

Modeling Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar Collections

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Abstract:

Over the past few years, Myanmar has been at the focus of renewed scrutiny for economic, social, and political challenges faced by a complex nation-state inclusive of great diversity, both in socio-linguistic communities and religious traditions. The current conflicts between the majority (Buddhist) Burmese and the minority (Muslim) Rohingya and (Christian) Kachin are a prominent and highly visible feature of more pervasive and long-standing religious and cultural divisions. In partnership with Harvard Widener Library and Harvard humanities faculty, the author has been collecting resources across Myanmar for the past three years with the specific purpose of targeting acquisitions in minority languages, especially materials that illuminate religious texts and customary practice. These collections are meant to not only present a more dynamic religious and social narrative outside of specifically Buddhist communities and traditions (with Chin, Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya materials) but to also expand access to interpretations of the Theravada Buddhist canon beyond those in Burmese (to include Mon, Shan, Pa'O, and Rakhine). A key hope for this project is to challenge the existing dominance of Burmese voices by modeling a more balanced religious dialogue in library collections and to negotiate broader community dialogue through access.

Keywords: Myanmar, ethnology, diversity, religion, language.

Over the past few years, Myanmar has been at the focus of renewed scrutiny for political, economic, and social challenges faced by a complex nation-state inclusive of great diversity, both in socio-linguistic communities and religious traditions. The current conflicts between the majority (Buddhist) Burmese and the minority (Muslim) Rohingya and (Christian) Kachin are a prominent and highly visible feature of more pervasive and long-standing religious and cultural divisions. In partnership with Harvard Widener Library and Harvard humanities faculty, the author has been collecting resources across Myanmar for the past three years with the specific purpose of targeting acquisitions in minority languages, especially materials that illuminate religious texts and customary practice. These collections are meant to not only

present a more dynamic religious and social narrative outside of specifically Buddhist communities and traditions (with Chin, Sgaw, Pwo, Kachin, and Rohingya materials) but to also expand access to interpretations of the Theravada Buddhist canon beyond those in Burmese (to include Mon, Shan, Pa'O, and Rakhine). A key hope for this project is to challenge the existing dominance of Burmese voices by modeling a more balanced religious dialogue in library collections and to negotiate broader community dialogue through access.

The influence of Myanmar national language policy

A confluence of political, economic, and cultural challenges will necessarily affect any effort to build library collections, both within a given geo-politic area and at institutions wishing to collect resources from and about that region. This paper seeks to simultaneously identify major trends and features to library collections from and about Myanmar (broadly defined by its current political boundaries) as well as to suggest strategies that may lead to increased inclusion of ethnic and religious diversity within such collections. The author will begin by describing general political, economic, and cultural trajectories resulting in observable collection development habits. Broadly speaking, the political environment as it relates to Myanmar collections is largely dominated by a series of both articulated and tacit national language policies across a century of rapid (and often extreme) political shifts. The author will present some of the more influential waymarks of the twentieth century (and the decade beyond). The matter of economics, where it is not inextricably tied to political affairs, also brings to mind the opportunities and limitations inherent to the production of content in ethnic minority languages. The author acknowledges openly that one may call into question the market viability of any ethnic minority press, and yet they managed (and even still continue) to persist. Finally, with regard to culture, arguably the most difficult influence to track, quantify, and define due to its complexity, the author is limited here to broad strokes and openly admits to the need for more subtlety than the present project allows. But, most humanities scholars of Myanmar allow to stand for its efficacy the debatable conceit that “the Myanmar government holds that 135 ethnic groups are clustered into eight major national races: Bamar [Burmese speakers], Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin [Karen], Mon, Rakhine and Shan.” (Holliday, 40)

