speak Southern Thai. Others in the eastern provinces of the south have Malay, an Austronesian language, as their first language, and learn Thai only in school. In a sense, these Malays are a minority from the Thai point of view. However, in their area, they are the vast majority; they speak the northernmost dialect of the national language of Malaysia, in a dialect continuum with adjacent dialects. This language therefore has prestige and widespread use in the media, albeit in a neighbouring country.

The Khmers are in a similar position in Thailand, as speakers of dialects of the national language of Kampuchea, which is a Mon-Khmer language. However, they tend not to identify with that country, and are tending to assimilate into the general Lao population of the southern parts of north-eastern Thailand.

The last category of groups not considered here is the speakers of Thai dialects or languages other than 'standard' Bangkok Thai. In the north-east, the north, and the south the main 'Thai' population speaks rather different dialects: Lao, Kham Muang, and Pak Tay respectively. The differences from 'standard' Thai are mainly in the area of phonology and lexicon; for some details see Brown 1965 and Diller 1981a. Since 'standard' Thai is taught in schools in all regions, educated people in these areas learn it as a second dialect in a diglossic situation; and intermediate varieties, with 'standard' lexicon but regional phonology, or an expansion of the range of possibilities within the regional dialect encompassing the 'standard', have developed; see, for example, Diller 1981a on diglossia in Southern Thai.

In addition to these regional varieties of South-western Thai² languages with large numbers of speakers in Thailand, there are various other Thai languages with smaller numbers of speakers: Shan and Lue in the north, and Saek, Yo, Phuan, Tai Dam or Lao Song, and Phutai³ in the north-east; and also some in the western central region. These languages are somewhat less similar to 'standard' Thai; especially the various small groups of the north-east, which are Central or (Saek) Northern Thai, historically and linguistically quite distinct from South-western Thai including Shan, Lue, Kham Muang, Lao, 'standard' Bangkok Thai, and Pak Tay. However, their native ability in a closely-related language is a great help in learning the national language at school.

The difficulties of the speaker of another Thai language or dialect in learning 'standard' Thai are real and substantial. In practice they are reduced by the teacher from the region who uses the regional dialect to introduce his students to 'standard' Thai; though strictly speaking (s)he is not supposed to do so. The result, as noted above, can be a kind of diglossia.⁴ However the degree of difficulty in learning another dialect to a usable extent is considerably less than for the traditional minorities, who are culturally much more distinct, and whose languages are unrelated to Thai.

The problems for the Chinese community, the Malays, and the speakers of other Thai dialects or languages than 'standard' Thai are thus quite different. All warrant further discussion and research. However, these problems are much less extreme than those of the traditional minorities which are the focus of this paper.

TRADITIONAL MINORITIES

There are many small groups in Thailand whose languages are either Tibeto-Burman (TB), Mon-Khmer (MK), Miao-Yao (MY) or Austronesian (AN). These groups tend to be socioeconomically less well integrated into Thai society; in many cases they live in mountainous border regions. Table 1 gives a brief summary of names, linguistic affiliations, populations and locations; for more exact information, see Bradley 1984b, Gainey and Thongkum 1977, Tribal Data Project 1972-1977, and Bhruksasri and McKinnon 1984, especially my chapter and the demographic chapter by Kunstader.

