

## Script, Text, and Voice : Micro-Regional Connectedness in the Articulation of Palaung Buddhism in Northern Myanmar

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2016-09-30 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 小島, 敬裕 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00006086">https://doi.org/10.15021/00006086</a>

## **Script, Text, and Voice: Micro-Regional Connectedness in the Articulation of Palaung Buddhism in Northern Myanmar**

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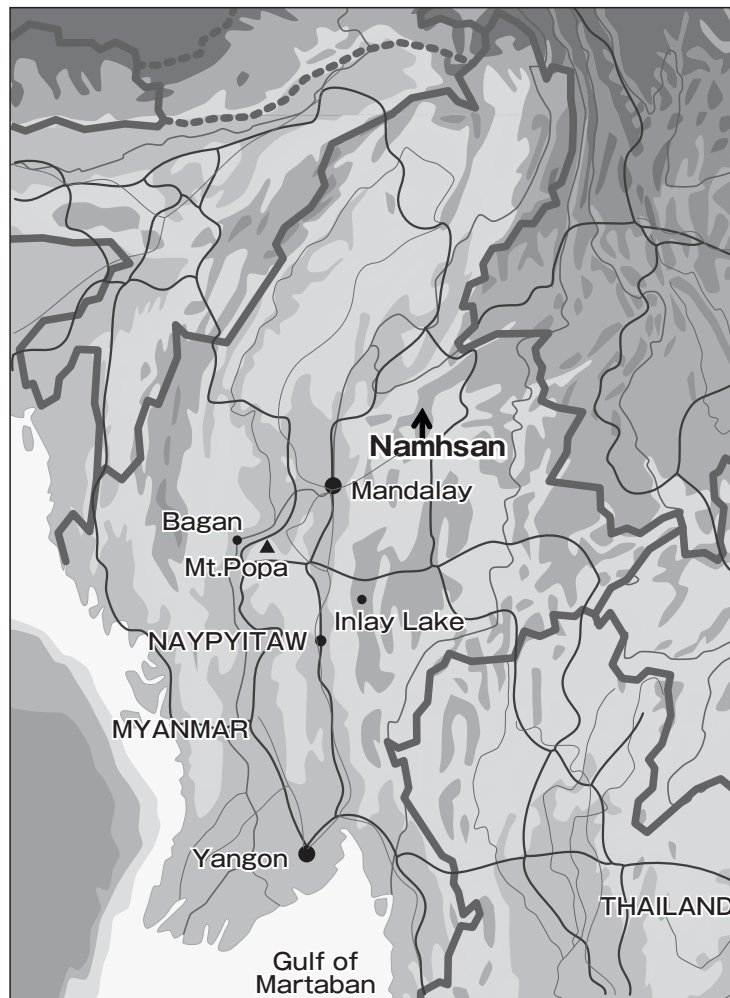
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### **1. Introduction**

This paper will explore the relationship between the migration of Palaung (Tǎ’ṇ) people and the remaking of ethnic/micro-regional connectedness, focusing on their practice of Theravāda Buddhism in Namhsan, northern Myanmar. I will take up not only Palaung, but also Shan (Tǎi), and Burmese (Bama) ethnic groups in my examination of the relationship. The research site, Namhsan, is located in the mountains of northern Shan state, and the Palaung are the majority population (Fig. 1). The Palaung are known as uplanders, while the Shan are rulers of the valley bottoms of this area, and Burmese are lowlanders (Photo 1). These three ethnic groups are included in the 135 ethnic groups officially recognized by the Myanmar government. According to the population census of 1983 (Census Division, Immigration and Manpower Department 1986: 1–21), the number of Shan people is 2,890,437 (8.5 percent of the population), and the number of Burmese people is 23,532,433 (69.0 percent). There are no concrete data about the Palaung, but the population is likely one percent at most.

Our frameworks for understanding upland–lowland relations have been colored by the influential works of Leach (1964[1954]; 1960). His typology of Southeast Asian social organization constructs two model systems in mutual opposition. The lowland model is characterized as governed by hierarchical political structures, supported by high-productivity wet-rice cultivation, dedicated to Buddhism, and displaying a modest level of bilingualism. The contrasting upland model has egalitarian governance, shifting cultivation, animism, and high levels of multilingualism as its defining characteristics.

However, Leach did feel that the Palaung showed some rather different traits that made them stick out within his typology of opposing systems. The fact that the Palaung were Buddhists, and the related point that their economy was strong enough to support the necessary physical infrastructure and social institutions in the uplands, put the Palaung outside his framework. Leach (1960: 53) went as far as to say that the Palaung were organized “in exact imitation of the political model provided by their Shan neighbors”.



**Figure 1** Location of Namhsan, northern Myanmar

The former studies also stated that the Palaung simply imitated or internalized Shan Buddhism. The examples that were taken up by former studies are that the Palaung, historically lacking their own script, would typically deliver teachings in the Shan language and use texts that were written in the Shan script, in spite of the large differences between their languages (Wang 2007: 456; Sang 1999: 41–42; Milne 2004 [1924]: 18).

Milne, who conducted long-term research in the 1910s, described the Palaung practices on Buddhist days in Namhsan as below.

