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ETHNIC EDUCATION, IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY OF THE
KAREN AND MON ETHNIC EDUCATION REGIMES IN MYANMAR

Master Thesis || Nemhoilhing Kipgen
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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of persistent violence, conflict, and the recent military coup d'état in February 2021, Myanmar offers an insightful perspective to study the link between education and conflict. Since its independence, the *Tatmadaw* or the state military government of Myanmar, has been waging an ideological war against its ethnic minority populations. This often took place in the form of “*Burmanization*” or assimilation of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual groups into a common Burman identity. Nation-wide literacy campaigns were launched and many ethnic groups saw it as a form of “internal colonization”. Thus, ethnic non-state armed groups have been fighting for their right to self-determination, and for the establishment of a federal democratic union. These political demands are reflected in their ethnic education regimes whereby school textbooks, school rituals, and language of instruction encourages a spirit of ethnic pride amongst children in ethnic areas.

This research examines the historical evolution of Myanmar’s national education system, specifically as a nation building process. Secondly, this paper focuses on two ethnic education regimes - Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and unpacks how these education systems are socializing, mobilizing and fostering in/tolerance through history textbooks, mother tongue based multi lingual education (MTB-MLE), and school rituals. Reflecting on the theoretical framework of education and conflict, it became evident that in the particular case of Myanmar, there are nuances underlying the causes of conflict. It would be too simplistic to argue that education causes conflict because often times, ethnic schools were formed due to urgent needs in conflict zones where the central government is unable to provide schooling and not necessarily due to ethnic political aspirations. Thus, questions remain as to what extent does education affects violence or is it the other way around? Does violence cause education? More importantly, is there a correlation between education and conflict rather than causality? Despite these unresolved questions, one thing seems certain in that the role of education in ethnic conflict cannot be overlooked. In order for future peace processes to advance, the issues of

education, identity and languages have to be at the forefront of peacebuilding processes in Myanmar.

Keywords: ethnic education, ethnic conflict, Myanmar, education, two faces of education

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BIA	Burma Independence Army
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organizations
EBEPs	Ethnic Basic Education Providers
EFA	Education for All
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KECD	Karen Education and Culture Department
KHCPS	Karen History and Culture Preservation Society
KNA	Karen National Association
KNU	Karen National Union
KTWG	Karen Teacher Working Group
LOI	language of instruction
MNLA	Mon National Liberation Army
MPF	Mon People's Front
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue Based – Multi Lingual Education
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NNER	National Network for Education Reform
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

1. INTRODUCTION

At the wake of its independence in 1942, Myanmar¹, then known as Burma had the highest literacy rate across the former British Empire (Cheesman, 2003). However, since its independence, the provision, quality and access to education in Myanmar has been adversely affected by the intermittent coup d'états in 1962, 1988 (Statista Research Department, 2021) and recently in February², 2021. Furthermore, ongoing internal ethnic conflicts between the state military government "*tatmada*"³ and the non-state ethnic armed groups has made schooling and access to education extremely challenging in many rural parts of the country where the majority of ethnic population resides.

This research study examines the relationship between education and conflict in Myanmar. Through literature reviews, comparative historical analysis, and case study comparison between the Karen and Mon ethnic education regimes, I argue that education and conflict are connected and that throughout Myanmar's history, education was used as a political tool to conduct force assimilation or "*Burmanization*" of multi lingual ethnic groups towards a common "*Bamar*" identity. Likewise, ethnic education regimes are also socializing, mobilizing and promoting in/tolerance towards the "Others" in their quest for self-determination. While past studies have acknowledged the use of education as a political tool by the "*Tatmadaw*", little has been explored on ethnic education regimes and its link to ongoing ethnic conflict in minority populated regions. Thus, in order to understand this research gap, this paper draws from both comparative historical analysis and examines the 2 ethnic education regimes of Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and

¹ In this paper, the terms Myanmar and Burma are interchangeably used. Burma refers to earlier historical periods under colonial rule and "Myanmar" indicates the country under military regime i.e., State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and after 1988, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (Salem-Gervais & Metro, 2012).

² On February 1st Myanmar military/ Tatmadaw seized power by declaring state emergency and detaining democratically elected leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi (BBC News, 2021)

³ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military government, also known as the military junta.

Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). Findings from this research will be a significant contribution to the ongoing debates on education in ethnic conflict, education in emergencies, and inclusive education. The objective of this case study is not to offer any recommendations or suggestions but to understand how different ethnic groups such as Karen and the Mon groups are demanding their right to self-determination and autonomy through their education provision and by employing their own ethnic language (also known as Mother-tongue based multi-lingual education MTB-MLE) and teaching of their own ethnic history. Thus, this paper will examine the following 3 research questions:

Research question 1: How has '*Burmanization*' of the state education system contributed to national identity formation and nation building in post-colonial Myanmar?

Sub-question: How has this process excluded ethnic minority groups?

Research question 2: How are ethnic education regimes reproducing ethnonationalism and ethnic national consciousness through the adoption of mother tongue based multi lingual education (MTB-MLE) system?

Sub-question: Is there a link between levels of conflict and language of instructions employed in ethnic schools/ classrooms?

Research question 3: What is the relationship between education and conflict in the context of ethnic education regimes and their respective ethnic armed organizations?

Sub-question: To what extent does the ethnic education regimes socialize, mobilize and bolster in/tolerance of the "Other"?

To answer the research questions above, I conducted a thorough desk research and semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals who were mostly ethnic education providers, some were authors and experts in the field, and others were working with international organizations responsible for education and humanitarian aid provision in ethnic regions. Interviews were conducted in English and Burmese languages and they were used as both guidance and insights in the case study analysis. To gather my data, I employed snowball sampling method to select

respondents who have worked or are currently working with ethnic schools in minority region, specifically in the Karen and Mon states. I was unable to conduct fieldwork due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, school closures and the recent Myanmar military coup. Finally, it is important to point out that my own norms have shaped this research topic and analysis. Thus, ethical considerations regarding reflexivity⁴, i.e., my ability to self-consciously refer to myself in relation to the research and the topic is recognized throughout the research process i.e., while conducting literature reviews and also during my interviews with experts on the ground. Lastly, due to a limited number of interviewees, lack of gender representation, age distribution, and other factors, these findings should be treated with caution and should only be used as an addition to an already existing literature on education and conflict in Myanmar.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section dissects the theoretical debates and literature around education and conflict with the goal of focusing on 3 key mechanisms – socialization, in/tolerance and ethnic mobilization - that will be used to understand the ongoing debate in the context of Myanmar. These three key mechanisms were inspired by Lange’s findings in “Education in Ethnic Conflict”. Opposing the widely held assumptions around the role of education in promoting peace and tolerance, Lange (2000) argues that education reinforces hostility and ethnic conflict in societies where there are pre-existing ethnic divisions, lack of resources and inadequate political systems. His studies discussed 4 major ways whereby education can promote ethnic conflict i.e., through socialization in schools, frustration and aggression when needs are not met, competition for resources, and finally, mobilization in schools which can ignite and influence student participation in violent social movements. He carried out a cross-national statistical analysis and conducted case studies in

⁴ I identify as an ethnic minority group (Kuki) from Burma/Myanmar and thus, during the research, reflexivity was an important considered and awareness that guided me throughout my research and analysis of interviews and or personal interaction with the interviewees.

countries like Sri Lanka, Cyprus, India, the Palestinian territories, Canada, Germany and sub-Saharan Africa. Given that Myanmar meets all the pre requisites and has all the pre-existing conditions such as ethnic divide deep rooted in colonialism, ineffective political structure, and lack of resources, this study applies Lange's framework to understand the role of education in Myanmar's internal ethnic conflict, which is regarded as one of the world's prolonging civil conflicts in modern history (Miliband, 2016).

Exploring the three mechanisms will help unpack ways in which education has the potential to influence the socialization, learning process and mobilize ethnic groups towards a common political cause. Additionally, this section also explores key terminologies such as violence and education. This paper recognizes that there is no universal agreement on what constitutes violence, and thus, it looks at different forms of violence using Salmi's analytical framework which consists of the four different types of violence i.e., direct violence, indirect violence, repressive violence and alienating violence. I also briefly discuss the nature and scope of violence to include Galtung's definition of "direct violence" and "structural violence."

Much like the term violence, education as a concept can be quite challenging to define as it could mean different things to many people. Thus, this paper simplifies education in its role as an institution, a learning process and a social process. Most importantly, and drawing from Bush & Saltarelli's (2000) study on "The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict," this paper recognizes that education mirrors the society in that it can be both a stabilizing and destabilizing cause. This paper challenges a widely held and an archaic understanding of education as a "panacea" for deep root evils and conflict in our society. Thus, against the backdrop that education is no longer regarded as a 'panacea' for many social issues ranging from racism to inter-ethnic communal violence, this paper focuses on education and conflict as it relates to nationalism/ ethnonationalism and finally the ethnic quest for self-determination. Thus, in many ways, this research focuses on the identity formation process that occurs through the education systems.

2.1. Education and Conflict

Education is neither neutral nor immune to the sociocultural and political changes around it and while this understanding is not new, it is increasingly becoming significant when examining the impact of education on conflict. Historically and in recent times, education provision as part of the Education for All (EFA) plan has the potential to exacerbate preexisting “inequalities and perceived (or real) injustices,” increasing animosity within and between different ethnic groups (Vaux et al., 2006). This is due to “certain patterns of educational administration” which may be considered detrimental since it bolsters the root causes of conflict (Ibid). In this regard, education system should be viewed as a “sector of governance” (Ibid) that mirrors and reflects core issues related to exclusion, discrimination, racism, inequality, etc.

The UNICEF Innocenti research insights on “two faces of education in ethnic conflict” refers to both positive and negative aspects of education as it relates to conflict and ethnicity (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). According to the study, negative aspects of education occurs when there is an “uneven distribution of education,” and when education is being used as a “weapon of cultural repression” and textbooks are produced or doctored to fuel hostility and intolerance (Ibid, p. 34). The positive face of education extends beyond good quality education provision and includes “the conflict-dampening impact of educational opportunity, the promotion of linguistic tolerance, the nurturing of ethnic tolerance, and the ‘disarming’ of history” (Ibid).

Similarly, Lange (2021) “Educations in Ethnic Violence” has examined how education shapes ethnic violence through identity formation, expectations & assertiveness, competition and mobilizational resources. Building on this knowledge, this research aims to apply this framework of understanding in the context of Myanmar. Education as a social learning process, a physical institution, a resource and an activity have the ability to shape violence and conflict in an already violent and politically unstable country. In the same vein, as a formal institution where learning and social process takes place, education can be highly influential in forming social relations and identity formation within a particular community. Thus, to understand the role of education and its influence

on the ongoing ethnic violence in Burma/Myanmar, I will be using the following theoretical framework that consists of the following 3 mechanisms: Socialization, in/tolerance and mobilization.

2.2. Socialization Mechanism

The concept of socialization can be traced back to 100 years ago when it first appeared in the American Journal of Sociology and since then it has advanced into a fundamental concept in the field of sociology (Zuiri and Checkel, 2005). Some scholars define socialization as a “process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community” (Ibid, p. 1046). Others who use constructivist approach sees ethnicity as a social construct and socialization as an underlying cause of violence in many ethnic conflicts (Lange, 2012). Additionally, constructivists believe that when ethnic groups create national communities using their ethnic identity as a groundwork, it results in conflict (Parsneau, 1996). In other words, political pursuit to create and re-create ethnic identities results in violence because modern ethnic identity is a dogma that results from “intentional political efforts and accidents of history” (Ibid, p. 74).

Wasburn (1984) echoes the sentiment that social conflict is not only an essential part of the socialization process but that socialization often results in conflict rather than peace. The socialization process, in and of itself, establishes a power structure whereby those in higher positions of power and authority imposes their ideas and beliefs on groups or individuals under their mandate. This is often met with resistance and thus, the process of socialization is bound to result in conflict – both internally and externally/ socially. Socialization can be broken down into 3 components – the socialization process, socialization agents and the outcomes of socialization. To briefly summarize, during the learning process of socialization, if questions raised by those who are being socialized are conflicting with the socializing agent’s interest, then it might be repressed. While some socializing agents may support the maintenance of the status quo, others might mobilize for social change and conflict. As for the outcomes of socialization, the socializing process of conformity and performance can result in unawareness or realization of “others” (Ibid).

