
***BULLETIN OF THE
BURMA
STUDIES GROUP***

In honor of our teachers...



*Denise Bernot visiting with a librarian from Central Universities Library, Rangoon University, Burma, 1993
Photo from C. Raymond*

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Introduction

This issue arrives late, for which I have to apologize to readers. But the good news is that holding back this issue has enabled me to give much of it over to Denise Bernot's illuminating account of her engagement with Burmese and related languages over the years. I am delighted that she has given us this article to put along Anna Allott's and John Okell's recent pieces about their respective experiences learning and teaching Burmese. These three *hsaya* were by no means the first Westerners to gain a good mastery of Burmese. Yet they were the first to set about putting their own knowledge of the language systematically at the service of the rest of us: their combined efforts, both as teachers in the classroom and as writers and compilers of language-learning materials, have been invaluable to many of us as we try to achieve something approaching their command of Burmese.

Anna Allott, John Okell, and Denise Bernot all continue to work on our collective behalf as teachers and scholars of Burmese. (Justin Watkins and San San Hnin Tun are among those who have taken up the baton more recently, as is evident in their recent contributions to the *Bulletin*.) Meanwhile back in Rangoon, Nance Cunningham and Aung Soe Min toil away at another project that promises great benefits for both English-speakers studying Burmese and Burmese-speakers studying English: a Burmese-English and English-Burmese dictionary written specifically with language-learners' needs in mind. Nance follows up on her contribution to the last issue, in which she acquainted us with some of the (mind-spinning) complexities of dictionary compilation, with a further

explanation of just why, despite the excellent Myanmar Language Commission Burmese-English dictionary published about fifteen years ago, the world still needs a learner's dictionary for Burmese and English.

A number of books about Burma have appeared in recent years that attempt to reach beyond the restricted audience of Burma monographs to address a wider public. One such plays on both Burma's greater salience (often for unfortunate reasons) in the international news and George Orwell's fame: Emma Larkin's *Finding George Orwell in Burma*, which Paul Sarno reviews in this issue.

The issue concludes with two notices about recent Burma-related publications and with the call for papers for the upcoming Burma Studies Conference to be held on October 3-5, 2008, at Northern Illinois University in De Kalb.

It is perhaps not out of place to say that the tragic events of recent months in Burma obviously weigh on the minds of all readers of this issue. Since this publication is intended to keep people interested in Burma in touch with each other, including people living in the country, it would be imprudent to delve further into the matter of what happened and what ramifications they may have. But we would appear feckless not to express our deepest concern.

–The Editor

In Honor of Our Teachers (Continued)

In the autumn of 1968 I arrived in Paris to start a self-directed junior year abroad. I had spent the summer in Indonesia and intended to continue my study of Indonesian at the

École nationale des langues orientales, which as it turned out was located close-by the seventh floor walk-up *chambre de bonne* I found to rent. My primary purpose, however, was to study anthropology. This was in the glory days of Claude Lévi-Strauss, at whose feet I wished to sit, but I also sought out the most important of France's anthropological specialists on Southeast Asia, George Condominas. When I mentioned to him my plan to study Indonesian at Langues O (as everyone called it), he suggested instead that I study Burmese with Mme Bernot "for the method."

As it happened, the previous year, at Cornell, Margaret Aung-Thwin had approached a fellow student in my first-year Indonesian class asking if she wouldn't like to study Burmese as well. (Poor Margaret had been hired to teach Burmese, but with no students signing up to take the course she had been consigned to cataloguing Burmese books in the depths of the library basement.) I was intrigued enough to go to the library to see what Burmese looked like and was immediately captivated: who wouldn't want to learn a language whose script was as cool as that? So Condominas's remark (along with his claim that the Indonesian teacher at Langues O was a Russian princess who had fled the Revolution via the Malay Peninsula) set me on an unexpected but not wholly unanticipated path.

As it turned out, we had only one class meeting for Burmese at the old building where Langues O had long been housed: the NATO buildings in Paris had recently been commandeered for more sensible use by the French Government (aka De Gaulle), and soon two fellow students and I were practicing the first line of the Burmese syllabary under Mme Bernot's tutelage in those less august but more practical halls.

It was impossible not to be enchanted by Mme Bernot's charm and good-heartedness. Parisians have lived at the center of power, learning, and glory for centuries. Is it because Mme Bernot lives in the suburbs that she shows none of the polite indifference with which most of us foreigners are treated in that city? Well, probably not; more likely it is because she knows, as the following delightful account reveals, what it's like to find oneself struggling in a strange environment with compromised linguistic skills. Then again, maybe it's because she is simply a treasure of a person, much loved in France and Burma alike. It is an honor as well as a great pleasure to acquaint readers with the history of her wonderfully fruitful engagement with the Burmese language (and its cousins), as part of our series on our teachers' own experiences as language-learners.

—The Editor

Why Burmese?

Every time I try to answer the question, often put to me, as to why I chose to study Burmese, I find myself starting in on a confused tale, one that reveals no single "choice," but rather a number of opportunities and encounters that led to a growing, and eventually passionate, interest.

The starting point was a research project awarded, through the good offices of Claude Lévi-Strauss, to my husband, Lucien Bernot, and myself in 1951. At the time I saw in this project not the first step toward a clear goal but rather a jump into the unknown. It meant that we would spend a year in Southeast Asia sponsored by the CNRS (the National

Center for Scientific Research).¹ We had two children; Lucien had just been accepted into the CNRS as an ethnographer; and I, in order to be free to travel with him, had given up—temporarily, I thought—my career as a librarian, for which I had already spent five years in training at the Ecole des chartes in Paris.² Our future field site was in the Chitaggong Hill Tracts, at that time a part of East Pakistan but under special jurisdiction. Claude Lévi-Strauss was recently returned from there and thought that the concentration of Tibeto-Burmans he had met—especially the Marma, of the Burman branch—made of it a sort of paradise for ethnographers and linguists. He was generous enough to want to share this paradise with an ethnographer whose work he had already come to respect, Lucien Bernot, and his wife, who at the time was spreading herself thin in the study of various Asian languages.