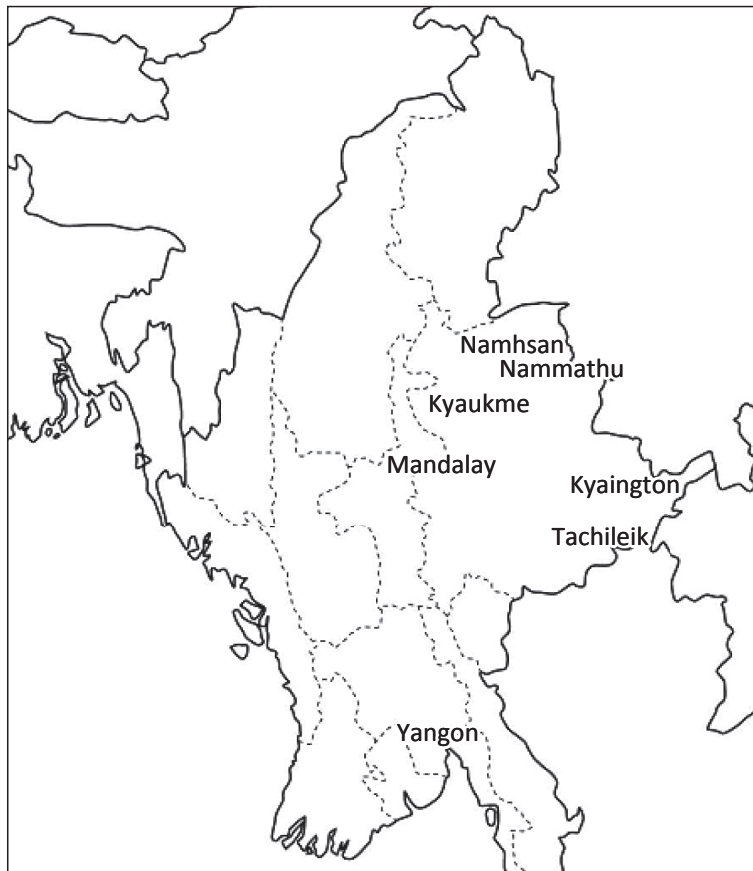


**Photo 1** A Palaung village in Namhsan.

Discourses by the monks are listened to in the morning. In the afternoon of a fast-day, in the rest house, the *Jātaka* is read aloud, in Shan or Burmese, by any one who can read. Some listen, a few sleep; others discuss the religious life, and talk of friends who are dead, and wonder where their spirits have wandered to. Towards evening they all return to the image-house to pray, and some of the more devout again place offerings before the images. That night they sleep in the rest-house; next morning they again make offerings before a statue of the Buddha, afterwards returning to their homes and to their ordinary occupations (Milne 2004 [1924]: 319).

U Paw San, one of the creators of the Palaung script, described the situation during the colonial period, when Palaung culture had very broad-reaching influence from Shan culture. When they prayed to the Buddha, they used the Shan language. If they used the Palaung language to pray, the Palaung people looked down on them because the Palaung language was regarded as a low-level language. If they prayed in Shan, the Palaung people thought that it was effective, had virtue, and was nice to listen to. U Paw San explained that this is because Palaung *sawbwas* and monks did not think of the interests of the Palaung people. Instead, they regarded Shan as “high level”, whereas they located themselves as “low level” (Paw San 1997: 138–141).

These facts coincide with Leach’s description about the mentality of uplanders in the colonial period. However, conducting fieldwork in Namhsan and the Myanmar–China border area, I found out that the Palaung have recently begun to translate the texts using



**Figure 2** Research sites

the Palaung script and teach dharma in the Palaung language.

Why did this new practice come about and how did the new practices influence the Buddhist practices in Namhsan? These are the questions I will explore in this chapter. And, by looking at the remaking of ethnic/micro-regional connectedness within Palaung people, I will re-examine upland–lowland relations through the lens of Buddhist practice.

The analysis is based on the ethnographic data collected between 2011 and 2014 during several stages of fieldwork at Palaung villages in Namhsan, Nammathu, and Kyaukme districts in northern Shan state, Tachileik and Kyaington districts in eastern Shan state, and Palaung monastery, as well as lay Buddhists' residences in Yangon and Mandalay (Fig. 2).

## 2. Palaung Buddhism in Namhsan

### 2.1 History of Palaung Buddhism and its sects

First, I will describe the process through which the Palaung people accepted Buddhism. The transmission of Buddhism from the Shan to the Palaung might be a result of their economic relationship, because the Palaung and Shan have long lived in close proximity. The Palaung have developed livelihoods based on cultivation and sale of tea (Photo 2), which they traded with the Shan, Burmese, and Chinese (see, for example, Milne 2004 [1924]). Income derived from tea was used to purchase rice and manufactured goods, such as textiles, from the Shan (Leach 1964 [1954]).

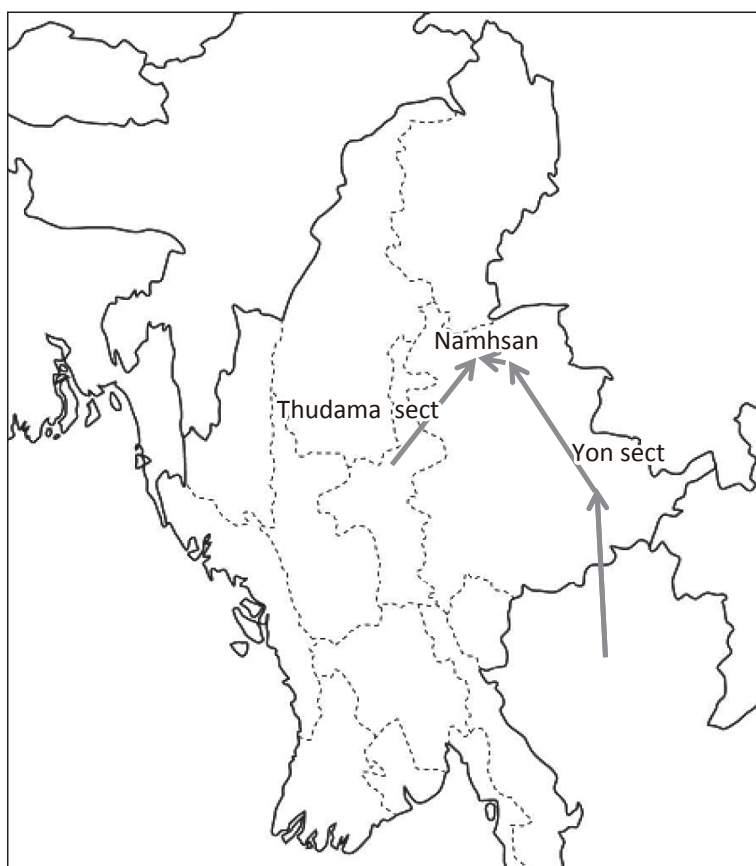
Another question is from where Buddhism was brought. In response to my interview questions, the highest monk of the Yon sect in Namhsan told me that Yon Buddhism was first brought from Kyaington in the eastern Shan state to Hsenwi by four missionary monks (Fig. 3). Palaung people made contact with them and became Buddhist monks. It is likely that Yon Buddhism entered Namhsan first, and the influence of Burmese Buddhism became stronger after the late eighteenth century (Milne 2004 [1924]).

The Buddhist sects in Namhsan are divided into the Yon sect and the Thudama sect. The Yon sect was officially incorporated into the Thudama sect after the foundation of the sangha organization in 1980, but in practice they still have differences. Firstly, the local monks and lay people distinguish them as Pa Yon (Yon sect) and Pa Man (Burmese sect). Secondly, a monk of the Yon sect cannot become the abbot of a Thudama sect



**Photo 2** Tea plants close to a Palaung village.





**Figure 3** Movement of Yon sect and Thudama sect into Namhsan

monastery. The monasteries of the Thudama sect are located in the villages close to Namhsan city. The Palaung people explain that this is because there are frequent contacts with the Shan and Burmese around Namhsan city. On the other hand, the monasteries of the Yon sect are in the villages outside Namhsan city, and there are many more than for the Thudama sect.