Generally acknowledged as a foundational study of the complexity of language policy in modern Myanmar, Mary Callahan’s essay (2003) establishes a broad historical narrative to which many subsequent reviews and refinements adhere. If one were to narrow one’s view of the issue to three broad periods: 1) the pre-independence colonial period; 2) the parliamentary period (1948–62); and 3) the socialist–military authoritarian period (1962–2011), then one has an adequate if imperfect frame that then only need accommodate the uncertain appendix of recent political change (2012–). With regard to the colonial period, there is no surprise in the preferential treatment of English as a language of administration and elite social position. It would be incorrect to claim that the geographic margins of British Burma were inconsequential, especially with regard to the war period, but one must acknowledge the primacy in all matters political, economic, and cultural of the central corridor between modern Yangon and Mandalay. The gravity of this anchoring area, as well as the importance of English and Burmese language as modes of media and nation, continued well into independence and the parliamentary period. It was only after the emergence of the socialist and authoritarian military period that policy statements began to acknowledge ethnic minority languages and literacies. Where elites had once been more concerned over the use of Burmese as an absolute tool for the construction and perseverance of a national identity, new political perspectives allowed for some level of acceptance to ethnic minority languages as a celebration of the diversity of the nation, so long as efforts did not result in or aid political opposition.

By 1972, this limited acceptance was marked by such practical measures as the establishment of local language committees as well as a national-level committee tasked with overseeing the composition of comprehensive language taxonomies. Indeed, primary education in local languages was, by policy if not always practice, allowed up to the fourth-grade level in national schools. The case may well be made in either direction of acceptance/control. For example, press nationalization laws made for often insurmountable censorship barriers. And, as Ian Holliday notes:

. . . the problem faced by many ethnic minorities is that the reality of daily governance in Myanmar falls far short of what the constitution and supplementary legislation provide for. Indeed, coming out of a half-century of military dominance in which state leaders prized unity above all else, ethnic leaders find it very difficult to promote their cultures. (411)

Yet, the net result is that well-organized ethnic minority groups found a more manageable, if sometimes fraught, path towards the publication, preservation, and documentation of local languages than in previous periods. The reality of experience differed across regions; for example, the case of the Mon language seems to have been particularly contentious and problematic from the 1960s onward to the present day. In the case of Mon specifically, the origins of conflict run somewhat deep, wherein the Mon language not only occupies a central place in historical concerns and shifts of more ancient political dominance (including the written Mon script as a source of Burmese script) but also maintains an alternative religious cannon in the Theravada Buddhist faith that often challenges Burmese interpretations. Notable, then, are the more recent shifts in discourse regarding national language policy, where recent steps toward democratic government includes rhetoric around language that acknowledges the efficacy of allowing longer periods of school instruction in local languages as a means of raising standards of education and perceived citizenship across the country. Holliday, again:

Today, the formal rights of ethnic minority peoples are mainly similar to those enjoyed by the Bamar [Burmese] majority, and moves are being made to cater for distinct linguistic and cultural groups. In July 2013, for instance, state broadcaster Myanmar Radio and Television announced that by the end of the year it planned to launch a TV channel with shows in ethnic minority languages. (411)

What remains to be seen, then, is the extent to which the Burmese majority, still politically, economically, and culturally dominant, is willing to allow for increasing levels of formal resistance in the mode of such publications as primary-level textbooks. As Salem-Gervais and Metro observe:

While the national history curriculum has been transformed, several non-state groups have been creating and revising their own textbooks. These textbooks often contain different content or opposing perspectives on events. They form an oppositional response to the dominant discourse on Burmese history. (60)

With these dynamics in mind, many language policy observers both participated in and anxiously await signs of real policy changes resulting from an “International Conference on Language Policy in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings,” hosted by the University of Mandalay in February of 2016. (Mizzima 2016)



Image 1: Political divisions of Myanmar. Seven of fourteen states are named for dominant ethnic minority groups; the remaining seven (Tanintharyi, Ayeyarwady, Yangon, Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, and Sagaing) are majority Burmese.