Socialization in education may take place through school rituals (national anthem, flag ceremonies, etc.), school curriculum, textbooks, history books, language of instruction, interactions between teachers and pupils, interactions amongst students themselves, etc. Findings by Padilla, Ruiz and Brand (1973) indicates that ethnic attitudes are established early on and once any positive or negative biases are formed, they only increase with time. Students also develop their ethnic identity early on through interaction with parents, teachers and or peers. Thus, in this regard socialization can be observed through schooling, syllabus or teaching content and school rituals, etc.

In highly diverse societies such as Myanmar, socialization through educational curriculum is deemed as a socio-political mechanism to “unify” the country. Coulby (1997) demonstrates two ways in which education has been used in “cultural homogenization” through the creation of “national literature” and promotion of a common national language. For some scholars, schooling imposes “symbolic violence” on ethnic minority students who are being socialized to accept and learn “arbitrary” selections and instruments of knowledge that is weighted heavily in favor of the major ethnic group’s interests (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997). Moreover, this dominant narrative is made to appear “neutral and objective” (Ibid). Thus, any study that attempts to understand the role of education in ethnic conflict has to consider how curriculum and textbooks socialize children through the inclusion, omission and promotion of a particular narrative over the other, how textbooks and curriculum are chosen and moreover, what main language is used as the language of instruction in classrooms?

2.3. In/Tolerance Mechanism

Some might argue that the in/tolerance mechanism can be categorized under socialization mechanism as it constitutes how an ethnic group or individual tolerates the “other” or the simple understanding that through socialization, individuals within a society either develop tolerance or resistance towards the others. This paper builds on this understanding and extends the in/tolerance mechanism to link it more closely to identity construction and the formation of “Others”. By definition, tolerance is respect for different identities, cultures, languages, race, religion, class,

gender and sexuality, etc. On the other hand, intolerance is usually associated with the belief that one's own social or cultural group is more distinct and superior than the rest and this sense of superiority comes across in how one views or behaves towards those they deem as "Others" (Bryan and Vavrus, 2005).

This process of identity formation by which one social group adopts a superiority narrative, and forms their collective identity in opposition to others is also known as "Othering". Staub (1989) calls this process "moral exclusion" whereby individuals create and maintain a consistent image of self and there are examples in which social exclusion and differentiation could result in the objectification and dehumanization of those who are considered different or "Others". This categorization of "Others" not only dehumanizes the social group but also allows them to be regarded as "undeserving, expendable and eligible for exploitation and harm" (Opatow, 2002, pp. 105-106). Delegitimization is a process through which the dehumanization and moral exclusion of "Others" is made permissible. It uses "negative, salient and atypical bases for categorization", for instance calling an out-group member as "parasites" or calling them evil, etc. (Bryan & Vavrus, 2005, p. 187; see also Bar Tal, 1989).

These forms of socializing, labeling and name calling, in some ways, normalizes the mistreatment of the "dehumanized" group because the "Others" are beyond the social group's moral compass and are categorized and labeled as inferior to human race. In his article "social issues of law and order," Bauman (2000) argues that there is an inclination to maintain order through the "paradigm of exclusion" and he further explains that in the process of exclusion, excluding the "others" becomes "an act of good sense and justice" and those who are involved in the exclusion might even "feel sensible and righteous" as they take on the role as "defenders of law and order and guardians of values and standards of decency" (p. 207). Thus, the process of exclusion assumes that the "others" or those who are excluded are "unfit to be free agents, *quod erat demonstrandum*" and therefore, there is a need to police, control and supervise over them as "an act of human care and charity, a profoundly moral duty" (Bauman, 2000, p. 207).

This “paradigm of exclusion” is observed in school systems where the curriculum is generated and controlled by those in power, often imposing their standards and moral values to be regarded as the societal norms. In schools, tolerance is taught and encouraged through the socialization process and learning the values and norms of a society. It is also enhanced through school curriculum such as civic, or moral education. In similar manner, intolerance can also be observed in ways students are assessed through a certain mode of assessment tools, admission processes and tracking policies and the overall school curriculum and syllabus. Furthermore, textbooks, school rituals, norms and acculturation practices may reinforce the idea that one’s own group, belief system or lifestyle is superior than those of others and often, this narrative is used to legitimize the nation state (Reardon, 1994). Likewise, education can be tailored to suit contemporary political needs. This exploitation of educational structures and processes by using ethnic and cultural differences as a basis for identity can lead to violence and conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Therefore, in order to understand how education shapes conflict, it is crucial to also explore ways in which languages, stories and narratives (through school textbooks and curriculum) are adopted by education providers to either promote tolerance or intolerance towards the “Others”.

2.4. Mobilization Mechanism

Theories on violence and ethnic conflict have emphasized ways in which socialization process, identity construction through in/tolerance against the “Other”, among many factors, motivates violence. Resource mobilization is unique in this regard as it focuses on ethnic groups’ mobilizational capacity to achieve a collective action or strive towards a common goal through social movements. According to Jenkins “mobilization is the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action” (1983, p. 532). Education provided by ethnic education regimes is a form of resource whereby ethnic groups are able to maintain their identity (language), and mobilize for a collective action (demands for self-rule and self-determination).

Studies on ethnic mobilization have also examined the link between the expansion of state policies such as education to ethnic competition (Olzak, 1983). In the same vein, education

strengthens ethnic competition and encourages ethnic mobilization as it expands the individual or groups' capacity to mobilize and bring about the movement's success (Lange, 2012). When it comes to ethnic violence, resource mobilization theory is highly relevant as ethnic mobilization or ethnic social movements, which aims for collective action, can contribute to violence (Ibid). Additionally, resource mobilization theorists examine social movements beyond institutional change to focus on organizing previously unorganized groups against institutional elites (Gamson, 1975) or to represent an excluded group's political interests (Tilly 1978; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977).

Throughout history and in many places such as France, Russia, Cuba and Latin America, schools have served as grounds for social and political movements/ revolutions and nationalist struggles (Lange, 2012). Some findings also indicate that social movements were consistent with era of educational expansion (Ibid). Although, student's participation in social movements in the 1960s have been linked to the assumption that college students and professions have flexible time schedule and income which grants them the liberty to participate in political movements (Jenkins, 1983).

Besides school and student participation in ethnic social movements, state language policies are an area of controversy especially in countries with ethnic diverse languages. According to Meyer and Hannan (1979) when states undergo education expansion during the nation building process, questions around language of instruction (LOI) is inevitable. Thus, depending on which language gets adopted to be the official language or the LOI in state education system, this may incite ethnic mobilization especially with competing language groups (Olzak, 1983). Language is a critical instrument that allows ethnic groups to maintain their culture, individual and collective identity and thus, ignorance or neglect of ethnic minority language can motivate ethnic mobilization to occur through education and more specifically through language of instruction in classrooms. In this regard, this paper will examine ways in which MTB-MLE (Mother Tongue Based – Multi Lingual Education) is used by ethnic education regimes as a mobilization resource to organize its ethnic

groups towards a common political cause for self-determination by strengthening ethnic national identity through education.

2.5. Unpacking key terminologies: Violence and Education

This section will briefly explore the definitions of violence and education as it applies to this research study.

2.5.1. Violence⁵

Studies on violence have demonstrated that there is no clear-cut definition or agreement on what constitutes an act of violence. In this regard, Bufacchi (2005) looks at theoretical ways and explore the nature and scope of violence. He unpacks two concepts of violence. The first concept “violence as force” adopts a narrow and minimalist understanding of violence as it focuses on “acts of force” that are “intentional or deliberate” (Ibid). On the other hand, the concept “violence as violation” maintains a broader scope of understanding violence, and aligns with Galtung’s definition, to also include both “direct violence” i.e., when the act of violence can be traced to a person and “structural violence” in which violence stems from the structures, often resulting in the unequal distribution of power and he further argues that this structural violence tends to be more harmful in the long run.

Another study that unpacks different types of violence is Salmi’s (2004) analytical framework for the definition of violence. Moreover, Salmi explores whether violence coexist with capitalism and democracy and drawing from his observation of the 9/11 terror attacks, crimes committed by the Taliban regime and persistent dictatorships in countries like Myanmar and Iraq, he came up with four different types of violence.

- 1) Direct violence refers to the acts of violence resulting in both physical and psychological sufferings (for ex: genocide, ethnic cleansing, murders, imprisonment, torture, rape and maltreatment, among many others),

⁵ In this paper, the term violence and conflict are interchangeably used.

2) Indirect violence is defined as violence by omission. It is a passive means that involves failing to intervene or giving assistance to victims. It extends beyond physical violence to include social violence such as hunger, disease or poverty and other natural catastrophes,

3) Repressive violence refers to violation of basic human rights such as political rights violation in undemocratic countries,

4) Alienating violence derives from a belief that an individual's well-being expands beyond material needs and include other rights such as the right to psychological, emotional, cultural and intellectual integrity. A key element would be "freedom from fear" (Ibid, pp. 2-5).

In addition to the four types of violence listed above, I also extend my framework of violence to consider Galtung's "structural violence" whereby violence is embedded in the structure or system and is illustrated in the form of "unequal power" and thus, "unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). This holistic examination of violence helps broaden our understanding of the root causes and the complicit role of education in worsening societal inequalities particularly in countries with ineffective political institutions. It can be argued that education, as an institution, and learning process, can influence the outcomes of such violence (Davies, 2006).

When examining violence, it is also important to consider other ongoing debates around the legality of what constitutes "genocide", "ethnic cleansing" or "crime against humanity". And this debate is highly applicable in the context of Myanmar i.e., whether or not to label the atrocities resulting from the ethnic conflict as "genocide" (Stanton, 2017, para. 7). Many ethnic minority groups such as Karen, Kachin, Rohingya, Shan, etc. have been under "Genocide Watch" and they are being closely monitored since 2006 (Ibid). Crimes include but are not limited to murder, enslavement, deportation, torture, rape, extermination, deportation, unlawful imprisonment, forcible transfers of population, etc. (Ibid). Therefore, to understand the link between education and conflict with the increasing atrocities perpetrated against the ethnic minority groups, this paper adopts violence in its entirety. Violence and Conflict are lived experiences for ethnic minorities which often translates into intolerance and hatred towards the "Other".

2.5.2. Education

It would be nearly impossible to define education or the concept of education as it means different things to many people. While some equate education with the physical act of “schooling” and of schools or colleges, others refer to the ways that students and teachers or professors interact (Smith, 2015, 2021). In order to simplify the concept of education, this paper will assign 3 components to education i.e., education as a learning process, education as an institution, and education as a social process.

As a learning process, education can be defined as a lifelong course since learning occurs in both formal and informal settings. However, to simplify this definition, this paper defines education as a formal learning process. The reason is because a broad definition would make it more challenging to conduct a study on the effects of education, its influences and its learning outcomes. Additionally, defining the concept of education as a learning process that takes place in formal setting will allow us to dive deeper to understand education as an institution. As an institution, education includes the transfer of knowledge, skills, and other ideas from teachers to students and vice versa. It also goes beyond teacher-student relationship to include higher authorities whose interests and provision in education extends beyond the simple transferring of skills and knowledge (Lange, 2012). These higher authorities may consist of national governments, religious organizations, charities, ethnic armed groups, etc.

As a social process, education involves socialization of groups to identify with a common narrative, history, culture, religion and language. It is a mechanism through which social identity is constructed for both individuals and groups. According to John Dewey (1916), an American philosopher and a pioneer in the field of education and social reform, education is a “social process...a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 239). Through education as a learning process and an institution, groups socialize and form individual and social identities. Thus, this paper analyzes ethnic education, schooling provided by ethnic armed groups in these 3 components i.e., learning process, as an institution and as a social process.