The third difference between these two sects lies in the languages that are used in the texts, and in the practice of precepts. Traditionally, Shan and Burmese scripts were taught in the monasteries of Thudama sect before the 1980s. The Yon and Shan scripts were taught in the Yon monasteries (Photos 3, 4).

The language used in prayers to Buddha images is different (Photo 5). The Yon sect prays in Yon style, and the Thudama sect prays in Burmese style. The Pali wording is also slightly different. But now, when the lay people pray to the Buddha, they also use Burmese or Palaung in almost all the Palaung monasteries of Yangon, Mandalay, and Namhsan City. If persons from different Palaung subgroups (*khru*) attend the ritual, they



Photo 3 Text for preaching written in the Yon script.

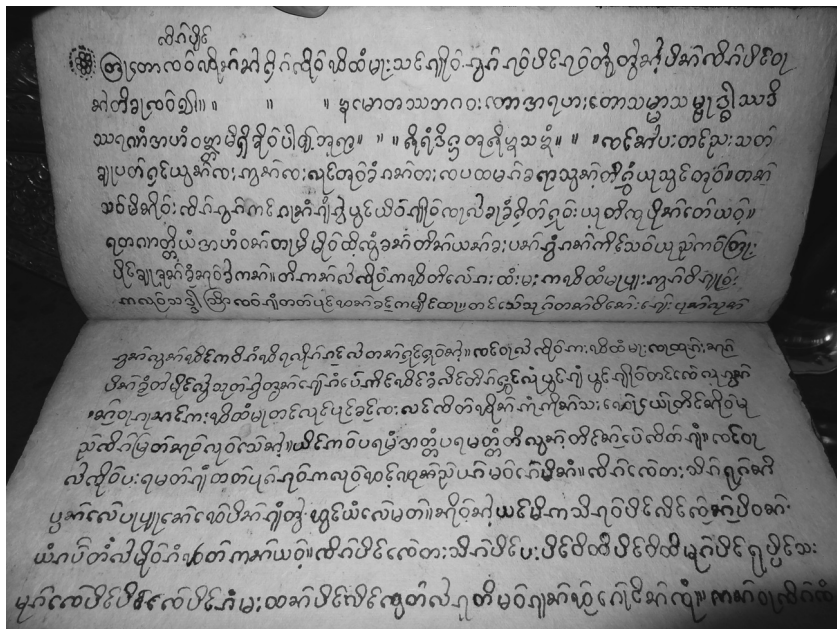


Photo 4 Text for preaching written in the Shan script.





**Photo 5** Palaung women praying to Buddhist images in a monastery.

use Burmese because the diversity of Palaung dialects is great. Within the subgroups in Palaung, the Samloŋ group live in the center of Namhsan. Rukhau, Thewrai, Dŭnrət, and Rucīŋ groups are in the village around Namhsan. The remaining groups live in other places in the Shan states.

## 2.2 Lay specialists in Palaung Buddhism

Next I will introduce the lay specialists, who are indispensable for the practice of Palaung Buddhism.

### (1) Monastery managers (*ta kyɔŋ*):

The word *ta* means “old man”, and *kyɔŋ* is originally from the Burmese word *kyaung*, which means monastery. They are called *gawpaka* by the Burmese. A few villagers play this role in each monastery.

### (2) Representative of the villagers (*ta ă can/ta păn tă ka/pu păn*):

The word *ă can* may come from the Thai *aacaan*, which means teacher. *Pu* has its origins in the Shan language, where it means “old man”, and *păn* is from the Burmese *pan*, which means “flower”. Because he plays the role of representative of the villagers who put flowers in front of Buddha or monks and leads the recital of prayers, this person is called *pan daga* by Burmese. Most representatives are ex-monks because the role is to act as a bridge between monks and lay people. A few villagers play this role for each

monastery.

(3) Lay specialist for reciting Buddhist texts (*ta cǎ re/ta phǎt lǐk/ta mǎ lik*):

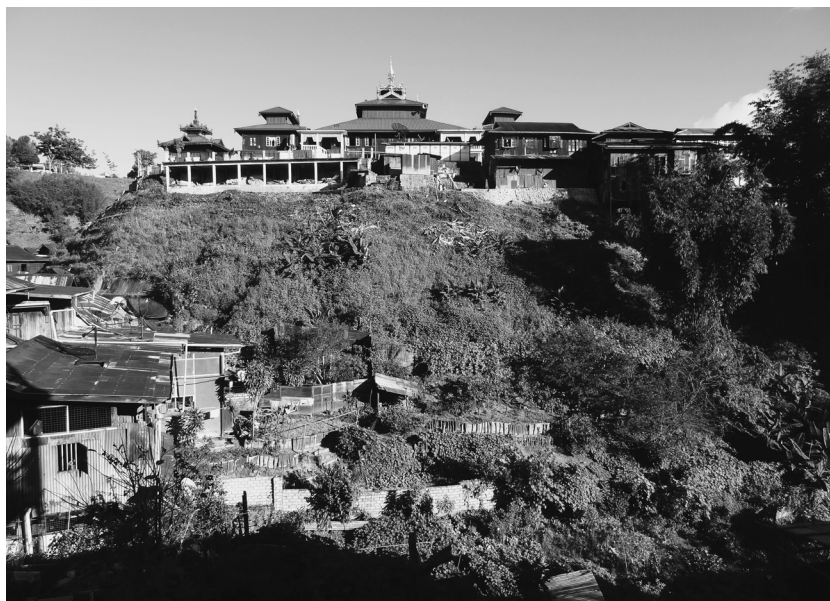
The origin of the word *cǎ re* is the Burmese *sayei*, which means the “people who have literacy”. The origin of *phǎt* is the Burmese *hpat*, which means “read”, while *lik* is a Shan word meaning “script”. *Mǎ* is also a Shan word, meaning “expert”. When there is a funeral, housewarming ceremony, or large donation festival, the lay specialist *ta cǎ re* recites Palaung texts with a distinctive intonation for the lay people (Photo 6). In the case of funerals, the monks recite sutras in the morning, and *ta cǎ re* recite the Buddhist texts in the night. Recitals are performed every night before the burial and many people, especially the elderly, come to the dead person’s house to listen.

Many villages have one *ta cǎ re*, but there are no *ta cǎ re* in Namhsan town now. I will explain the reason for this later. Many of the *ta cǎ re* are ex-monks, but without a good voice one cannot become a *ta cǎ re*. If a potential *ta cǎ re* has not been ordained, he can still become *ta cǎ re* if he possesses literacy and a good voice.