Rather than present a comprehensive study of language policy in Myanmar, this author must limit himself to a snapshot with connections to more systematic documentation and analyses. The overall goal here is to establish an outline of a significantly contentious political, economic, and cultural environment for the publication and dissemination of any form of knowledge resource in ethnic minority languages, most especially the written word. By extension, then, the collecting librarian, especially those efforts that began in earnest at United States academic institutions from the 1960s onward, would naturally face myriad obstacles to any notion or effort to collect outside of the Burmese literature, easily available and openly preferred by the government and brokering agencies. And so, what do we then see resulting from roughly fifty years of academic collecting in modern Myanmar?

A snapshot of U.S. academic collections of Myanmar

Since the 1960s, both the United States' Library of Congress Cooperative Acquisitions Program in Southeast Asia (CAPSEA) and the Committee on Research Materials on Southeast Asia (CORMOSEA) have driven collection development in academic institutions within the United States and have arguably exerted substantial influence on global access to information about the region. Library collections of and about Myanmar have overwhelmingly reflected a topical focus on the majority Burmese culture and are primarily composed, when narrowed to resources in the vernacular, of literature in the Burmese language. This unfortunate tendency results from a confluence of institutional policies, constraints on regional acquisitions offices,

and the dynamics of complex internal political climates. Yet, Myanmar is composed of dozens of ethnic groups distinct from the majority Burmese culture, and seven of fourteen internal national geo-political divisions are occupied in the majority by national minority groups (Shan, Kayah, Kayin [Karen], Kachin, Mon, Chin, Rakhine).

Analysis of “Myanmar” collections then, by any given metric, disproportionately reflect Burmese perspectives; and, since a substantial proportion of Burmese publications are traditionally religious in nature, collections reveal a limited scope of understanding of both ethnic cultural and religious diversity within the nation.

Systematic measurement of the content of key collections of Myanmar-related resources would be outside of the scope of the current paper. What the author hopes to achieve here is to provide an accurate snapshot and the overall tendencies of the current state of collections while acknowledging the severe limitations of the methodology employed here. Mindful of the need and ultimate usefulness for the argument central to this paper, the author regrets that he has not yet embarked on what may be accurately identified as a systematic review. The table below provides a window into current monographic holdings in key languages at three academic institutions who serve leading collection development roles within CORMOSEA for Myanmar. In the case of Cornell University Library, that institution has occupied a leadership role across the board in Southeast Asian Studies collections and was curated for a substantial period by a scholar of Myanmar, John Badgley. Northern Illinois University is home of the Center for Burma Studies, a distinction that carries a mandate for focused collecting in Myanmar and was led for a substantial period of time by Burmese librarian May Kyi Win. And, finally, the University of Michigan Library has served a faculty with long and deep academic ties to the study of Myanmar, especially in the fields of history and religion.

	Cornell	Northern Illinois	Michigan
Burmese	16,355	5,452	2,748
Shan	54	9	193
Karen Languages¹	105	49	47
Mon-Khmer [Other]²	126	12	107
Sino-Tibetan [Other]³	235	73	380
Kachin	40	24	18

Table 1: Monographic holdings by language (left column) and collecting institution (top row). Library of Congress language fields are not always especially specific nor are they without problems of category. 1) includes very large dialect groups: Pwo, Sgaw, and Pa’O among many other smaller groups; 2) includes not only important internal languages, such as Mon, but also regrettably encompasses languages well outside of Myanmar, such as Lawa (Thailand); and 3) includes not only important internal languages, such as Rakhine and all major Chin dialects, but also regrettably encompasses languages well outside of Myanmar, such as Bai (China).

Though arguably imprecise, such numbers present a useful view of the landscape of Myanmar-related collections in the United States. Expressed as a simple percentage, Burmese language monographs account for ±97% of vernacular resources on Myanmar at Cornell and NIU. At Cornell and Michigan both, percentages are skewed (substantially at Michigan) by the collection of Sino-Tibetan languages from outside of Myanmar. One may adjust for any manner of variables and collection scenarios, but the author would argue that one must travel a great intellectual distance beyond apparent and explicit biases to explain such slanted figures. These numbers certainly do not match with population statistics (also notably imprecise given decades of problematic census data), where most agencies estimate between 65–70% of the country to be ethnically Bamar (Burmese), with the Shan numbering 9–10% as the second largest group.