REFLECTIONS/ CONCLUDING REMARKS

This section laid out the continuing debates on the topic of education and conflict, more specifically on ethnic conflict. For the purpose of this paper and drawing from Lange's framework, this paper mainly focuses on three mechanisms i.e., socialization mechanism, in/tolerance mechanism and mobilization mechanism. The socialization mechanism draws from well-renowned sociologists and constructivists in the field who shares that socialization establishes power structures whereby people in power imposes their ideas and beliefs on a group. In this regard, the state education system, controlled by the military government in power, uses their authority to impose its own ideologies and political agendas through school rituals, curriculum, textbooks, history books, classroom language, etc. Similarly, the ethnic education regimes, controlled by ethnic armed groups could also influence its ethnic school curriculum and socialization process of its students and teachers.

The in/tolerance mechanism or the "Othering" of a particular ethnic group stipulates that through the process of socialization, and with identity formation, there is a notion of "us" versus "them" and with that comes what Bauman (2000) calls the "paradigm of exclusion" which allows groups to morally exclude the "Others" and by doing so, they are able to categorize, label, and mistreat the "Others" (p.207). In school systems especially through school textbooks and curriculum, the in/tolerance mechanism can be further explored. The mobilization mechanism consists of the processes by which groups gain collective control over resources for their shared goals and actions. Education as a resource is secured, controlled and used to mobilize for a collective action whether it is to fight against foreign occupation/ colonial rule or ethnic groups demanding for their right to self-determination and autonomy. Since ethnic languages and identities are suppressed and excluded, one-way ethnic groups have mobilized is through their demands for the MTB-MLE education system which will allow them to teach their ethnic languages during school hours.

Finally, key terminologies such as violence and education are unpacked. When discussing conflict and the use of violence, this paper recognizes that violence includes direct physical acts of violence,

violence by omission or social violence i.e., deaths resulting from hunger, diseases or poverty, repressive violence which involves the violation of basic human rights, alienating violence that encompasses the right to psychological, and emotional integrity, and finally structural violence which includes violence embedded within a system, often expressed in the unequal distribution of wealth, power and social status.

3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

This section discusses the methodology employed, case studies examined, limitations and challenges to consider. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic on education and conflict, I used qualitative methods to gather information. It is important to note that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, lack of internet connectivity and the recent military coup in Myanmar, I was not able to carry out field work as I had initially intended. Additionally, I was not able to conduct online surveys as access to internet was limited in many areas. Thus, this paper relies heavily on secondary sources and information gathered from the in-depth interviews with ethnic education providers, education experts, and others from research and academia. Informal and in-depth semi structured interviews ensured a sense of trust and informality which is crucial to gain valuable information on this topic. About 13 interviews were conducted over the zoom platform in both English and Burmese languages. Respondents were always asked for their consent to cooperate in the discussion and they were ensured complete confidentiality.

Unit of Analysis

This research focuses on 2 main actors i.e., ethnic armed organization (EAO) education service providers and other experts who are knowledgeable and have written about ethnic schools or who are working with international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region. Due to the research scope, when looking at ethnic schools, I mainly focused on Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) schools and with regards to education providers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ethnic

education providers whose background ranged from director, program managers, secretary, board of education to researchers in the field. Due to the ongoing political fragility, I did not reach out to the Myanmar Ministry of Education as there could be potential conflict of interests or ethical concerns regarding the recognition of their role as legitimate political actors in the midst of political instability. Both the Karen and Mon ethnic groups were chosen due to the following 3 reasons:

1. The availability of literature on the Karen and Mon ethnic education regimes in comparison to other ethnic minority groups, some of whom do not have their own ethnic schools (for example, Chin, Rakhine or Rohingya ethnic groups)
2. Availability of interviewees such as ethnic education providers who work directly with either Karen or Mon ethnic groups
3. Comparing two different education regimes will provide a holistic view as their approach towards ethnic education curriculum and teaching mirrors their relationship with the state government or Tatmadaw.

Both case studies on Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) aims to understand ways in which ethnic school children are socialized and mobilized to embrace their ethnic identity, how they are being taught in/tolerance and the describing of “Others” and their mobilization towards a common cause through the teaching of their ethnic curriculum which constitutes their unique histories, culture and languages. A case study comparison of both the Karen and Mon ethnic education regimes will be helpful for international and humanitarian organizations in the field of education or education in emergencies to understand the complexity of education in ethnic conflict settings. It will also lay the groundwork for study of language teaching and identity formation in multi-ethnic societies like Myanmar.

Research challenges and ethical considerations

As mentioned above, one of the biggest barriers was the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, ongoing military coup and lack of internet connectivity in some parts of the country. It is also

important to address the question of reflexivity⁶ in this research process. I am aware of my role as a researcher and how my identity as an ethnic Kuki minority group in Myanmar affects my positionality, analysis and construction of knowledge and inferences of meaning. Thus, as a researcher and throughout the process of this research, I am constantly asking myself: “What do I know? How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective? With what voice do I share my perspective? What do I do with what I have found?” (Patton 2014, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016, para. 6). Personally, the interview transcription process served as a crucial component of reflexivity as I was able to re-listen, analyze and examine it alongside pre-existing literature and research findings. My identity as an ethnic minority did not only influence my discussion with interviewees but it also shaped my analysis of the interview and the subject matter. A minor yet important observation during the interview process was the interviewees asking and, in some cases, guessing with curiosity which ethnic group I was from. I believe these could affect ways in which they answered the interview questions⁷.

Another challenge is in regards to the limited number of interviewees and lack of gender representation as only 2 out of 13 respondents were female. The interviewees were selected using snowball sampling method, whereby I asked my first interviewee to provide me with a list of contacts from his network and connections that have worked or are currently working with ethnic education providers. I interviewed the second round and gained more interviewees who have, in some capacity, worked with the Karen and or Mon ethnic groups, and so on. At least 7 interviewees claimed that they directly work with the ethnic schools whereas the others have written research on the topic of education in Myanmar or were working with NGOs and IOs in the region. While the information gathered from these interviews were highly informative, analysis from this research

⁶ Roulston (2010) defined reflexivity in research as “the researcher’s ability to be able to self-consciously refer to him or herself in relation to the production of knowledge about research topics”

⁷ During a discussion, an interviewee asked if I spoke my native language (Thadou Kuki) and when I responded with a “yes,” they went on to praise and talk about the importance of cultivating native/ mother tongue languages in ethnic communities.

study should be treated as complementary to what is already written about the ethnic education regimes mainly because these semi-structured interviews conducted do not reflect diverse voices nor have gender balance, diversity in age composition, or diversity in ethnic backgrounds⁸, etc.

4. CONTEXT

Myanmar is a country in South East Asia, inhabited by over 54.41 million people⁹ (World Bank, 2020). There are more than one hundred ethnic nationality groups (Lwin, 2019) with their own ethnic languages and dialects. According to the Myanmar government, there are officially “135 ethnic minority groups¹⁰” or “national races” [*taingyintha*] living in Myanmar. However, the official language is Burmese and it is used in government offices, public, schools and state affairs. According to the 2014 Myanmar population and housing census (2016), Buddhism is practiced by 89.8 percent of the population, 6.3 percent practice Christianity, 2.3 percent are Muslim, 0.5 percent are Hindu and the rest either practice other religions or do not identify themselves as religious.

This section will review Myanmar’s history in a chronological timeline divided by different transition period. It starts with precolonial Burma (up to 1884), followed by education in colonial Burma (1885-1948), post-independence nation building (1948 - 1962), socialist period (1962-1988), post-socialist era (1988-2011) and finally the ongoing democratic reforms (2011- current)¹¹. Through literature reviews of secondary sources and examination of the education system (policies, schooling, textbooks and classroom language), this section argues that all throughout history, ethnic groups were not only governed separately by the British colonial administrators but that they were also

⁸ Please note the issue of “minority within minority languages” that are common in many ethnic groups including the Karens who speak 3 major languages.

⁹ See [Appendix 1](#) for the administrative maps of Myanmar, and [Appendix 2](#) for maps of the Karen and Mon state

¹⁰ This number is not only “arbitrary” but also quite problematic as it shows “often imposed identities” (Cheesman, 2017 as cited in Lall, 2021).

¹¹ While the “current” state in Myanmar is not undergoing “democratic reform,” this paper assumes that the current period is still part of the long “road to democracy” as the people of Myanmar are resisting the *Tatmadaw* forces. Thus, this paper categorizes the democratic reform period starting from 2011 till today.

advancing in their aspirations towards the process of nation building. Thus, when Myanmar gained its independence in 1948, many ethnic armed groups continued to fight for self-determination through means of violence and also through education, which was administered by ethnic education regimes.

4.1. Precolonial Burma (up to 1884)

In Pre-colonial Burma, monastery-based education was predominant. The control of schooling and the role of education in establishing state legitimacy throughout the history of Myanmar is demonstrated by Cheeseman (2003) in his paper titled “School, State and Sangha in Burma”. According to him, prior to the 19th century, the Sangha¹² had control over schooling in Burma as schooling was deemed to be an integral part of the relationship between the state and the Sangha. The state supported the Sangha with material needs and in return, the Sangha cooperated with the state by giving it legitimacy through its ideological support, loyalty and ensuring that there was political stability and maintenance of the state’s authority (Mendelson, 1975).

To understand the link between education or schooling and the monastery, one can turn to the source which is language. In Burmese language, the word for “school” and “monastery” are identical and the term “education” was derived from a Pali word meaning “learning, wisdom and knowledge” (Cheesman, 2003). This indicates the linkage between Sangha’s monastery schools to the notion of education for the Bamar majority ethnic group. As for other ethnic groups such as Shan, Mon and Arakanese, they also had their own kingdoms and were able to record their distinctive histories in chronicles (Kaung, 1963; Than Htut, 1980). Other ethnic groups like the Karen and the Kachin passed down their histories and achievements orally (Ibid).

¹² The Theravada Buddhist order.

4.2. Education in colonial Burma (1885 - 1948)

The colonial rule can be traced back to 1826 when the British first took over the Rakhine state and Tenasserim provinces (Lwin, 2000). Then in 1852, lower Burma was occupied and finally in 1885, after the third Anglo-Burmese war, the remaining kingdom and the whole Burma came under British rule (Ibid). It is important to note that from the beginning of the British rule, ethnic minority groups such as Shans, Kachins and Karens, among many others, were governed separately from the rest of Burma (Silverstein, 1977). These minority groups collectively made up for about 45 percent of the country's population and ethnic groups such as the Karens were given the privilege of having reserved seats in the state legislature under the British rule (ibid).

According to J.S. Furnivall (1943), the foremost colonial era historian and one-time British administrator, of all the pre-colonial schools in the region, Burma's schooling was exceptional. He compares the colonial education provision in Burma to its neighbor India and asserts that throughout India, British colonial administrators provided schooling as a form of social advancement, whereas in Burma, this form of free schooling came at the expense of the monastic schools and resulted in far greater resistance (Ibid). The British colonial administration dismantled the teaching role of Sangha. However, Sangha's role in schooling was not fully destroyed, it continued to exist by means of resistance against the foreign rule (Cheesman, 2003).

The British saw their role as peace makers or peace builders in ethnically divided Burma. Their rule was justified by their claim that Burma needed protection, law and order. According to a 1927 geography textbook, Britain was described as "the mother country" bringing "peace, protection and prosperity" to her children and Burma was the "adopted" child in need of "protection" without which "prosperity suffers" (Rowlands, 1927, p. 3, as cited in Salem-Gervais & Metro, 2012, p. 31). The British historians portrayed colonial rule in Burma as necessary and they often illustrated ethnicity and conflicting ethnic identities as the most pertinent issue (Lieberman, 1978). According to Aung-Thwin (1988), one of the prejudices that have influenced the historic interpretation of Burma is the "reification of ethnicity" by which he means the attribution of historical explanations to

ethnicity. In other words, there is a tendency for western scholarships to simply reduce Burmese history to an “endless series of battles between ethnic groups,” a perspective not shared by indigenous chronicles (Ibid). In opposition, Burmese sources do not portray the inter-ethnic wars and rebellions as being caused by ethnic differences but rather a quest for power by elite groups (Ibid).

In history textbooks, the British historians referred to Burmese kings as “brutal” with their failed attempts to dominate other ethnic groups and claimed that “the English conquest came not to destroy but to fulfill. Racial character cannot develop so long as government is unstable” (Harvey, 1926). While they recognize the Burmese dynasties as central to the nation’s history, the label of Burmese kings as brutal paved ways for their justified rule as they brought peace and “true unity” (Salem-Gervais & Metro, 2012).