In the Milne ethnography cited above, she described the lay people who recite Jataka tales. Milne did not write about them by the specific name, but judging from the practice, the lay person described is *ta cǎ re*. The old men who keep precepts are called *ta sin*, and old women are called *ya sin*; *sin* means precepts. They sleep in the *cǎ rǎp* building located in the monastery grounds on the Buddhist days of the Lent period. As I will explain later, the practice has now changed to Burmese-style Vipassanā meditation, but sometimes *ta sin* and *ya sin* invite *ta cǎ re* to listen to a recital of Buddhist texts



**Photo 6** A *ta cǎ re* reciting Palaung text.



**Photo 7** Gaingkyok monastery.

because listening to the preaching is regarded as a meritorious deed.

In the case of Namhsan, the Buddhist texts used for recital by *ta cǎ re* were written in Shan script before the 1970s. However, the number of *ta cǎ re* who recite Palaung texts is increasing. Many Palaung texts were translated from Shan texts, but by using the style of Palaung verse. The author U Nagatheina (1922–1991) was a monk of Gaingkyok monastery (Photo 7), which is the central monastery belonging to the Thudama sect, and wrote around 60 Palaung Buddhist texts after 1961 (Thu Hka 2009: 11). Even though some Palaung texts were translated from Burmese, they follow the style of Palaung verse. The author U Pyinnyananda is a monk of a Palaung monastery in Mandalay belonging to the Yon sect.

In the next sections, I will explore the question of why they made their own scripts.

### 3. Creation of the Palaung Scripts

#### 3.1 Origin of the Palaung scripts

Milne (2004 [1924]: 18) described the situation in the 1910s, saying that “Their Chronicles are written in Shan,” but did not mention the Palaung script. However, the books and documents written by Palaung themselves described how the Palaung script was adopted officially in 1972 (Paw San 1997; Muhse Myone Ta’an (Palaung) Sapei hnin Yinkyehmu Kawmati 2009; Htun Wa 2010; Thu Za Ta 2012). Now I will describe the process of creation, depending on these documents and interviews with the people concerned.

The first person to create a Palaung script was an American woman, Miss Maclean. She created a Palaung script using the Roman alphabet, but it was not successful. According to my interviews with Palaung people, Miss Maclean was a Christian missionary. At that time, other minority scripts were being created by missionaries, so the Palaung case was part of a larger phenomenon common in colonial Burma. However, the Christian missions to the Palaung were not successful because the Palaung people are eager Buddhists. A result was the failure of Palaung script to become prevalent. But this stimulus from outsiders led to the creation of a Palaung script by Palaung people themselves.

After the initial attempt by Miss Maclean, Palaung scripts were created by the local intellectuals using Burmese and Shan scripts, but they also failed to spread. The reason is not clear, but one possible explanation given by U Paw San is that the Palaung people regarded Shan script as “high level” and Palaung script as “low level”. Furthermore, because Shan was the *lingua franca* in this area, many Palaung people understood Shan and so did not need to use the Palaung language.

### 3.2 The Palaung script by U Paw San

After experimentation with a number of scripts in the 1910s and 1920s, this orthography movement settled down. In the 1950s, this movement was activated again. The key person in this movement was U Paw San (1909–2005). Drawing on U Paw San’s autobiography (Paw San 1997), I will describe this next phase in the development of a Palaung script (Photo 8).

The trigger for U Paw San’s creation of the Palaung script was the occasion of the Palaung *sawbwa* Khun Pǎn Cīṅ’s meeting with Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, one of the greatest Burmese poets, writers, and political leaders of twentieth century Myanmar (Photo 9). Khun Pǎn Cīṅ was one of the famous *sawbwas* in the Shan states and, in fact, represented the Shan states at the second Panglong (Burmese: Pinlon) meeting in 1947.

One day, he met Thakin Kodaw Hmaing through introduction by Prime Minister U Nu. Kodaw Hmaing asked *sawbwa* Khun Pǎn Cīṅ, “Do your Palaung people have their own script?” Khun Pǎn Cīṅ replied they did not. Kodaw Hmaing said that “ethnic groups that don’t have their own script tend to perish.” There is no explanation of why Kodaw Hmaing said this to him, but as one of the slogans of the Thakin party



Photo 8 U Paw San.



was to respect one's own language and literature, it is natural that Thakin nationalists have this kind of thought.

Having heard this statement, Khun Pǎn Cǐng was ashamed and tried to create a Palaung script. U Paw San knew of his reaction and devised a Palaung script, basing it on Burmese letters because he reasoned it would be easier for the people who know the Burmese script to pick up. He was an ex-monk who studied Burmese in Mandalay and Yangon, and also studied English in Sri Lanka. He tried to create a Palaung script because he felt ashamed that he himself was from an ethnic group that did not have its own script. He felt that ethnic groups that did not have their own scripts were low-class, undeveloped people.

In 1955, his Burmese-based Palaung script was completed, and the Palaung *sawbwa* Khun Pǎn Tsǐng recognized this work and awarded him a gold medal.

### 3.3 Taunggyi Conference

Though U Paw San was awarded a gold medal, this did not mean that his Palaung script had been accepted as the standard within Palaung society. There were still other ways of writing Palaung. Ven. Nagatheina, a monk at Gaingkyok monastery, created a Palaung script based on the Shan script (Photo 10). Ven. Nagatheina was ordained as a novice in Namhsan and then went to a monastery in Mandalay to study Buddhist doctrine. After he came back to Gaingkyok monastery, he studied Palaung poetry and started creating Buddhist texts in 1961. After that, he became a vice-abbot of Gaingkyok monastery.

When he wrote Palaung rhymes, he used a Palaung script based on the Shan script. According to his disciple, Ven. K of Gaingkyok monastery, the first reason that Ven. Nagatheina used the Shan script was



**Photo 9** Palaung *sawbwa* Khun Pǎn Cǐng  
(Source: Min Naing, 1962).



**Photo 10** Ven. Nagatheina.



that he was more used to it, as he had learned Shan first and then Burmese subsequently in the monastery. The second reason is that leaders of the Shan Council (Shanpyi Uzi Ahpwe) put pressure on Ven. Nagatheina to use Shan script, particularly the old Shan script, because U Kyaw Zaw, a member of the Shan Council, wanted to ensure that the old Shan script continued to be used. U Paw San also wrote about the pressure from leaders of the Shan Council on Ven. Nagatheina (Paw San 1997: 201–218).