The reader may surely draw a direct connection to these holdings numbers and the broader influence of the national language policy issues covered in the opening of this article. Indeed those policies coupled with broad periods in which travel and access to the country, especially at the geographic margins, were either wholly or partially curtailed almost certainly account to a substantial degree for such enormous disparities in holdings figures. Such a view, whether justified or not, also necessarily limits the agency of collecting institutions such as the Library of Congress, the CORMOSEA cooperative, and the librarians who serve those institutions. Indeed, in most cases, those instances above that indicate the acquisition of limited holdings in ethnic minority languages can often be tied directly back to individual scholars, whether they were providing resources to those libraries as a gift (e.g. Gedney, Tannenbaum, Lehman, etc.) or for purchase as a specialized and intrepid vendor (e.g. Renard). What can be gleaned from any of those examples is that none have been aggregated as a result of sustained, intentional collecting in ethnic minority languages. Further, there is a case to be made that the level of privilege afforded Burmese language in Myanmar society has in many regards traveled in both directions as the avenue of least resistance and then a reification of itself in outside scholarship. Thus, we extend by proxy an argument put forward by Matthew Walton:

. . . native fluency in the dominant language of the state is a privilege that Burmans enjoy, supporting the unspoken (or even unrecognised) assumption that as a Burman one will be conversant in the language of political power. Speakers of other languages are not only at a disadvantage in this way, they also receive less support for developing and expanding their own languages. In addition, while learning a non-Burman language is a choice that Burmans are privileged in being able to make (albeit one that very few actually make), in most areas of the country, non-Burmans must learn Burmese as a matter of survival. (15)

One may then hope that the current shifts in political climate may result in a newly pronounced effort among collecting institutions to pursue holdings in ethnic minority languages. Indeed, with increased access to Myanmar and its political periphery, there are certainly a growing number of scholars making their way into minority areas. Yet, a recent essay in the *CORMOSEA Bulletin* (Thant 2013) and the ongoing Fulbright-funded partnerships featuring librarian training at Arizona State University, NIU, and the University of Washington all maintain an overwhelming focus on the central, Burmese-speaking corridor as the source for knowledge production and dissemination in the country. As this author can personally attest, holdings in the State Libraries of the Shan, Kayin, and Kachin States not only strongly feature Burmese language collections, their librarians anecdotally and readily report no holdings in local languages. Meaning, neither institutions of the state nor foreign academic institutions hold or actively seek to build library collections in ethnic minority languages of Myanmar. Leaving, for now, the burden of the safe-guarding of intellectual contributions in those languages to small, locally-supported and perilously positioned cultural groups and formally (or currently, in some cases) militant political organizations.

The author notes here that there are commonalities and subtle divergences of tendencies with regard to religious manuscript traditions and resultant archival collections of ethnic minority materials. Such primary source materials, while outside of the scope of this paper, provide interesting parallels to the consideration of print monographic resources from and about Myanmar. Jotika Khur-yearns provides an insightful view into the aggregation of Shan religious manuscripts in his study (2009), wherein significant collections exist outside of Myanmar in Thailand, the UK, and Germany (with some smaller collections in India and China, even). Telling in that case, as with the current paper, is the challenge that the literate Shan

community has faced within Myanmar in maintaining alternate perspectives and interpretations of the Pali canon.

Another means by which to garner some perspective on the collection of ethnic minority monographic resources is by comparison of language-specific holdings as recalled in a WorldCat search on relevant and targeted Library of Congress Subject Headings. The chart below, drawing just a few key examples will help the author further illustrate some important points below.