The British rule brought about different types of schools in Myanmar. Thein Lwin (2000), writes that before independence and under the British rule, there were three types of schools in Burma:

- 1) Vernacular schools¹³ in which the language of instruction was Burmese or one of the recognized ethnic languages;
- 2) Anglo-vernacular schools in which English was taught as a second language and the language of instruction were both English and Burmese or one of the ethnic languages;
- 3) English Schools in which English was the sole language of instruction with Burmese as the second language (Lwin, 2000, p. 4).

While vernacular schools were common and accessible to the majority of students in the country due to their low cost, the Anglo-vernacular and the English schools were restricted to families from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Ibid). Furthermore, these upper tier schools were used to train people to fill the lower and middle ranks in colonial administration (Lall, 2008). Moreover, during

¹³ Vernacular schools were administered by local education authorities and it was deemed the most common and only form of schooling for the majority of the population and thus, they were also regarded as “second-rate schools” (Lwin, 2000).

this time, the ‘English schools’ that used English as the sole language of instruction were deemed as the most elite schools in Burma (Hillman, 1946).

4.2.1. Ethnic groups under the British rule

The British not only attributed and justified their presence as peace ambassadors in what they saw as ethnically divided country, but they also implemented the “divide and rule” policy. Since the beginning of the British rule, ethnic minority groups such as the Shans, Kachins and Karens among many others were governed separately from the rest of Burma (Silverstein, 1977)¹⁴. These minority groups collectively made up for about 45 percent of the country’s population and the Karen ethnic minority groups were given reserved seats in the state legislature under the British rule (Ibid).

Furthermore, the British authorities recruited more ethnic minorities¹⁵ into the British army than the Burman majority (Smith, 1999). Taylor (2007) argues that not only were minority groups governed separately but from the construction of the first legislative assembly in 1921, ethnicity and religion were used as the basis for parliamentary electorate. In this manner, ethnic differences were integrated into the “representative structures of the colonial state” (Ibid).

Although colonial rule was rejected by ethnic Bamar majority, the Karen National Union (KNU)¹⁶ viewed the British as their protectors against the Burmans. In describing the Burma Independence Army (BIA¹⁷), the Karen Education Department claims, “as soon as the BIA (Burma Independence Army) entered Burma, the Karen were blamed as English spies, people loyal to English and helpers of English. BIA Burman soldiers shot, arrested, beat and killed the Karens. They also took the Karen properties and burned down houses and villages and raped women in many places” (KED, 2003, p. 29, as cited in Gervais and Metro, 2012, pp. 67-68).

¹⁴ See “Viscount Cross letter to the secretary of state for India in London” Smith, 1999, for more.

¹⁵ In late 1939, there were only 472 Burmans in the British Burma Army, as compared with 1448 Karens, 886 Chins and 881 Kachins (Smith, 1999).

¹⁶ The Karen National Association (KNA), the forerunner of modern-day KNU was formed in 1881

¹⁷ The Burma Independence Army (BIA) was the first national army formed. With the help of the Japanese army, BIA fought against the British and this resulted in Burma’s independence in 1948 (Aung, 2019).

Unlike in pre-colonial Burma when monastic education was only available to Burmese speaking Buddhist majority, colonial period saw an increasing opportunity for schooling of other ethnic groups who were non-Burman and non-Buddhist (Furnival, 1943). Ethnonationalism and pan-national identities became prevalent to newly educated ethnic groups – most notably the Karens, who were able to form alliances through Christian organizations in opposition to the Burman majority (Cheesman, 2002). In 1881, Karen National Association (KNA) was formed to protect and promote Karen identity, education, writing and leadership and to advance social and economic goals of the Karen peoples (Smith, 1999). Although literature indicates that the British looked favorably upon the ethnic minorities, there was little done to advance or support their aspirations for self-determination. Whether it was the Karens or the Kachin Duwas or Shan leaders, the British ignored their demands and ethnic aspirations for self-rule (Ibid).

4.2.2. Anti-colonial movements and national schools

At the turn of the 20th century, and with an increase in literacy and education¹⁸ amongst the Burmese population, there was also a rise in nationalist aspirations and anticolonial sentiments. Lack of available jobs, frustrations and anger amongst the recent university graduates prompted students to march down the streets, and protest which resulted in political unrest and this state of political instability resulted in the overall country's economic decline (Hillman, 1946). Secondly, the realization that they [*Burmese*] were treated as second-class citizens in their own countries and the political awareness of national self-determination, among many others, fueled anti-colonial movements (Cady, 1958).

In many ways, education acted as a catalyst in empowering the Burman people to fight for independence against the foreign rule. As the British occupation dismantled the Sangha or Buddhist order of education system, the nationalist perceived it as a form of attack on Buddhism (Taylor,

¹⁸ Worldwide and especially in the global south, there was a rise in nationalism as countries resisted foreign rule and demanded for autonomy

2007). Thus, modeling the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), a nationalist group known as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was formed (Smith, 1999). However, later this nationalist movement shifted towards a Marxist critique of imperialism and its impact on small urban populations and peasantry (Taylor, 2007). This nationalist movement grew as university students who called themselves *Thakin*¹⁹ group and We Burmans Association²⁰ also joined the fight for independence, mobilizing nationalist sentiments across the country (Cheesman, 2003).

One of the ways in which nationalist sentiments were strengthened was through the revival of interest in Burmese history, arts, and literature (Cady, 1958). This was achieved through the creation of national schools in 1920s where the language of instruction was Burmese and Buddhist holidays were observed instead of British ones (Lall, 2021). During these struggles for independence, the following nationalist slogan was promoted:

Burma is our country

Burmese is our literature

Burmese language is our language

Love our country

Praise our Literature

Respect our language. (Callahan, 2003, p. 151, as cited in Wong, 2019, p. 57)

Scholars have examined the exclusion of ethnic minority voices during this nationalist and independence movements especially when Burman majority has self-proclaimed their own Burmese language as the sole national language and likewise their culture (Wong, 2019; Taylor, 2007). The Burman nationalist not only claimed that Burmese was the only national language but they also rejected the British narrative of inter-ethnic competition. Yet, they were still influenced by the western alignment of ethnicity and nationalism (Ibid). This contributed to the formation and development of "*Burmese-ness*" or Burmese-centric national narrative and moreover, this national

¹⁹ "*Thakin*" translates to "Masters" and this is the label with which anticolonial nationalist refer themselves

²⁰ Also known as "*Dobama Asiayone*"

narrative came to be associated with patriotism (Gervais and Metro, 2012). In many ways, this national narrative bolstered the process of “Othering” i.e., if one did not identify with the dominant Burmans or “us” then they were against and for “Others”. This “Othering” not only undermined the presence of other ethnic groups but in the long, it deteriorated the country towards isolationist policies, making it “one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia” (World Bank, 2014, p. 11).

4.3. Post-Independence nation building (1948 - 1962)

Although the national schools did not survive beyond the 1930s, anti-colonial nationalism persisted and grew across many educational institutions (Lall, 2021). After its independence, instead of re-investing in Sangha, the new state took control over schooling to instill ‘national idea’ and schooling was subjected to the military regime’s nationalist agenda (Cheesman, 2003). Lall (2016) describes that the nation building process in Burma embraced the notion of “*amyo batha thatana*” or “one ethnicity, one language, one religion” which echoes Burman nationalist anticolonial sentiments. This narrative did not reflect multi-ethnic and multi-lingual realities on the ground.

Guibernau (2007) defines nation as “a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (p. 47). This definition of a nation state is an antithesis to the state of Burma. According to Bigagli (1995), at its independence, the Union was a state without a sense of nation. It was multiple “nations” each inherently defined by ethnocultural characteristics – different languages, religion and history, among many others. Thus, attempts were made to unify the country through “Burmanization” and nationwide literacy campaigns. According to Callahan (2003), from colonial rule to post-independence, many ethnolinguistic minority groups in the former Frontier Areas of Burma were able to educate their children in their native language. However, this changed as nation-wide literacy campaigns were conducted and many ethnic minority groups in the frontier areas saw this as a form of “internal colonization” (ibid, p. 159).

In noting back to colonial experiences, there was distrust and suspicion that lingered amongst many Burman nationalists who viewed the close relationship between missionaries and ethnic

minority groups such as the Karens, Kachins or Chins with suspicion. According to Smith, “ethnic assertiveness and expression of ethnic minority views became equated with the divisions of colonial rule” (1999, p. 100). In the words of U Ba Swe, president of the Socialist party and prime minister of Burma in 1956, “they [British] converted the Karens to their religion and also created a separate literature and privileges for them” (Ibid). This distrust and categorization of ethnic nationalist groups as the “Other” continued post-independence. Previously alleged to be loyal to the British, in post-independence, the ethnic nationalists were accused of assisting any foreign power such as the United States, China or Thailand (Ibid). In 1987, the state-controlled press accused the Karen National Union (KNU) of “invoking their old owner-masters and craving for colonial servitude, yearning for their distant relative over and above their own mother” (Ibid).

4.4. Socialist Period (1962- 1988)

Under Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the “Burmese way to socialism” did little to resolve long-standing ethnic tensions in the country and instead brought the country to economic collapse in the 1980s (Smith, 2006). In 1987, the United Nations categorized Burma as one of the least developed countries (LDC) in the world. This socialist period was filled with many ethnic ceasefires and it became apparent that if Myanmar were to progress socio-politically or economically, one had to consider ethnic participation and national reconciliation at the heart of its national reform policies and practice. Thus, for the first time in 1974, Ne Win formally presented ethnic groups in the country’s political map by creating seven divisions – Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. However, despite the appearance of ethnic groups on the national maps, the one-party structure of government²¹ and the strategies used to employ the government’s socialist goals were met with resistance from ethnic minority groups²² (Ibid). According to Graver and Kyed (2017), one consequence of the military rule between 1962-1988 was the promotion and

²¹ Enshrined in article 11 of the Constitution

²² Including the formation of new insurgencies among ethnic groups including the Palaung, Kayan and Lahu

forced assimilation of multi-ethnic groups into a unitary state in which Bamar identity was the foundation.

Adding to this, the state began to nationalize all religious and private schools, instituting a centralized national curriculum and this posed many challenges for local teachers to continue teaching in their respective ethnic languages (Jolliffe and Mears, 2016). According to Walton (2013), Burmanization was equated with “establishing Burman culture as the norm of national identity” (p.6) and it took many forms and in education practices, teaching of ethnic languages were outlawed and replaced with textbooks that promoted Burman-centric historical narratives. This period saw the increasing resistance from ethnic groups. In 1972, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which was formed in 1958 established its central ethnic education department. Similarly, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) education department was established in 1978. During this period, the KNU, KIO, NMSP, KNPP²³, and six other non-communist ethnic armed groups formed the National Democratic Front, an alliance in favor of a federal, democratic Union of Myanmar (Ibid).

4.5. Post- socialist era (1988-2011)

The economic decline under Ne Win’s BSPP instigated civilian anger as many took their frustrations out to the streets in protests and demonstrations. Students were at the forefront of these protests and social movements and in 1988²⁴, the biggest demonstration was met with martial law and violent suppression, torture and many lives lost (Clarke, Sein and Siwa, 2019). On September 18, 1988 General Saw Maung, led a coup, replacing BSPP with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and officially changing the name “Burma” to Myanmar²⁵ (Ibid). According to General Saw Maung,

²³ Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)

²⁴ Also known as 8888 uprising

²⁵ Burma became Myanmar, Burmese language became Myanmar language (Clarke, Sein and Siwa, 2019)

The nation should be one in which only Myanmar residents reside and which Myanmar residents own. We will have to be vigilant against Myanmar Naing-ngan [the Union of Myanmar], the home of Myanmar nationals, being influenced by anyone. And it is important that Myanmar Naing-Ngan does not become the home of mixed bloods influenced by alien cultures though it is called Myanmar Naing-Ngan. (Steinberg, 2001, p. 62)

After the 1988 uprising and violence across the country, many schools, colleges and universities closed down until in May 1991 when schools reopened and heavily armed military forces with uniformed and plain-clothed were sighted in many schools (Smith, 1992). These closures and interruption of schooling affected “eight academic years” and according to some, the SLORC will “sacrifice an entire generation of trained graduates – scientists, doctors, lawyers, technicians and teachers” to continue to stay in power (Ibid, para. 41).