At last, the Shan Council invited creators of the Palaung scripts, using Shan script, Yon script, and Chinese Tai script, to a conference in Taunggyi from 1967 to 1968. The conference decided to use the Burmese script mainly. This was because almost all Palaung people are Buddhists and they use the Pali language written in this script. Moreover, using a Burmese-based script would be convenient, as it could make use of Burmese typewriters (Thu Za Ta 2012: 163).

Despite this decision, people in different regions continued to use their own preferred scripts for a variety of local reasons. According to Ven. K, Ven. Nagatheina changed his writings from the Shan script to the Burmese script after the Taunggyi conference. In fact, when composing Buddhist texts he employed a hybrid system that included the use of Burmese initial consonants and of symbols borrowed from Shan for vowels and final consonants.

### 3.4 The Palaung script “unified” by the students

Faced with this situation, six Palaung students from Yangon University, Mandalay University and Taunggyi College organized a script commission and elaborated on orthographical standards for using the Palaung script. According to one member of this group (male, 63 years old), the reasons for standardizing the usage of the Palaung script were the following. 1) There was a possibility that differences would split the Palaung people into different factions. 2) The Palaung were ashamed because they lacked their own script, even though many other minorities did. Finally, 3) they were concerned that the Palaung ethnic group would disappear if they did not have their own script. This narrative stresses the importance that some people at that time were giving to the unity of the Palaung people, as well as the critical role that some perceived a shared orthography could play.

In 1972, the representatives of Palaung groups in Myanmar met together in Padan Village, Nanhkan District, and decided to adopt the conventions proposed by the students. The students had researched many kinds of scripts and adapted the style of U Paw San, Ven. Nagatheina and others in an effort to reach a compromise that would satisfy the various groups (Photo 11).

The script developed by the students is used in education in Namhsan, Mandalay, Kyakme, Muhse and Nanhkan area even now. During the Ne Win regime, the Palaung script could not be used in the government schools. After the Ne Win period in the 1990s, lay education in the Palaung script for high-school graduates gained momentum.

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ကျော့အီးမျိုးဟည်း  
ဃာ် ဈာ် ဋာ် ဌာ် ဍာ် ဎာ် ဏာ် ဏာ် ဏာ် ဏာ်

Photo 11 The Palaung script “united” by students.

## 4. Creation of the Palaung Buddhist Texts

### 4.1 The Palaung Buddhist texts by Ven. Nagatheina

As I have described above, the Shan-based Palaung script developed by Ven. Nagatheina was not adopted at the Taunggyi conference, but the students used an adapted version of his style for some parts of vowels and final consonants of the script. But more than the script, Ven. Nagatheina’s great contribution is the creation of Buddhist texts, starting in 1961 (Photo 12). Most of the Palaung texts used by the Samloṅ group were written by Ven. Nagatheina. I will now explore the question of why his Buddhist texts were so widely accepted by the Palaung people, especially after the 1980s.

The Palaung Buddhist texts composed by Ven. Nagatheina used the traditional style of Palaung rhyme (*ṇe-kār kār*), where each verse is composed of 6 syllables. The lay people use the same style of rhyming when the young men and women sing love songs together, during wedding and housewarming ceremonies, and in funeral rites for the deceased. One of the main contributions of the work of Ven. Nagatheina was to put the stories of Buddhism into traditional Palaung rhyme. This enabled the lay people to memorize and recite the new texts written in Palaung script, but using traditional rhyming patterns.

The origins of these Palaung texts are Shan Buddhist texts, which Ven. Nagatheina translated into his own language, that of the Samloṅ group centered on Namhsan. When

a *ta cǎ re* recites Buddhist texts, he recites the Palaung with distinctions in voice pitch, creating a tone system that sounds like singing to the listener. When the monk recites, he does not look at the text and recites without this type of tone because the precepts prohibit monks from singing.

These texts were created in Gaingkyok monastery after Ven. Nagatheina came back from Mandalay. Why did he create these Palaung texts after he studied the doctrine of Buddhism? According to my interviews with Ven. K, a disciple of Ven. Nagatheina, the Shan Buddhist texts had become difficult to understand for the lay people, and he wanted to make the Buddhist material more accessible to normal people by providing Palaung versions.

#### 4.2 Social changes among the Palaung lay Buddhists

Palaung Buddhist texts were created through the processes described above. The next question is why the Palaung people accepted the Palaung texts, particularly after the 1980s, given that they had previously been regarded as “low level”.

To analyze this phenomenon, we must consider first that the languages for praying and reciting the Buddhist texts may differ. The words used in prayers to the Buddha are mostly Pali. Many of the lay people do not understand the meaning of these Pali words, but they learn them by heart. On the other hand, lay Buddhists would like to understand the stories recited by the *ta cǎ re*. The contents of the texts include Jatakas (the stories of Buddha’s previous lives), Buddha’s tales, the biographies of famous kings, and Palaung stories. Listening to the Buddhist texts, rather than reading them oneself, is an important part of popular Palaung Buddhism.

Before the 1970s, the Shan language was the *lingua franca* of Namhsan. This means that every Palaung lay person could understand the meaning of the texts written in Shan that were recited by the *ta cǎ re*. But since the 1980s the number of *ta cǎ re* reciting texts in Palaung has been increasing. The reason for this change is that the lay people, especially the young generation, do not understand the Shan language.

One factor of this change has its roots in the fact that education in elementary schools was conducted in only Burmese during the Ne Win period (1962–1988). Moreover, one of members of the group that created the Palaung scripts in 1972 (male, 63 years old) became part of the government’s educational administration in Namhsan. When formal government education was started in 1956, the percentage of children

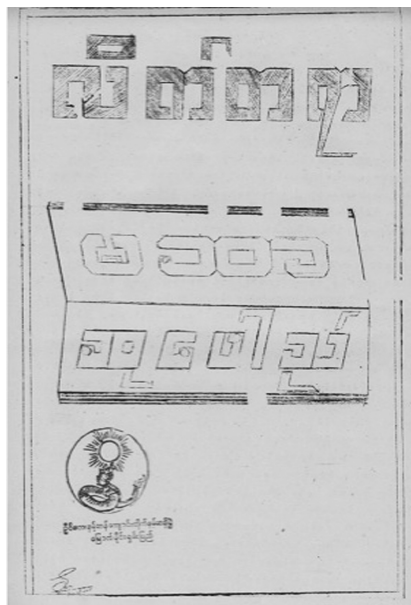


Photo 12 Palaung Buddhist texts by Ven. Nagatheina.

entering school was around 10%. He thought it was important to develop education and tried to build a school in every village. As a result, the number of schools increased from 56 to 110, and the number of students increased from 6,000 to 13,000 between 1984 and 1986. As the school attendance improved dramatically, the Burmese language became more frequently used in everyday life.