	Burmese	Shan	Karen	Mon-Khmer	Sino-Tibetan ¹	Kachin
Burma.	12,758	174	114	53	58	43
Shan(Asian people).	38	113	21	-	-	-
Kachin(Asian people).	39	-	-	-	-	36
Chin (Asian people).	45	-	-	-	5	-
Buddhism.	3,152	125	27	57	20	-
Tipiṭaka.²	353	21	7	4	-	-
Christianity.	120	-	-	-	-	-
Islam.	94	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2: Monographic holdings aggregated to WorldCat, searched by LCSH (left column) and refined by language (top row). 1) includes Rakhine and all Chin dialects. 2) formal title for the Theravada Buddhist canon.

Despite recent shifts in the global political landscape to accept “Myanmar” as the official name of the country, “Burma,” remains the primary Library of Congress Subject Heading for resources about the country. Perhaps a reader is not demonstrably surprised to find such a disparity in the figures for Burmese-language content about “Burma,” but the author notes that Shan and Karen authors in particular have dedicated a significant amount of paper to situating themselves in the overall narrative of the nation, much more so than these numbers accurately reflect. Be that as it may, the author finds it even more alarming that libraries have collected more Burmese-language materials about the Kachin and Chin ethnic groups than they have such content in the languages of the people about whom they are written.

Matters of religion and scriptural texts

At this point, the author takes the opportunity to shift the focus of the paper so that it now takes a more specific track towards a deeper reflection on how these concerns result in similar processes and shortcomings in the collection of religious texts. By way of introduction and explanation, most Buddhist practice in Myanmar is of the Theravada variety informed by the Pali canon. While some traditions may show some hint of Mahayana influence (e.g. Pa’O), these tendencies are rare and subtle such that Buddhism in Myanmar may be broadly assumed to be Theravada in strain and closely tied to most conceptions of a Burmese identity.

Despite long traditions of Theravada Buddhist practice, monastery education, abbot authorship of canonical elucidations, and the building of manuscript archives among the Shan, Mon, Rakhine, and Pa’O (Karen) ethnic groups, WorldCat results on a simple search on the subject of “Buddhism.” demonstrates that ±93% of the collecting has occurred in Burmese language resources. Once again, the simplest argument is that this results from ease of access in the

Myanmar context. But, Callahan (172) and Holliday (410) each extend the argument further in their analyses of national language policy, wherein Buddhism plays an unusually important role in the conception of national identity and citizenship, and Burmese interpretations of the canon are held to be privileged over others.

Since acquisition preference for Burmese-language editions and publications of elucidations and commentary on the Buddhist canon has been overwhelmingly dominant both inside and outside of Myanmar, such a tendency has naturally resulted in the mistaken notion that interpretation of the canon is unified across the breadth of Myanmar. National religious policy has only reinforced this by direct advocacy, going so far as to build evangelical Burmese monasteries in ethnic minority regions. However, equally vibrant commentary exists within the monastic, scholarly, and lay literature of other primarily Theravada Buddhist communities throughout the country, especially so among the Shan, Mon, Rakhine, and Pa'O. (One should note, rather importantly, that these four cultures cover three divergent language families: Tai, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman.) Therefore, the expansion of institutional holdings in these languages, especially of Theravada Buddhist literature, remains key to the representation of an accurate dialogue among Buddhist traditions in Myanmar. An example effort may be seen in an Endangered Archives Programme project funded by the British Library resulting in the digitization and online accessibility of approximately 100 Pa'O Buddhist manuscripts (facilitated by the author's longstanding relationship with the Pa'O Literary and Cultural Committee Council, see Miller et al 2006).