In the aftermath of the 1988 violence, the military government issued strict surveillance, suppressing academic freedom and press. Ethnic minority teachers and ethnic leaders who tried to teach or promote their language and cultures were harassed and arrested (Smith, 1992). Additionally, education became surveilled in areas where ethnic armed opposition groups lived. School buildings were destroyed and targeted in air raids by the Burmese military forces (Ibid). Many ethnic civilians and school children were forced into carrying materials for the Burmese army. Others were pushed to flee the country and settle along the border areas.

During this period, the National League for Democracy (NLD)²⁶ was formed and Aung San Suu Kyi became the national hero for the NLD party who expressed their interest in building a federal democratic system of government (Jolliffe and Mears, 2016). The party offered new hope for many others suffering under the military regime.

²⁶ NLD was formed on 27 September 1988

4.6. Democratic reforms (2011 - current)

For the first time in 50 years, Myanmar's civilian government was inaugurated on March 30, 2011 with Thein Sein as a new president (Turnell, 2012). The new government ameliorated press restrictions, launched discussions for economic reforms, released political prisoners and put an end to the suspension of Myitsone dam vastly sponsored by China on grounds that it was "against the will of the people" (ibid, p. 157). The international community was taken by surprise and many were filled with hope to finally initiate the process of democratic reform in Myanmar. Ironically, the country's progress towards democratic reform was met with an escalation of violence, causing thousands of people to flee across the borders, and ethnic minorities continued to face setbacks and challenges in their demands for "autonomous status within a federal state" (Nilsen & Tønnesson, 2016, para. 2). The renewed ethnic conflict brought about many grave human rights violations including but not limited to "attacks on civilian population, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, internal displacement, land confiscations, the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as forced labor" (OHCHR, 2011, p. 9).

In regards to education reform, in March 2014, the Education Promotion and Implementation Committee (EPIC) drafted the National Education Bill to reform the country's archaic education system (Lall, 2016). Before sending it to the parliament, president Thein Sein made 25 suggested amends, of which only 19 changes were enacted. This national education law was met with public outcry, and large demonstrations. It could be argued that often times "reforms" in national and statewide curriculum reproduce or even worsen existing inequalities (Apple, 2000). Given the prevalence of inequalities, the National Network for Education Reform (NNER), a coalition of civil society groups including students, teacher unions, ethnic education groups, faith-based groups, etc. took an active role in advocacy and speaking out (Lwin, 2007). Among many, one of the major controversies was the lack of input from students, disregard for ethnic groups demands, disagreement over teachings of ethnic languages and cultures at universities, university's independence and the restriction of student and teacher union formation (Lall, 2016).

In regards to ethnic education inputs, the Karen education department recognizes that state school curriculum has to be partially developed at the central level. Yet, they want each ethnic groups to have the right to contribute to at least 40% of the central curriculum especially subjects related to ethnic language, social studies, English and geography (KTWG and Karen information Centre, as cited in Lenkova, 2015). The demands from Mon Education Department echoes the demands of NNER and federal education system that will legally accept and recognize Mon education systems and also allow Mon curriculum to prevail alongside the central curriculum. Overall, the demand for decentralization of education system and exclusion of key stakeholders in the decision-making process, among many others, continues to be a challenge. This was confirmed by the literature review and also during personal communication with ethnic education providers from the field.

CONCLUSION

This section explored Myanmar's historical timeline as it paints a backdrop against which the current ongoing ethnic conflict can only be understood. With the understanding that education structures tend to mirror the society around it, this historical timeline gave an overview of how education in Myanmar has evolved throughout different regimes and social movements. Starting from precolonial Burma where monastery education was highly prevalent for the Burmese ethnic majority, colonial Burma introduced education to many ethnic groups through missionary schools. During the colonial rule, national schools were formed to give birth to nationalism and or "*Burmanization*" which opposed any foreign rule and promoted the forceful assimilation of multi-lingual ethnic groups under a common "*Bamar*" ethnic identity. This nationalization campaign strengthened in post-independence into the "Burmese way to socialism" under Ne Win who nationalized all religious and private schools and centralized the national curriculum. Many social movements and uprisings took place and it was led by students throughout the country, resulting in learning loss equivalent to 8 years (Smith, 1992).

In 2011, when Myanmar started to undergo political reform²⁷ the world was hopeful. Yet, violence continued to exacerbate in ethnic areas between ethnic armed groups and the military regime. Thus, to provide schooling in these conflict zones, many schools were established by the local communities or the ethnic armed groups. Thus, this paper further examines two ethnic groups i.e., the Karen and Mon ethnic education regimes and explores ways in which schools under these ethnic groups are socializing, promoting in/tolerance and mobilizing towards their collective political goals of self-determination.

4. CASE STUDIES (Karen and Mon ethnic groups)

Lall and South (2014) have written thoroughly and conducted a comparative analysis of the Mon and Karen non-state ethnic education regimes, and they have argued and favored Mon model as it could be helpful for political and civil society leaders to negotiate and discuss education reform as Myanmar transitions towards a decentralized state. With the current state of Myanmar and the recent military coup, this conclusion will probably need some reevaluation. This is because their argument assumes that a peace process between ethnic non-state armed groups and the *Tatmadaw* is in the near-future when in reality and with recent events, this might not be the case.

To examine the ethnic education regimes, this section will first explore literature on ethnic (Karen and Mon) history, national identity and education regimes. Secondly, the theoretical framework (which includes the 3 mechanisms: socialization, mobilization and in/tolerance) will be used to answer the third research question: what is the relationship between education and conflict in the context of ethnic education regimes and their respective ethnic armed organizations? To what extent is the ethnic education regimes socializing, mobilizing and bolstering in/tolerance of the 'Other' through the use of ethnic language and history? From an analytical perspective, I will be employing the 3 mechanisms from Lange (2000) i.e., understanding how ethnic education regimes

²⁷ This included the release of pro-democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrests.

socializes its students through history textbooks, and school rituals such as flag ceremonies or singing the Burmese or ethnic national anthem. Secondly, I analyze ethnic mobilization through the use of ethnic languages in classrooms. Lastly, I examine in/tolerance and the “Othering” through the narrative and languages used by education providers when describing the “Others”, which in this case, is the Burman majority.

4.1. Karen National identity

It is challenging to write of “the Karen²⁸” or of “Karen national consciousness” that dates back to pre-colonial era because according to Garbagni and Walton (2020), “a Karen national political consciousness only developed from the last decades of the 19th century, largely constructed against the ethnic Burman majority and on terms recognizable to, and appreciated by, the British” (p. 761). According to the Karen History and Culture Preservation Society (KHPCS), Karen history date back to about 739 B.C. ago, when the first Karen settlers came to what is now known as Burma/ Myanmar (KHPCS, 2006). The Karens named this new land “Kawthoolei”²⁹, a land free of all evils, famine, misery and strife...a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful country” (Ibid). Nonetheless, this was short-lived as the Mons entered this area followed by the Burman and both introduced and practiced feudalism (Ibid). After winning the feudal war, the Burman enslaved many nationalities and the Karens were persecuted³⁰, tortured, killed, suppressed and were forced to do hard labor. However, this changed during the colonial period as the Karens began to earn their living, and were educated by the Christian missionaries (Ibid).

Furthermore, the British colonial officers encouraged a sense of national identity among the Karens. For instance, in discussing Karen people’s involvement during the 1886 Burman rebellion, Dr.

²⁸ Karen is a diverse ethnic group living in South East, and also in the central region of the Irrawaddy River delta and in Tanintharyi Division. The 2 majority sub groups within Karen are Sgaw and Pwo Karens (Garbagni and Walton, 2020).

²⁹ Kawthoolei can also be translated as “Flower land” as “kaw” means land and “thoolei” is the plants in Karen hills (Garbagni and Walton, 2020).

³⁰ The Burmese military used the “Four Cuts Operation” strategy which included cutting lines for supplying provisions, cutting line of contact between the masses and the Karen revolutionaries, cutting all revolutionary financial income and resources and cutting off the heads of all Karen revolutionaries (KHPCS, 2006).

Vinton, an American missionary stated his excitement in seeing the Karen people fight and states that “from a loose aggregation of clans, we shall weld them [Karen] into a nation yet” (Smith, 1999, p. 45). Although the British colonial administrators favored the Karens and encouraged a national identity amongst them, they did not accede to Karen National Army’s demands for self-determination (Ibid).

Many nations under colonial rule demanded independence after the second world war, and so did the Karens. In August 1946, the Karen case was taken up to the British government and the British people, asking for a Karen State. However, the British labor government responded “to throw in our [Karen] lot with the Burman” (KHCP, 2006, p. 9). This was disheartening for many Karen leaders as they were confident that their loyalty and support towards the British during the Lower Burma uprising (Thant Myint -U, 2001) and later as their allies against Japanese invasion (Garbagni and Walton, 2020) would have granted them British sympathy and granted their request for statehood. The Karen leaders expressed their moral claim to independence in a 1946 resolution where they claimed,

The Karens are unanimous in their desire to be separated from the Burmans. [...] Our ambition and aspiration are to be a member of this great Commonwealth of Nations. We do not deem ourselves inferior to the Burmans in any sphere of life and can never stand any measure to merge us with them. We are distinct from them in every way—dress, language, culture, custom and especially in moral character. Can a people who respect truth and honesty give up his [sic] virtue and suffer himself to be merged with another who is of a lower moral standard. (Tinker, 1983, p. 740, as cited in Garbagni and Walton, 2020, para. 27)

Additionally, the Karen leaders expressed that it is very difficult for Burman and Karen to “yoke together” as they are “two peoples with diametrically opposite views” (KHCP, 2006, p. 8) and this sentiment, along with grievances strengthens ethnonationalism and a quest for self-determination. They further stressed that they [Karen people] have learned through sufferings that “unless we

control a state of our own, we will never experience a life of peace and decency, free from persecution and oppression. We will never be allowed to work hard to grow and prosper” (Ibid).

Throughout history, Karen nationalism and the Karen National Union (KNU)’s goals have shifted from their appeal for statehood from a domestic to an international level to now “autonomy within a federal Myanmar” (Garbagni and Walton, 2020, p. 761). This sentiment was echoed by a Karen education leader who asserted that “our [Karens] political aspiration is to build a federal system” (Mo, 23 September 2021). The Karens pursued their quest for self-determination often by highlighting their differences with that of Burman who according to them were of “lower moral standard” (Ibid).

Karen Education Regime – Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)

As discussed above, in many ways Karen national identity was strengthened through education during colonial rule. Thus, ethnic education regimes serve as a crucial element in preserving and maintaining national culture, language and traditions. While it is unclear as to how many schools are directly under the Karen National Union, the estimated number is over 1000 schools³¹ and according to Thein Lwin (2019), there are about 500 primary and secondary schools directly under the KNU education regime. The Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), formerly known as the Karen Education Department (KED) was formed in 1956 after the KNU government was formed (Karen National Union, 2018). In conflict affected parts of the country³² where the Ministry of Education are unable to reach or provide access to education, the Ethnic basic education providers (EBEPs) which includes local ethnic actors, EAO’s education departments, community- based organizations and religious organizations fill the existing social service gaps including education services (Jolliffe and Mears, 2016). In this regard, the EBEPs provide crucial services to children in armed conflict zones and thus, Jolliffe and Mears (2016) argues that the EBEPs should be recognized

³¹ An interviewee who worked for an international education organization stated that due to privacy and security issues, they don’t have an exact number but only an estimation.

³² Southeast Myanmar bordering Thailand

and represented as key stakeholders by government and international organizations in achieving the overall education goals of Myanmar (Ibid).