The second factor is migration. Many Shan people came to Namhsan to pick tea leaves before the 1970s, but this stopped after the 1980s because rice production increased during this time. After the 1980s, in-migration to Namhsan was primarily of Burmese people, and the *lingua franca* changed from Shan to Burmese. Because of these reasons, the number of Shan speakers decreased and the number of Burmese speakers increased.

#### 4.3 The influence of Burmese Buddhism

This change of language environment influenced the activity of ordination. When I asked the older generation, they said that the Palaung did not have the tradition in which every man is expected to be ordained for a short period. If a man is ordained once, it is expected that he will stay in the monastery as long as possible. Disrobing was looked down upon and was shameful for a monk that left the clergy.

According to an abbot in a Mandalay monastery, the number of monks and novices studying Buddhist doctrine in Yangon or Mandalay was limited before the 1980s because many of them could not speak Burmese and felt uneasy.

This situation changed after the 1990s. As I have described above, Palaung who can speak Burmese increased after the 1980s, and the monks and novices were not afraid to go to Yangon or Mandalay. The result was that the number of novices who went to the social welfare monasteries (Burmese: *parahita kyaun*) or the monks' secular education monasteries (Burmese: *hpondawgyi thin pinnyayei kyaung*) in the central part of Myanmar increased suddenly. After they moved to the cities, some of them studied Buddhism in the monasteries specializing in Buddhist education, while others studied in monasteries providing secular education. These monasteries for secular education were established in the U Nu period but were closed during the socialist period from 1962 to 1988 because of Ne Win's policy of "secularism". After the democracy movement in 1988, the military regime changed religious policy to support Buddhism, and social welfare monasteries were increased after the 1990s. Economically poor parents wanted their boys to become novices in the social welfare monastery or monks' secular education monastery in central Myanmar to get general knowledge about secular life. As a result, the number of novices in Namhsan increased. After they study basic Buddhist sutras in the monastery of their native village, novices move to monasteries in the city. Some of them disrobe in the city, but many of them continue their studies in the city and then return to Namhsan.

This phenomenon influenced the practice of Buddhism in the central part of Namhsan. According to Mr. A (male, 65 years old), who lives in the center of Namhsan, many monks were not good at preaching because their educational level was low prior to the 1980s. The lay people also tend to feel that the main role of the monks is to recite *pa*

*rī* (one part of the Buddhist canon to protect from evil spirits, called *pa reik* in Burmese) in the rituals to escape misfortune. The monks simply memorize and recite the *pa rī*, but they do not understand the meaning. In fact, the level of preaching by the lay specialists, *ta cā re*, was higher than that of the monks. As the number of monks studying the doctrine of Buddhism increased, the level of preaching by the monks was raised to levels higher than before. The education level of monks in central Namhsan is higher than that of the villages, and lay people started to invite monks instead of *ta cā re*, especially after the 1990s.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, the members of the Damasetkya organization in each village recite Damasetkya sutta when there is a funeral in central Namhsan. The Damasetkya organization is a lay Buddhists' group for reciting the Damasesetkya sutta, the first teaching by Buddha. The members of the Damasetkya organization join voluntarily. They go to the temple and recite the texts melodiously when there are Buddhist ceremonies, for example, during the full moon days of the period of Buddhist Lent. This type of organization is present in many Burmese villages and neighborhoods, but there is no larger nation-wide organization. According to an informant, the first Damasetkya organization was organized in the 1970s and spread across the whole country (Kojima 2014b: 249–251).

A Palaung informant (male, 54 years old) estimates that the people living in central Namhsan moved to the central part of Myanmar frequently for business reasons, and might be influenced by these practices. But in the other areas of Myanmar, the members do not recite Damasetkya when there is a funeral. This demonstrates that although the Palaung adopted the practice of lowland people, they modified these practices to accommodate local preferences.

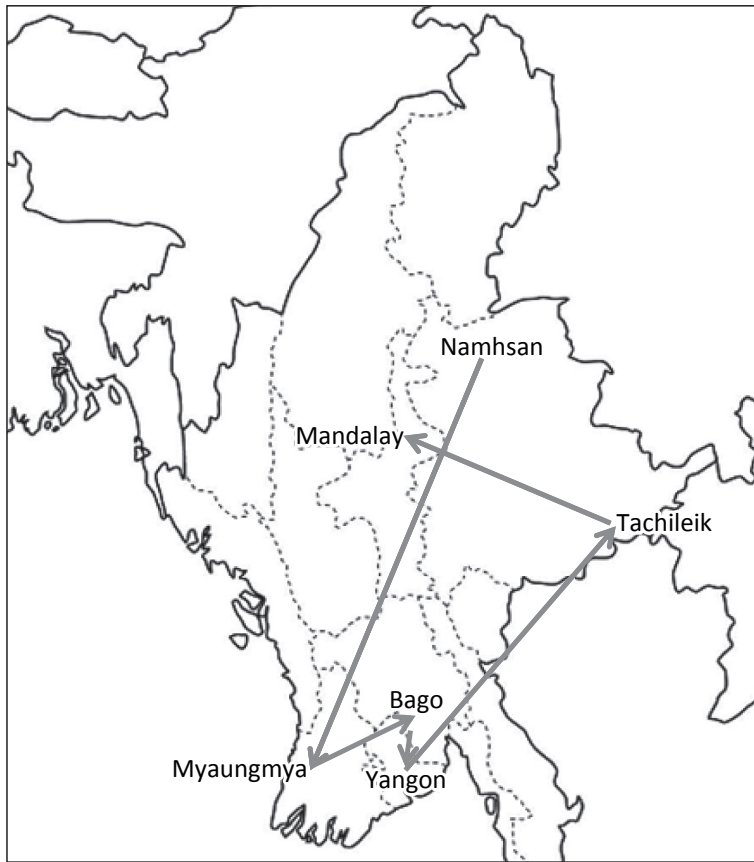
In the holy days during the Buddhist Lent period, elderly Buddhists who keep the precepts (*ta sin, ya sin*) practice the Vipassanā meditation methods of Mogok Hsayadaw (1899–1962), a famous Burmese teacher of meditation. The traditional recitals of Buddhist texts by *ta cā re* are seen only in the villages around Namhsan. This means that the influence of Burmese practices became strong in central Namhsan, especially after the 1990s.