Further still, the dominance of Burmese Buddhist literature in library holdings obscures the existence of significant communities throughout Myanmar who adhere to the Abrahamic traditions. From among Rohingya, Chinese, and even ethnically Burmese populations, Islamic literature is available; and, the overwhelming majority of Chin, Kachin, and Karen (Sgaw and Pwo, primarily) populations practice some form of the Christian faith, producing literature reflective of active engagement in religious life. Again, while such resources may be aggregated among those local populations, they exist in isolation and do not extend into the scope of larger national collections and most certainly remain trivial in number as collected outside of Myanmar, as seen in Table 2 above. In the experience of the author, the opportunities to collect in these traditions are not limited to the long-available translations of core religious texts (e.g. Quran and Bible) into local languages; rather, there exists a vibrant publishing tradition within these communities, who produce erudite and thoughtful commentary on religious life, customs, and practice in those traditions. In fact, because the practice of the Abrahamic traditions within Myanmar have relied so heavily on financial support from outside of Myanmar, those textual traditions are in many ways reflective of an engagement with global communities beyond Myanmar where Burmese Buddhist literary traditions may often seem regulated and confined specifically to the Myanmar context.

A path forward?

As Myanmar recently embarked upon political reform and demonstrated initial steps toward notable social progress, there emerged signs of broader dialogue with respect to both socio-linguistic and religious diversity. Indeed, even a long-maintained national emphasis on the Burmese language was openly challenged by renewed efforts to preserve the country's broad linguistic diversity in schools, media, and cultural institutions. Unfortunately, such efforts for progress have begun to buckle under enflamed conflicts at the geographical margins occupied by ethnic minority populations and the subsequent international scrutiny of economic, social, and political challenges faced by a complex nation-state. For example, the current violence

between the majority (Buddhist) Burmese¹ and minority (Muslim) Rohingya and (Christian) Kachin are a prominent and highly visible feature of more pervasive and historically rich religious and cultural divisions.

This author argues that academic libraries outside of Myanmar have not only reflected Burmese-dominant cultural policies and religious voices within Myanmar but have also served to reify the legitimacy of those trends by building unbalanced collections, intentional or not. Since libraries serve a substantial role in both current dialogue as well as annotation of the historical, by orchestrated development of content and providing access to information, then one may well call upon libraries to fully address the inherent responsibilities of such a position. By implication here, a more thoughtfully constructed collection development policy with regard to Myanmar would necessitate a reconciliation on key inadequacies of resources in the vernacular and on topics of religion authored by ethnic minority communities.

In partnership with Harvard Widener Library and Harvard humanities faculty, the author has been collecting resources across Myanmar for the past three years with the specific purpose of targeting acquisitions in minority languages, especially materials that illuminate religious texts and customary practice. These collections are meant to present a more dynamic social, cultural, and religious narrative of communities outside of the majority Burmese paradigm.

Shan	Pa'O	Mon	Rakhine	Kachin	Sgaw Karen
88	90	63	37	26	20

Table 3: Monographic acquisitions by language and number for Harvard Libraries, 2017. Compare Table 1 figures, representing acquisition totals since the 1960s.

By composing a more inclusive collection development policy in coordination with Harvard, the author argues by policy and direct action that the academic library stands to reflect not only a more illustrative snapshot of intellectual and religious life among the broadly diverse ethnolinguistic communities of the Myanmar nation but to also model a healthier representation of Myanmar national religious dialogue through a plurality of religious perspectives. Though libraries may be limited in their ability to directly influence aggressively orchestrated national propaganda, there remains the long arc of a concerted and determined effort to document diversity within cultural institutions dedicated to systematic acquisition and breadth of access. Admittedly, we are a long way from acquiring to the point that collections reach quantifiable parity reflective of most applicable metrics, such as being analogous to population distribution. What may be more reflective of contemporary Myanmar, in fact, if one were to seek an adequate measure for first steps, would be to ask if collections in minority languages and reflecting interpretations of diverse religious perspectives parallel the increasingly emergent voices evident as the nation opens socially and politically.

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¹ Though central to tensions in the west, the Rakhine serve as culturally adjacent proxy to Burmese Buddhists.

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