Interviews with education experts from Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) pointed out that Karen education started in the early 1800s and was run by American Baptist missions and that after Burma's independence in 1948, the schools continued to operate as community schools and then later came under the Karen National Union's education department (Smith, 23 September 2021). Furthermore, according to the Karen education expert, the development of Karen Education and its history can be categorized chronologically into 3 parts 1) colonial and pre-independence, 2) after-independence to 1962 military coup and 3) post- 1962 coup to current state. Most Karens today agree with the narrative that they benefited from education and other privileges during the British colonial rule. However, this changed after-independence and especially after Ne Win's government which forcefully emphasized "Burmanization" and assimilation of ethnic groups into a common Burman identity. According to an interviewee, during those times [under Ne Win] "the only place where we [Karens] were able to maintain those education or the studies of Karen scripts and literature was through church or religious activities" and furthermore during the four cuts operation, a military strategy employed by the military government to cut off resources to the Karen population, "the Karen education was a way to maintain strongly in the revolution... and the materials that we use, the [education] system that we use, is outlaw, is not legal" (Mo, 23 September 2021).

4.2. Mon National identity

Studies on Mon literature has estimated that the arrival of Mon in Burma can be traced back to around B.C. 1500 (Pon Nya Mon, 2007). Originally from Southwest China, Mon people migrated and settled in Lower Burma and established the kingdom of Suvarnabhumi in Thaton (Lwin, 2011). In neighboring Thailand, they formed Dvaravati and Haripunjaya kingdoms. However, the Mon kingdoms were conquered first by the Bagan Kingdom in A.D. 1057 and later in 1539 by the Burmese king Tabinshwehti (Ibid). The Mon people are famous for introducing Buddhism into Burma and the

famous Shwedagon Pagoda was built by them (Burma Link, 2014). Much like the Burman, Shan, and the Arakanese/ Rakhine, the Mon people also documented their triumphs and victories in chronicles. Historically, the Mons are enshrined as “religious and cultural donors” in the Burmese historical narrative (McCormick, 2014, p. 300). In fact, Mon culture and language was influential in the creation of Burmese language. However, due to “Burmanization” and assimilation into the Burman identity, the number of Mon language speakers have been deteriorating. According to Pon Nya Mon (2007), in 1911 census, only 1224 people out of 532,357 in lower Burma identified as Mon and only 399 Mon people could speak Mon language. In this regard, Mon Buddhist monks, Mon scholars and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) have been at the forefront actively promoting Mon language and culture.

New Mon State Party (NMSP), an insurgent group representing Mon people, was formed in July 1958 after the Mon People’s Front (MPF) surrendered to the Burmese military government (Sharma, 2014). NMSP claims that it is fighting for the right to establish “an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free nationalities exercising full right of self-determination inclusive of the right of secession” (ibid, p. 159). The Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), an armed wing of NMSP is a much smaller armed group with over 800 troops (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2019). Although there have been ceasefire negotiations since 1995, and the NMSP entered a peace agreement with the government (Sharma, 2014), their demands for self-determination still continues.

Mon Education Regime - Mon National Education Committee (MNEC)

In contrast to the Karens whose majority drew their identity from Christianity as they were educated through missionary schools, the vast majority of Mon people are Theravada Buddhist. Not only did they introduce Buddhism in the country, their kingdoms flourished and their cultures and languages were embraced by the ancient Burmans (Lwin, 2011). However, the Mon kingdoms were conquered by Burman kings who imposed Burmese language upon them. The result of this forced assimilation is the decline in the number of Mon language speakers in Myanmar (Mon, 2014). Thus,

the Mon Buddhist monks, Mon scholars and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) have stressed the importance of learning Mon language in schools and monasteries.

There are about 156 Mon national schools which continues to expand into “mixed schools”³³ shared with the government (Lall and South, 2014). According to a Mon ethnic education provider and expert, the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) was formed because of conflict in southern region of Myanmar around Kayin and Tharinthari area where mostly Mon people reside. The Mon population in this region not only suffered from the ongoing civil war between Mon EAO and the Myanmar military but also many children could not attend proper schooling and although some towns had government schools, the teachers were absent. In these areas, parents had to rely on private tutors or teachers. Later in 1972, teacher groups associations were formed in Mon populated areas where students were taught despite the ongoing war. One of the interviewees himself went through this process. In his own words, “we taught students despite the ongoing war. I personally went through that life experience myself. I studied in the midst of the ongoing war. schooling and conflict... that’s how life was” (Mon, 11 September 2021).

However, education was gradually transformed in 1995 with ceasefire agreements between the NMSP and the central government. The issue of education was brought up and both parties agreed that students from NMSP schools would be legally recognized and accepted by government schools but with placement test in three subjects of Burmese, English and Mathematics (Mon, 11 September 2021). There were also agreements to allow MNEC teachers to attend education colleges and universities. However, these decisions were not implemented on the ground (Ibid). Irrespective of this, ceasefire agreements between NMSP and the military government has been beneficial for both parties. According to an interviewee, there was significant progress in the field of education until the recent military coup. He goes on to describe the role of MNEC as filling the educational gap and

³³ Mix schools are schools that teaches ethnic Mon language and history in primary level, and then later shift to Burmese language instruction in middle school (McCormick, 2014)

bridging it to the overall government education system with a final vision to transform Myanmar's education into a federal education system that reflects self-determination at its core (Ibid).

Mon national schools under MNEC are considered as "mixed schools" whereby students learn in their mother tongue or Mon language at primary level alongside Burmese and English. But in upper primary, they incorporate both Mon and Burmese in the schools and teach Mon history (Mi, 4 November 2021). Thus, Lall and South (2014) state that "the Mon education regime combines the best of both worlds" (p. 318) as it meets ethnic nationalist demands through the teaching of Mon language, history and culture, and also allow students from these schools to be able to reintegrate into the central government school system.

4.3. Applying the 3 Mechanisms to the ethnic education regimes

4.3.1. Socialization through textbooks and school rituals

Karen history textbooks and school rituals

On the cover page³⁴ of Karen revolutionary history book, there is an emphasis of the Karen conflict with a silhouette image of a soldier and blood splattered all over. One could argue that this visual image emphasizes Karen revolution shaped around the need for freedom from the oppressive Burmese regime, and more specifically violence as a means to it. Although during an interview, Karen ethnic education providers stressed that the Myanmar government uses education as a tool for hatred and in social studies book, it is depicted that "we [Karen] cause unrest, we rebel against the central government" and they went on to express that even in history books, one only learns about the Burmese kings and no ethnic icon or person is displayed as a heroic figure (Mo, 23 September, 2021). Coulby (1997) discusses ways in which the education system has been utilized to promote cultural homogenization, which includes the creation of a "national literature" and the promotion of a common national language. Schooling can contribute to the process of "constructing

³⁴ Please see the [cover image](#) of this research paper for reference.

and imposing a common culture, founded on a common language, a shared sense of history and destiny and more broadly, a common set of expectations and behaviors rooted in a sense of civic loyalty” (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, p. 6). Although there are many ethnic sub groups within the Karen ethnic minority group, these textbooks often portray the Karens as a homogenous group with a common political goal that draws on the military regime’s project of homogenizing and controlling diversity to maintain political control (Ibid). Additionally, the KECD education strategy plan for 2019-2023 recognizes that while there are increasing opportunities to teach Karen language(s) in schools, “tensions will increase over the exclusive use of Sgaw Karen in KECD’s curriculum” (KECD, 2019, p. 6). This is a challenge that many ethnic education regimes will have to consider in the long run i.e., how to ensure that there are representations of other ethnic minority sub groups within the ethnic group as well. For now, the Karen ethnic schools teach their own histories, highlighting their national heroes and emphasizing their own dominant ethnic language.

One of the major challenges that the students who graduate from “separatist schools” that solely emphasize on Karen language as the language of instruction is that they are unable to reintegrate into the Myanmar government system (Lall and Ashley, 2014). The ethnic education system is not officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, and even if the education system were to be recognized, the “separatist model,” which teaches little to no Burmese language teaching prevalent in Karen ethnic schools, will make it challenging for students to reintegrate.

Mon history textbooks and school rituals

Salem-Gervais & Metro (2012) gives an overview of varying educational contents during different periods of political regimes in Myanmar and how textbooks were utilized in post-colonial nation building project. It is important to note that while nation building project was occurring in the central state curriculum, many ethnic education departments formed by ethnic armed groups were also undertaking their own ethnic nation building process.

When examining ethnic school curriculum, there are 3 overarching themes in the history textbooks produced by ethnic groups that are quite similar to the state curriculum (Gervais and

Metro, 2012). Of the 3 themes, there is the idea of the “golden past” when power belonged to the ethnic people as opposed to the three Myanmar empires, secondly, ethnic books discuss internal ethnic cohesion instead of unity of Myanmar as a complete entity and finally, the representation of Burmans as a common enemy instead of Thais or British in contrast to how it is often portrayed in the state curriculum (Ibid). A case in point is while in the state curriculum, Burman kings such as Anoratha, Bayintnaung and Alaungpaya are regarded as national heroes for conquering the Mon kingdoms, in Mon history books these kings are labelled as “invaders” and instead Mon king Rajadhirit is glorified as he did not lose any war fought against the Burman during his 40-year rule (Lwin, 2002).

In Mon schools, the school rituals consist of singing “*Amyo thachin*” or their Mon national song and hoisting Mon national flag during the school assembly (Mi, November 4, 2021). In order to encourage students to love their culture and histories, many of the school buildings are named after Mon kings and queens. According to a school director, “we named our classrooms and school buildings after our national heroes such as Shin Sawbu, Jamadevi, Razadarit and we use both Kings and Queens for gender balanced representation” (Ibid).

4.3.2. Ethnic mobilization and language of instruction (LOI)

Ethnic mobilization can be defined as “the process by which groups organize around some feature of ethnic identity (for example, skin color, language, customs) in pursuit of collective ends” (Olzak, 1983, p. 355). With the assumption that language strengthens ethnic identity, culture and belonging, this section examines ethnic mobilization through the lens of Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and the extent to which mother tongue is prioritized and used as the main language of instruction (LOI) in schools. Furthermore, how this usage of language aligns with the pursuit towards a “collective end” i.e., ethnic nationalist demands for self-determination.

Through case studies of Karen education model and Mon education model, one could argue that ethnic groups who faces severe conflict tends to be more extreme in their pursuit of ethnic mobilization using the promotion of only their ethnic language. This has been observed in the case

of the Karen and Mon as ceasefire agreements between NMSP and the central government has allowed for Mon education regimes to reintegrate into the government system. In contrast, the ongoing wars between KNU and the state government has left little to no room for ceasefire negotiations. As tensions in these Karen populated regions increases, so does their demands for self-autonomy which mirrors in their separatist education regimes. However, it is important to note that while this link between violence and education regimes may be observed in the case of Mon and Karen as observed here, this might not be applicable in other conflict areas such as the Rakhine/ Arakan state³⁵ where violence is at an all-time high, yet there are no ethnic schools similar to KECD or MNEC schools there.

Karen ethnic mobilization

There has been no comprehensive study of language teaching in Myanmar. This is an existing gap in literature that needs to be further explored. Through interviews and secondary sources, it became evident that most nationalist and political activist considers speaking and learning Karen language and history as a crucial component to maintaining and strengthening their ethnic identity. However, an interviewee cautions that not all communities think in this manner. In fact, there are ethnic communities who do not care about ethnic education. He recalled an experience when he took the UN officials to a Karen village, not far from Hpa An³⁶, and when discussing about education, he asked the leading question to the villagers “wouldn’t it be great if you can study in Karen at school rather than just in Burmese?” to which the one of the parents responded “we don’t care about that. We speak Karen at home and they [children] learn Karen in Sunday school, we want them to learn in Burmese. If there’s a change in curriculum, we want more science and computers, we don’t want Karen. We can teach them Karen at home” (Lee, October 20, 2021). This seemed counterintuitive

³⁵ Among many others, violence in the Rakhine state includes genocide of Rohingya ethnic groups.

³⁶ Capital and largest city in the Karen state

and thus, it is important to be careful of what the interviewee calls “sweeping generalizations” when examining the issue of language in schools.