#### 4.4 The “creation” of a Palaung sect

As the number of Palaung monks who moved to central Myanmar increased after the 1990s, more and more of them sat for Buddhist examinations held by the Myanmar government. It is noteworthy here that not only Thudama monks but also Yon monks take these examinations. Ven. Thu Hka is famous as the second monk to excel in mainstream Buddhist education and pass the Damasariya (high-level) examination, but at the same time we must also understand that he made great efforts to establish a “Palaung Buddhism.”

Ven. Thu Hka was born in 1967 at Rukhau village, Namhsan district. He became a novice in the monastery of his native village when he was 7 years old. Because the monastery belonged to the Yon sect, he studied the Yon script, Shan script, and basic sutras. At the age of 12, he moved to central Myanmar, staying in Myaungmya, Bago,





**Figure 4** Movement of Ven. Thu Hka

and Yangon (Fig. 4).

After he passed the Damasariya examination at the age of 23 (1990), he met with U Paw San, one of the creators of the Palaung script, as introduced above. U Paw San advised him to study Yon Buddhism because he thought that the root of Palaung Buddhism is the practices of the Yon sect, even though U Paw San himself was a monk of the Thudama sect. U Paw San advised Ven. Thu Hka that the Yon sect in Namhsan was like a tree that was going to die, but he should study Yon Buddhism and revive the tree. Because Ven. Thu Hka had just passed the Damasariya examination at that time, he took up U Paw San's suggestion and went to Naga Hnatgaung kyaung in Tachileik, a monastery famous for education in the Yon language. He studied Yon intensively for one year. As a result, he mastered the Yon language, but he felt that because Yon is not a Palaung language but rather a Thai language, it was more important to develop Palaung Buddhism than to revive Yon Buddhism.

After U Thu Hka moved to Mandalay to get secular education at the high school

level in 1992, he established a Palaung monastery for the Rukhau group of Palaung in 1998. Then he studied Palaung script and became a leader of Palaung education in Mandalay. After he disrobed in 2006, the Rukhau monastery published biographies of the creators of Palaung scripts (Thu Hka 2009) and the teachers' manual for Palaung script (Thu Hka 2011), written in Palaung and Burmese.

In my interview, Ven. Thu Hka said that Palaung Buddhism was divided into Pai Yōn (the Yon sect) and Pai Man (the Burmese sect). He also said that this fracture should be fixed by the establishment of a “Pai Tă'aṅ” (Palaung sect). Here, we can see that Ven. Thu Hka was profoundly influenced by Burmese Buddhism, but this did not lead him to promote a simple replication of Burmese Buddhism among the Palaung. Rather he tried to manipulate it and establish Buddhism that would exist as a “Palaung sect”. As a result, the monks and novices who study in Mandalay must take classes in the Palaung script. The number of monks who can read and write the Palaung script is increasing, because the Organization for Spreading Palaung Literature (Burmese: Ta'aṅ Sapei Pyanpwayei Ahpwe, an organization under the Committee for Palaung Literature and Culture) teaches Palaung script in some monasteries. On the other hand, the young monks of the Yon sect do not study Yon or Shan script, but learn the Burmese and Palaung script instead. Thus, the monks' and novices' abilities at the Yon script are becoming progressively lower. This was not the case before.

## 5. Change and Continuity in Buddhist Practices in Namhsan

### 5.1 The diversity of the Palaung script

Social change in the Namhsan area after the 1980s brought a change in *lingua franca*, from Shan to Burmese. It was also at this time that elite Palaung monks tried to create a “Palaung sect” of Buddhism and establish their own practice. Here, we need to take a close look at how these larger trends influenced people's practices at the local level.

As I have described above, the Palaung script was unified in 1972 by the conciliatory efforts of the Palaung students. But even after this period, Ven. Nagatheina continued to compose Buddhist texts using his original script. After 2007, Mr. S (male, 52 years old), a member of the Committee for Palaung Literature and Culture (Burmese: Palaung Sapei hnin Yinkyehmu Ahpwe) started to change the script of Ven. Nagatheina to the standardized version. Nonetheless, I still found many Buddhist texts written in Nagatheina's own style in the villages.

In a village in Nammathu district, next to Namhsan district, I found a Palaung Buddhist text written in the Yon script. This text does not use the Palaung script created by the students, but, rather, a script widely used by some of the Rucīṅ in southern and eastern Shan states. It is said that Rucīṅ is the largest of the Palaung subgroups. They also held examinations in their Palaung script. The representative of this group did attend the conference in 1972, but the ability of that collective decision to bring about change in Rucīṅ literary practices has been limited.

## 5.2 The diversity of the Palaung languages

Excepting these groups, other Palaung groups use the standardized script created by the students. But the spoken language of these Palaung groups is not the same, even if they are written in the same script. As far as I know, the language of the texts can be divided into three subgroups.

As explained above, the most popular language used in the texts around Namhsan is that of Ven. Nagatheina, and such texts are composed in the Samlon language. In contrast, the most popular language used in the texts across the China-Myanmar border is the Rumai language (Photo 13), which is written by the monks and lay specialists (Kojima and Badenoch 2013).

Other than the above, Rukhaw language is also used. Some texts in this language are written by Ven. Pyinnyananda (37 years old) after 2008. He is resident at the Rukhau monastery in Mandalay and is a disciple of Ven. Thu Hka, in addition to serving as the leader of the Organization for Spreading Palaung Literature in Mandalay from 2012. Comparing these texts with the texts by Ven. Nagatheina, it is noteworthy that Ven. Pyinnyananda's texts are written in the standardized Palaung script of the students, but composed in Rukhau, as he is a member of the Rukhau group. Furthermore, Ven. Nagatheina followed the traditional Palaung rhyme style of 6 syllables per line of verse, but Ven. Pyinnyananda's style is 4 or 6 syllables per line because these are translated from Burmese and preserve the Burmese rhyme system.

The reason that texts vary in the language of composition is that the differences between the spoken languages is significant in practice. Although they are commonly referred to as different dialects of Palaung, in many cases they are not mutually intelligible. So, if the texts of Ven. Nagatheina are used, Rukhaw people cannot understand the meaning, and the *ta cã re* must translate again from the Samlon language to their own language.

In some subgroups, members of the subgroup must marry within their subgroup, and marriage with members of other subgroups is not allowed (Photo 14). Because these groups maintain strong kinship relationships, they go to the “mother village” three times during Buddhist Lent to greet and pay respects to the monks, old people, and relatives. Furthermore, villagers of the same subgroup go to the monastery of the largest abbot and donate *kathina* robes during the one-month period following the Buddhist Lent.