	Own name	Thai name	Other names	Population	Location	Linguistic subgroup
TIBETO-BURMAN	Phlong*	Kariang	Pwo } Karen Sgaw	300,000	W	Karenic
	Sgaw*	Yang			NW	Karenic
	Lahu*	Musə		35,000	NW,N	Burmic
	Akha*	Ikaw		22,000	N	Burmic
	Lisu*	Lisaw		20,000	NW,N,W	Burmic
	Mpi	Kaw		2,000	Phrae P.	Burmic
	mBisu	Lua ⁵	Bisu, Misu	200	Chiengrai P.	Burmic
	Ugong	Lawa	Kanburi Lawa	300	W	Burmic
	Jinghpaw*	-	Kachin	1,000	NW	Kachinic
			Tibeto-Burman Total	380,500		
MON-KHMER	Chong	-		6,000	E	Pearic
	Mon*	=		200,000	W	Monic
	Nyahkur	Chaobon ⁶	Niakuol	10,000	w.NE	Monic
	Kui*	Suay		210,000	s.NE	Katuic
	So			30,000	e.NE	Katuic
	Bruu		Vankiêu	1,000	e.NE	Katuic
	Brao			200	e.NE	Katuic
	Lavua	Lua		15,000	NW	Palaungic
	Phalo	Lua	Mae Rim Lawa	100?	Chiengmai P.	Palaungic
	Khamet ⁷	Lua		100	Chiengrai P.	Palaungic
	Lua	=		100?	Lampang P.	Palaungic
	Khmu*	=	Lao Thoeng ⁸	10,000+	e.N	Khmuic
	Mal/Pray*	Thin ⁹		25,000	e.N	Khmuic
	Mrabri	Phi Tong Luang ¹⁰		100?	e.N	Khmuic
Tonga/Mos	Ngaw ¹¹		300?	S	Aslian	
			Mon-Khmer Total	507,900		
MIAO-YAO	Hmong*	Maew	Miao, Meo	60,000	N,W	Miao
	Iu Mien*	Yao	Yao	35,000	e.N	Yao
			Miao-Yao Total	95,000		
AN	Moken/ Moklen/ Urak Lawoi*	Chao Thale ¹²	Orang Laut; Sea Gypsies	4,000	W. coast	Western

Table 1: Traditional minorities of Thailand

The total population involved is less than a million, or about 2% of Thailand's total. A full bibliography of linguistic research would be out of place here; but the work under the aegis of the Tribal Research Center on Lahu, Akha and Lisu, of the Indigenous Languages of Thailand Project on Khmer, Kui, Bruu and Mpi; and of the former Southeast Asian Language Center on Sgaw Karen and on Lavüa should be acknowledged. Another valuable source on ten traditional minority languages is Smalley 1976, which includes chapters on nine of the above; three TB languages, both MY languages, three MK languages and the one AN minority language of Thailand.

The smallest traditional minorities - such as the TB mBisu and Ugong, the MK Phalo, Mos and others - are in most cases in the process of assimilating; for a case study, see the section below on Ugong. A few small groups, such as the TB Mpi and the MK Bruu and So, have traditions of being brought as war captives to their present locations; some, such as the Brao, are relatively recent refugees - though earlier than the massive post-1975 influx from Laos. The populations given do not include the population of refugee camps - which house large numbers of Meo, Yao and others in the north; large numbers of Lao, other Thai groups, and some MK groups in the north-east; and very numerous Khmers (and a few others) along the border with Kampuchea.

Some of the traditional minorities, especially the larger ones, are what I call 'transnational minorities' in Bradley 1984a; these are indicated by an asterisk in Table 1. Such groups live in several countries, but have a feeling of their separate identity. Until recently, there was considerable movement of individuals in such groups from village to village, without much regard for national borders which divide their territory.

EDUCATION POLICY: PAST AND PRESENT

This section is not intended to give a comprehensive survey of Thai education policies; rather, it briefly discusses the issues in traditional and modern primary and secondary education as they affect the traditional minorities. For more references and details see Sternstein 1976.

Historically, young males in Buddhist countries entered a monastery as a novice for three months or more during their adolescence. During this time, the monks would teach them to read and write, both in the vernacular and in Pali; this education was largely of a rote nature, relevant mainly to religion. Prior to the existence of secular schools, the monasteries also provided education to the local young boys, whether novices or not, over a longer period. Thailand was no exception to this rule; some schools of this type continue to exist, and many other ex-monastery schools were taken over by the Ministry of Education.

The traditional minorities in principle had equal access to the monastery schools; since the monasteries also provide boarding, the obstacles if anything used to be less than now. There are still various monasteries which 'specialise' in teaching traditional minority novices and monks; the largest and best-known is in Chiangmai, but others are scattered through the towns near minority areas, and there is even one in Bangkok. Since many traditional minorities are nominally Buddhist, the reduction in the availability of monastery education has had a negative effect on their opportunities to learn.

Since 1852/2396, there have also been private schools established by Christian missionaries in Thailand; some of these are now among the most prestigious secondary schools in the country. From 1871/2414, when King Chulalongkorn