On the other hand, another interviewee expressed that when he asks his Karen friends why they would not learn or speak Burmese, they respond with “why learn the language when there is so much hatred towards the Burman soldiers or people”³⁷ (Hein, November 30, 2021). Often times, in rural areas, the only interaction that the Karen people have with Burman ethnic groups are through the Burmese military army who are heavily armed and thus, there is a general hatred towards them all (Ibid). When asked about the role of education in peacebuilding efforts, an interviewee describes that, “education can also be contributing to peacebuilding and also can be deep root cause [of conflict] because for us, we say if we lose our language, we lose our nation” (Mo, September 23, 2021).

With regards to whether or not ethnic political leaders themselves attend or send their children to these ethnic schools, an interviewee shared that “historically, many leaders went to Myanmar government schools and the reality is that many armed groups are neo-patrimonial” in that the leaders use their elite positions to get advantage for their own families and many leaders of the KNU and other armed groups send their kids to schools in Thailand, India or the US (Lee, October 20, 2021). Thus, it is important to keep these realities in mind when discussing ethnic mobilization. Most ethnic education providers whose education was interrupted due to ongoing civil wars shared that they received their education informally from migrant schools along the Thai-Myanmar border or from “open university”. These discussions shed a newfound understanding that not all ethnic leaders from EAOs sent their children to ethnic schools to learn in their ethnic languages. Many sent their students abroad where the quality of education was higher. In many ways, ethnic schools in conflict zones were an only option for families living in these rural areas.

³⁷ Adding on to this, during interviews with the Karen education providers, they expressed that they wanted to discuss in English language and not Burmese.

Mon ethnic mobilization

The Mon national schools produce and reproduce Mon language, culture and history as prioritized by the NMSP, Mon scholars and the Mon Buddhist monks. The concerted ceasefire efforts between NMSP and state government has drastically decreased violence in the Mon-populated areas of Myanmar for roughly over 2 decades (Lall and South, 2014). These ceasefire agreements have been accompanied by expansion of schools in many of these areas.

Mon national schools teaches both Mon language and their ethnic Mon history alongside the Burmese government curriculum. According to an education expert, the Mother Tongue Based Multi Lingual Education (MTB - MLE) was adopted not because the Mon education department understood the benefits of early childhood learning in one's own mother tongue, it was adopted due to the needs and demands as many children in rural areas only understood in Mon language and that is why it became the language of instruction (LOI) (Mon, September 11, 2021). Initially, the Mon education department translated Burmese textbooks into Mon language to teach. However, this has changed as they hired education experts to develop the curriculum which incorporates international standards, government standards and the content, syllabus and framework have been modified to make it equivalent to other government's education system and to reflect regional standards such as those of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and India (Ibid).

4.3.3. In/tolerance and the Othering

In/tolerance and the "Othering" is ways in which identity construction occurs through the dissociation or the distancing from the "Other". In many ways, this in/tolerance can be learned from social settings, culture, family, friends, language and or schools. While tolerance is fostered through inclusion, intolerance arises when one ethnic group believe they are superior than the "Others" (Bryan and Vavrus, 2005). In schools, tolerance can be acquired through socialization, and the teaching of values and norms of a society. There are many ways in/tolerance can be observed i.e., through classroom interactions, textbook narratives, name-calling of "Others" as "parasites" or calling them "evil" (Bar Tal, 1989).

In the past, an official from the Myanmar Ministry of Education has accused ethnic schools under EAOs as producing “the rebellion curriculum,” meaning that these ethnic school curricula are teaching hatred towards the central government (Nan, October 22, 2021). While these accusations are not backed by any research or evidence, they showcase how education in Myanmar is linked to state legitimacy. In other words, any attempts by ethnic schools to follow their own curriculum is met with resistance and thus called “the rebellion curriculum” or “illegal” curriculum by the military government. In this regard, each EAOs are seeking self-determination through means of education provision which includes educating their population using their ethnic curriculum which bolsters ethnic language and history. Thus, this section will examine how different ethnic groups have adopted tolerance or intolerance and the “Othering” in the process of national identity formation through schooling and education.

Karen narrative

Grievances and sufferings caused by the Burmese military is engraved in Karen national consciousness and Karen history textbooks. Additionally for many Karen villagers in rural conflict areas, the only interaction they have with the Burmans have been through the military soldiers who tried to kill them and thus many Karen parents are disinterested in sending their children to attend state government schools (Lall and South, 2014). In describing how the Burmans see the Karens, one of the education providers claimed “even though we encourage multiculturalism [in education] and to have respect for others, to be responsible, caring citizens and also to care for the mother nature... they [Burmese] see us as ‘cockroaches’” (Mo, September 23, 2021). Another emerging theme is the lack of trust between the Karen education regime and the central government. While the source of distrust can be traced back to conflict since the colonial rule, there is the idea of “Otherness”. For instance, when describing the involvement of Burmese school teachers in ethnic areas, a Karen interviewee describes, “when the teachers (government) come to the community schools, those schools become their schools and then they bring in their system, their curriculum, and in the area

where our community is closes to city or town then they can fully dominate or occupy and become pure Burmese government school” (Mo, September 23, 2021).

In state curriculum and history books, there is a sense of national pride that accompanies the narrative that the Bamar majority-built Myanmar and as such, an interviewee describes that “what we learned in history books... we learned a lot about how the Bamar majority built this country and they sacrificed for this country so they see other people as second tier citizens that’s why they do a lot of exclusion” (Sam, November 3, 2021). These discussions with Karen ethnic education providers highlighted ways in which “Othering” is occurring in both sides i.e., Karen and the Burmese military. The difference is in regards to the imbalance of power embedded in the state system, favoring the military regime and thus, although there is “Othering” and creation of the “Others” by the ethnic Karens, it is done so as a defense strategy, or a learned mechanism of coping/ dealing with internal wars, forced displacement, human rights violation and innumerable sufferings at the brutal hands of military junta.

Mon narrative

Much like the Karen national consciousness, Mon also emphasizes for the need to maintain and preserve its language and history, albeit different in intensity. When asked if Mon students are taught “*amyo chit seit dat*” [patriotism and love for one’s ethnic group], an interviewee responded that Mon schools teach love and respect for every other ethnic group living in Myanmar with emphasis on the preservation of one’s own culture and tradition (Mi, 4 November 2021). Another education provider expressed that the opportunity to learn in one’s own mother tongue is very crucial because if a child learns in a language they don’t understand, it becomes “learning by rote or rote learning” and this discourages critical thinking (Mon, September 11, 2021).

Furthermore, when asked if education is linked to conflict i.e., if contents in classroom encourages or fuels hatred towards “others,” the interviewee responded, “ethnic education is not rebel producing education system. It [conflict and education] are not related. The education we teach is for children’s future so that they can be good and productive citizens and community

leaders. That is the only thing we aim for. It is similar to government education system. The only difference is identity and language” (Ibid). He went on to share his visions for democratic federal education system which will “promote peace and love and not war against the government... this is our ethnic group demands and once fulfilled, there will be lower conflict. Ethnic education supports peace and the gradual reduction of conflict” (Ibid). Through discussions and interview analysis, it became apparent that in comparison to the Karens, Mon ethnic group were more tolerant towards the greater Burman rhetoric and the overall central education system. This could be due to the fact that the KNU are still at war with the military whereas the NMSP has signed ceasefire agreements since 1995 (Lall and South, 2014).

4.4. Case Study synthesis - findings and reflections

Research studies, findings and informal discussions with both Karen and Mon ethnic education providers has pointed out that ethnic education regimes under EAOs socializes their respective students to take pride in their ethnic history which emphasizes ethnic heroes who fought against the Burman, love and showcase pride in their ethnicity, and strengthens internal ethnic cohesion. There is also a robust indication that ethnic mobilization occurs through the implementation of mother-tongue based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE) as indicated by an interviewee that losing one’s ethnic language is equated with losing one’s nation and national identity. Lastly, ethnic education promotes tolerance only if there are no pre-existing ethnic tensions. For instance, in the Mon case, the education regimes are adaptable to central state curriculum and they also desire to be part of the Myanmar education system whereas in the extreme Karen case, their prolonged civil war, hatred and lack of trust towards the state government left them with little to no room for tolerance or acceptance of anything associated with “Burman”.

While ethnic education regimes socialize, mobilize and strengthens in/tolerance, it is unclear as to what extent? In other words, what are other factors that are also contributing towards the strengthening of ethnonationalism in addition to ethnic education regimes? For instance, socialization does not only happen in schools through textbooks and school rituals, it also happens at

home, churches, monastery, and community events, etc. An interviewee mentioned that “We will never learn it [ethnic history] from our state curriculum in primary school, middle school, high school – we will never learn so what we know [about our ethnic history] is we know it from parents, family, friends so that’s how we learn and when in university, there’s some ethnic based student organizations associations so we get involved and that’s how we learn about our history, culture and language” (Sam, November 3, 2021). Similarly, ethnic mobilization, and bolstering in/tolerance against the “Other” can also happen through social settings, family, peers and life experiences. Although we do not have an exact data/number, many ethnic communities have suffered in the hands of the *Tatmadaw*. Since independence, all ethnic conflict/ civil war fought between EAOs and the Tatmadaw has been in ethnic areas. According to an interviewee, “The Tatmadaw, they come and fight in ethnic areas. Who suffer the most? It is the ethnic people, family in their homeland. If you ask any leaders of EAO from Karen, Kachin, and Chin- they [ethnic groups] are the people who want peace the most. We are dealing with the most brutal military who will do anything to keep their power” (Ibid).

According to the Karen education department, while they recognize that state school curriculum has to be partially developed at the central level, they want each ethnic groups to have the right to contribute to at least 40% of the central curriculum especially subjects related to ethnic language, social studies, English and geography (KTWG and Karen information Centre, as cited in Lenkova, 2015). The demands from Mon Education Department echoes the demands of NNER and federal education system that will legally accept and recognize Mon education systems and also allow Mon curriculum to prevail alongside the central Myanmar curriculum.

5. CONCLUSION

In the context of Myanmar, the “road to democracy” is a challenging path paved with the need for changes in the political system, to make it equitable, inclusive and representative of other ethnic minority groups and respecting their demands for self-rule and autonomy. In this regard, language,

identity and education are key elements in understanding ethnic conflict and violence in Myanmar. This research paper examined the role of education in conflict through the lens of history and ethnic education regimes as case studies. To answer the first research question on how “*Burmanization*” of the state education system has contributed to national identity formation, this paper traced historical studies of pre-colonial Burma, colonial Burma, and post-colonial Myanmar. This paper analyzed education regimes and the ways in which education was used as a political tool by the military to “*Burmanize*” other ethnic minority groups under the common umbrella of ‘Burman’ identity.

Throughout history, and especially in the context of identity formation and nation building, education was seen as an effective mechanism. This occurred with the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism. In pre-colonial Burma, education and schooling was provided by the Sangha and in exchange for the provision of education and maintaining a good image of the state, sangha received support from the state. During the British rule, sangha’s role was diminished. The British colonial administrators were able to provide education, ruling upper and lower Burma separately, often in favor of ethnic minorities living in the frontier areas especially the ethnic Karens. During the colonial period, educated Karens were influenced and aspired with ethnonationalism and a vision for separate Karen Nation. However, their request for a nation state went largely to deaf ears as the British did not accede to the ethnic demands and instead asked them to resolve it with the Burmans or in their words “to throw in our [Karen] lot with the Burman” (KHCPS, 2006, p. 6).

At its independence, Burma was a country with “multiple nations” and in order to unite the country, nationalist education campaigns were initiated throughout. During this time, many student movements also took place to express their frustrations and anger over the outdated education system. While these student movements took place in big cities like Yangon and Mandalay, and not necessarily by ethnic education regimes or in ethnic areas, these demonstrations and protests reflected the overall public outcry and student’s demand for education reform.