Of course, the monks who live in the Namhsan area go to Gaingkyok monastery



Photo 13 Palaung Buddhist text composed in the Rumai language.



**Photo 14** Women's clothes differ by subgroup  
(left to right; Samloṅ, Rucīṅ, Rumai, and Samloṅ).

and pay respects to the abbot. The monks do sometimes go to monasteries of other sects, but if the sect is different, a monk cannot become the abbot of the other sect's monastery. This is common in Theravāda Buddhism, but interestingly, Palaung monks cannot become the abbot of another subgroup even if the sect is the same. This means that the Yon sect does not have a united organization and there are many networks of each subgroup functioning under the umbrella of the "Yon" sect. Each subgroup establishes its own practices through periodic contact. This feature can also be seen in the "Thudama" sect. Each subgroup has its own monastery; there are twelve Palaung monasteries in Mandalay, and six monasteries in Yangon. The monks in these monasteries regularly communicate with each other and sometimes stay in the monasteries of other subgroups. However, one monk said that if he stays in the monastery of another subgroup for a long period, he feels small. Therefore, each subgroup hopes to have its own monastery.

### 5.3 Factors of change and continuity in Palaung practices

Each subgroup shares similar styles of practice, but this does not necessarily mean that all the practices within the subgroup are the same in each village. One factor that reflects this difference is the language environment. Now I will describe the example of the Rukhau group, in which the monks take an important role in establishing a "Palaung sect" like the one described above.

Hukwet village in Kyaukme district is located 1,300 meters above sea level and 140 kilometers from Namhsan. Their main livelihood is cultivating tea plantations. Around

Hukwet village, there are some Shan villages. Most Shan people in other areas engage in paddy cultivation, but the Shan in this area live on the mountains and cultivate upland crops and tea. Furthermore, of the 507 households in Hukwet village, 15 are Shan households. Due to the proximity of Shan neighbors, almost all of the Palaung villagers can speak the Shan language.

After 2008, some monks in a Hukwet monastery started to use the texts by the Rukhaw language when preaching to the villagers. These texts are written in their own language, making it easy for the lay villagers to understand the meaning.

It is not only the monks who preach, but also the *ta cǎ re*. For example, at funerals, the monks preach in the morning in Palaung language, and the *ta cǎ re* recite the Shan texts for one hour after dinner. When villagers make donations five or seven days after the funeral, the *ta cǎ re* again preaches for three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. When invited, during the Buddhist days of Buddhist Lent, the *ta cǎ re* preaches for *ta θan* (*ta sin* in the Samlong language) and *ya θan* (*ya sin* in the Samlong language). Recently, *ta θan* and *ya θan* practice the Vipassanā meditation methods of Mogok Hsayadaw, but sometimes they still invite the *ta cǎ re* to their small building in the precinct of the monastery. Moreover, when the villagers have a big donation ceremony, a *ta cǎ re* is sometimes invited by the villagers and recites the Shan texts. The villagers understand the recital because almost all the villagers can understand the Shan language.

This case of Hukwet village is different from the case in Namhsan, where many Palaung people, especially the young generation, cannot understand the Shan language. I will next describe two villages of the Rukhau group in Namhsan.

In Aram village, the *ta cǎ re* recites Palaung texts by the Rukhaw language at funerals and wedding ceremonies. This is because the *ta cǎ re* and village head are both relatively young and would like to change the style of preaching. This is the same tendency as in Namhsan, described in Section 4 of this chapter.

However, in Rukhau village (the original village of the Rukhau group), it is not the same. In Rukhau village, the *ta cǎ re* recites texts written in the Yon or Shan scripts. In the case of Yon text, the *ta cǎ re* first recites in Yon and then explains in the Palaung language because the villagers do not understand the Yon language at all. In case of Shan texts, however, the villagers understand around one-third of the meaning. Why do the *ta cǎ re* in Rukhau village not recite the Palaung texts by U Pyinnyananda, even though U Pyinnyananda's native village is Rukhau and the texts are written in the Rukhaw language? The reason is that the *ta cǎ re* and *ta ă can* of Rukhau village are from a relatively older generation (they are each more than fifty years old). These older religious leaders decide the texts for recitation in the ceremony, and they think that they should not change the old tradition of the Rukhau village.

This means that another factor in producing diversity of the practices in the same subgroup is differences in the generation of religious leaders in the village. The young Palaung elite monks represent an ideological and practical shift from Yon and Thudama (Burmese) sects to the Palaung sect, but the "Palaung sect" itself is not homogeneous because each subgroup, and sometimes each village in the same subgroup, establishes its



own practices.

## 6. Conclusion

As I have described above, the social contact between the Burmese and Palaung people became more intense in Namhsan, especially after the creation and strengthening of the institutions of the nation state. This tendency brought about a decline in the influence of Shan and Yon Buddhism. At the same time, influence from Burmese Buddhism became stronger. But this does not mean that the Palaung Buddhists simply assimilated their Buddhism into Burmese Buddhism. Rather, they have tried to make their own style of practice, one that is neither the Yon sect nor the Thudama (Burmese) sect, but a “Palaung sect”. These developments demonstrate how the Palaung have exercised their own cultural agency and remade the ethnic connectedness in the articulation of Palaung Buddhist practice.

Yet we must take care with regard to the reality of the “Palaung sect.” Because of the great differences in language among the Palaung subgroups, the Buddhist texts composed by Ven. Nagatheina in Samloṅ are difficult to understand for other subgroups. The Rucīn group in the Shan states created their own texts using their own script. The Rumai group across the China–Myanmar border and the Rukhau group in Namhsan, however, created their own Buddhist texts written in the students’ script, but composed in their respective languages. The tendency to create texts written in Palaung became common, but there is great diversity in the practices of each sub-group, and also among villages of the same subgroup. This means that Palaung Buddhists still maintain a micro-regional community by remaking and reinforcing connectedness within these groups.

Upland Buddhists have been considered to be an anomaly, an exception to the convenient categories that have been constructed. In fact, each group of Buddhist upland people has distinct historical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics. These upland Buddhist practices, however, have not received sufficient attention. There is a need to more closely examine how these factors of culture, including religion, language, social organization, and migration, interact within changing political and economic contexts. Here, specifically, we have shed some light on how the seemingly straightforward and transparent categories of “Buddhist” and “upland” have masked more complex and decisive factors such as the politics of orthography, the diversity of language within assumed ethnic groups, and the micro-politics of composing Buddhist texts to meet shifting social preferences. In doing this, we also uncover new frames of reference for describing the uplander–lowlander relationship, which is essential to understanding this region.

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