To answer the second research question on ethnic armed groups reproducing ethnonationalism and ethnic national consciousness through their education regimes, this paper delved into Karen and Mon ethnic non state armed groups. Both armed groups have been pursuing their political self-determination goals in parallel with the rise of anti-colonial nationalism amongst the majority Burman. Thus, in post- colonial rule, when nation building took place in the form of forced assimilation or “*Burmanization*”, ethnic armed groups such as KNU and NMSP were formed to resist and fight in their pursuit for self-determination and autonomy. Although many ceasefire negotiations have been signed between the two parties, the agreements have yet to be actualized. The conflict between central military government and KNU since 1949 has been deemed “Asia’s longest-running insurgencies” (Smith, 2006). In contrast, NMSP has been undergoing ceasefires for over 2 decades and thus, as compared to the Karens, conflict in Mon populated areas have deteriorated (Lall and South, 2014). Both ethnic education regimes have also adopted and shared the importance of preserving ethnic language as it relates to strengthening national identity. Thus, ethnic education providers and those working in the field of inclusive education have advocated for the integration and formal recognition of the Mother tongue based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE) system in the state education structure.

Finally, to study the relationship between education and conflict using ethnic education regimes, this paper analyzed literature reviews, research findings and in-depth interviews with ethnic education providers. In particular, this research paper examined two distinct ethnic education regimes. Through case studies, this paper highlighted the similarities between the Karen and Mon ethnic education system when it comes to political demands for self-determination, promotion of ethnic language, strengthening ethno-national identity and ethnonationalism through the teaching of ethnic history. With regards to differences, this paper discussed the two types of ethnic education regimes i.e., mix versus separatist agendas. Mix ethnic schools, which are common in Mon national schools, teaches a mixed curriculum combining both ethnic syllabus and state curriculum from the Ministry of Education. In contrast, Karen national schools have adopted a separatist agenda by

teaching only their ethnic language and English, with no intention of merging with the state education system. This raises pertinent issue and according to an interviewee, "...the reality is that ethnic education particularly in the Karen system and more and more in the Kachin system where they don't teach Burmese and teach a different curriculum is going to educate a generation of children who don't identify with the state of Myanmar. And some people might say that's a good thing but I think it's often done without considering the political implications. I think there needs to be more awareness of some of the consequences of these decisions" (Lee, 20 October 2021).

To build understanding on the operation model of both ethnic education regimes and its relation to conflict, this paper applied the theoretical framework on how ethnic education affects violence. The three mechanisms of socialization, ethnic mobilization and in/tolerance or the "Othering" were discussed. Socialization through textbooks and school rituals in both regimes took the form of history books which teaches about ethnic history and ethnic heroes. Instead of the Burmese kings, students at Mon national schools learn about their Mon kingdoms and likewise students at Karen national schools learn about Karen heroes who fought against the Burmans. According to interviewees, both national schools display their ethnic national flags and sing their ethnic national anthem which instill a sense of ethnic pride among students.

Secondly, ethnic mobilization through the use of ethnic language in classrooms occur in both ethnic national schools to a certain extent. In Mon national schools, students are mobilized to embrace, love and take pride in their ethnic national identity. This happens through Mon language teaching in primary school and later, the students learn Burmese language and the state curriculum. The students graduating from Mon national schools are able to speak Mon, Burmese and English while also learning Mon and Burman histories. On the other hand, students from Karen national schools with separatist model are mobilized only in their ethnic language and in English. It is important to note that many education providers themselves had suffered at the hands of the brutal military and thus the hatred towards the military can fuel their disregard for state and Burmese-centric education system. Echoing this, an education expert claims, "I think the reason why they're

[Karen separatist schools] developing a different education system is because they feel like they're at war with the state of Myanmar. So, in this case, the violence is causing the separatist system... maybe a bit too simplistic rather than separatist system is causing the violence" (Lee, 20 October 2021).

Lastly, in/tolerance and the "Othering" of the majority Burman group were noticed through historic narratives and also during the interview process. While Mon ethnic education providers refrained from making a general statement that would be associated with hatred or intolerance of the state military, Karen ethnic education providers expressed their grievances, sufferings, distrust and lack of hope in the state's ability to bring about any change or reform. In many instances, the Tatmadaw was often equated with the Burman people, and the Burmese language. According to an interviewee, "when we talk about *Burmanization*, it is not just the military things, there are also other people from an ethnic group who tries to promote and to maintain Burma-centric attitude for their interests as well, including the NLD [National League for Democracy]. I think there are a lot of Burma-centric and chauvinistic attitude in that" (Smith, 23 September 2021). These discussions highlighted the general lack of trust between the victims of violence and the Burman majority, and not just the military government.

The 3 framework mechanisms (socialization, in/tolerance and ethnic mobilization) were helpful in this research process as it aided us in understanding education in ethnic violence. However, questions remain as to what extent does education affects violence or is it the other way around? Does violence cause education? Despite these unresolved questions, one thing seems certain in that the role of education in ethnic conflict cannot be overlooked. In order for future peacebuilding efforts to be effective in Myanmar, the issues of education, identity, languages and inclusive dialogues must be at the forefront of peace processes.

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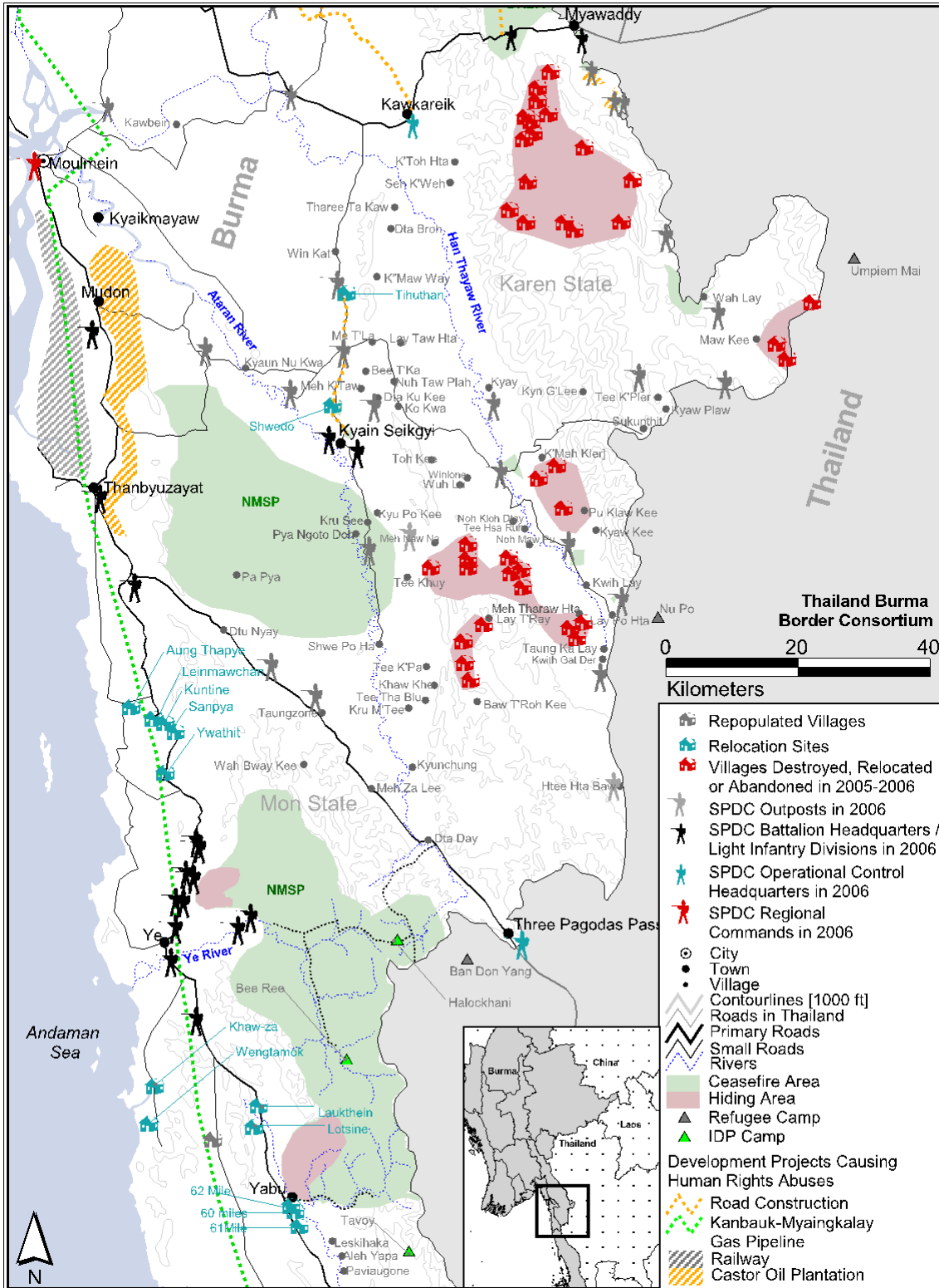
Appendix 1: Administrative Map of Myanmar (source: Nations Online Project)



Figure 1: Political map of Myanmar (source: Nations Online Project)

Appendix 2: Map of southern Mon and Karen states (source: The Border Consortium)

Area 6: Southern Mon and Karen States



Appendix 3: Typology of ethnic schools (source: South and Lall, 2016)

Type	Characteristics	Examples
Type 1 – Ethnic-input schools	Government-run schools with civil society input.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government-run schools, with some teachers (and teaching materials) provided by the local community or civil society.
Type 2 – Mixed schools	Government schools in EAG-controlled and contested areas, with some EAG and/or civil society input.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes schools in remote areas that accept volunteer teachers.
Type 3 – Hybrid schools	Part government, part EAG; sometimes also input from civil society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NDA-K schools in Kachin ceasefire areas. IDP schools in Kachin areas. Schools which were previously under the authority of EAG education departments, but have now been ‘flipped’ (or ‘poached’) by government MoE.
Type 4 – EAG (government curriculum) schools	Schools managed by EAG, with no government teachers, but which use government curriculum (often in translation) and where children can sometimes transfer to the state system, after a test or local arrangement. Curriculum is supplemented by ethnic nationality-orientated materials, especially for history and social studies, but sometimes also other subjects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NMSP/MNEC Mon national schools. KIO schools (teach government curriculum in Jingphaw, etc., and later in Burmese). Some Karen schools, particularly those supported by the community with limited KNU/KED input.
Type 5 – EAG schools	Schools built and run by EAGs and/or associated civil society groups, with separate mother tongue-based curriculum; no recognition/accreditation or possible transfer for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KED schools, and ‘community schools’ in areas under KNU authority or influence; refugee camp schools.
Type 6 – Civil society private schools	Separate mother tongue-based curriculum and different teaching methods; no recognition/accreditation or possible transfer for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-supported schools in northern Shan and Kachin States. Some Karen schools in KNU-controlled areas (sometimes administered and funded by churches).
Type 7 – Foreign curriculum schools	Curriculum developed in/by another country, allowing (some) students to transfer to other schools in that country.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools with Indian curriculum in Kachin; some Karen mission schools.
Type 8 – Supplementary schools	Schools that focus on ethnic language and/or culture/religion, but teach after the government classes are over – either summer schools or afternoon/evening schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly provided by civil society groups; often linked to the <i>Sangha</i> and the churches.

Table 1: Typology of ethnic schools. (Source: South and Lall, 2016).

Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview questionnaires

Interviewee's personal information

- Name, Age, Gender, Ethnicity and Education/ Academic Background

Information about MNEC/ KECD schools

- Briefly talk about the history and origin of ethnic education in Karen/ Mon populated areas. Why was there a need for a separate ethnic education system?
- What are the key differences between ethnic schools and government/state schools?
- In ethnic schools, do students perform assemblies, or flag ceremonies? Do they sing the Burmese national anthem '*Kabar ma kye!*' or their ethnic national anthem?
- What is the language of instruction in ethnic school classrooms? In your opinion, does mother-tongue based education strengthen ethnic national identity?
- How are textbooks and curriculums chosen, revised or produced in ethnic schools? Are students taught the history of their people/ ethnic groups?
- Does education shape ethnic mobilization towards a common political action? Are students being taught nationalism/ pride and love for their ethnic groups?
- Based on your observation and perhaps through textbooks and curriculum (civic or moral education), does ethnic schools foster tolerance or intolerance? (i.e., respect for others or hatred towards the Myanmar military)?
- Has any of the political leaders (from KNU and NMSP) attended these ethnic schools? Or did they graduate from Burmese schools or international or private schools?
- Have you participated in any protest/ ethnic social movement? If needed, would you participate in the freedom arm struggle to protect your ethnic group?