¹ Editor's note: The CNRS sustains France's intellectual glory by enabling select researchers in a great range of fields to devote their energies to full-time research. To this day, Burma studies benefits from this—and I use the word advisedly—enlightened government policy not only in the cumulative contributions of Lucien and Denise Bernot but also in the ongoing work of such notable scholars as Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, François Robinne, and Guillaume Rozenberg.

² Editor's note: The Ecole des chartes is an elite university-level institution in Paris that trains a select group of students as archivists, librarians, and other experts concerned with written records. Its alumni include a distinguished number of historians, anthropologists, and linguists.

Preparations

The ethnographic part of the project fell to Lucien, and to me, the linguistic. This required, at a minimum, an initiation into Burmese, of which Marma was a dialect. What I had studied, however, was Sanskrit and Hindi. My husband and our fellow students, who were all studying exotic languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, and Tibetan, declared themselves interested in Burmese, which was not taught in Paris at the time. So every Tuesday, the day our friends all gathered at our house, I found myself in front of a blackboard, chalk in hand, recounting Vossion's "French-Burmese Grammar," a translation dating back to 1889 of Judson's still older English work, and attempting to write the Burmese examples on the board—on the grounds that, as our friends kept insisting, "It's by teaching things that you learn them."

Why didn't I go study Burmese in London? In part because it was summer, during the university break. But above all, I admit, it was because I had learned that we would not be able to take our children to London and I hadn't the heart to part with them so soon, knowing that not long after we would not see them for over a year.

First fieldwork

In those days the journey to Chittagong was long and punctuated with many layovers and bureaucratic formalities: first in Karachi, getting permission to enter Pakistan and to fly over India to get to East Pakistan; then in Dacca, getting permission to travel from Chittagong to the Hill Tracts preserve. France's consul in Chittagong was an Englishman who put us up and assisted us greatly by lending us his car to gather up provisions and equipment for a long stay in an isolated area.

A day-long boat trip on the Karnaphuli River took us to Rangamati, the Hill Tracts' port, but once there we had to await authorization to establish ourselves among the Marma. Only Colonel Hume, British Superintendent of the Hill Tracts, was in a position to grant us such authorization. He asked us our intentions and was surprised at what we had to say but gave us permission to take as our base of operations the Marma village of Pankayapara, near the Kagrachori market. Both the village head and the overseer of the market were Marma but there was always a Pakistani official present in this region of the "Mong Circle," which was peopled primarily by Northern Marma.

It was going to take three days' hike to get to our village, so we left Rangamati one morning, packs on our backs, to the laughter of the local Indians. We reached the bungalow-shelter in the evening having neither eaten nor drunk anything the whole day, as we were unable to put any intelligible questions to those few Tibeto-Burman travelers we came upon. At the shelter, we were very politely greeted by an elderly lady, thin as a thread and very dignified, with her dazzling white blouse, high-necked and long-sleeved, and her close-fitting, full-length dark red skirt—in a word, the classic Burmese lady such as we had seen in books. Lucien suggested to me, since I had studied Burmese, that I ask the lady for some tea, a drink which in any case so many languages name by basically the same word: tea, thé, tchay, teha. I opted for "tcha," since that struck me as appropriately oriental. Discreetly amused, the lady hurried to bring us...a handful of coarse salt. So "thé", alas, would not do in Burmese even if it did in most other languages. Could it be that "salt," which I had seen transliterated into roman script from Burmese as *'tsa* was pronounced *tcha* here among the Marma? A brutal warning, in any case, that

communicating with the inhabitants was hereafter going to be a vital necessity.

Our apprenticeship began at once, as the Marma lady gave us food and drink and sufficient vocabulary for us to do the following two days' hike in greater comfort. We had to rely exclusively on Marma to communicate with the residents of Pankayapara. But the Marma market overseer, in addition to his natal language, spoke and wrote both English and Bengali, and he agreed to be my teacher. He had me work several times a week on Marma proverbs collected by Lewin, written in the script I had learned from Vossion's Burmese grammar.

We spent a little over four months among the Northern Marma, recording their vocabulary both phonetically and in their writing system, whose traditional layout they showed us...in the manner of the copyists they still were, lacking typewriters and printing presses.

Their word for 'son' was pronounced `sa and for 'daughter' *se`mui*, with the same tones as in central Burmese.³ But the initial sibilant in these words corresponds to an interdental (the unvoiced *th* in English) in central Burmese. Our bitter experience with the handful of salt—proffered when we were thirsty!—had already taught us that the Marma aspirated palatal affricate corresponded to the aspirated sibilant in Burmese, transliterated *hs* in Judson, `ts in Vossion (among others).

³ The falling tone for the vowels *a* and *i* is indicated here by a grave accent before the syllable, whereas J. Okell, in his grammar, places the accents indicating tone above the vowel itself.

Since the greatest concentration of Marma was to be found in the southern portion of the Hill Tracts, we decided to spend the second part of our stay there. We had to pass through Chittagong, where Robert Duvauchelle was the new consul. He welcomed us warmly and his interest in our research, starting from that moment and destined to continue long after, provided valuable encouragement.

Among the southern Marma (Bohmong Circle), 'daughter' was *se`mui*, 'salt' was the same as in the north, yet learned residents of the capital, Bandarban, pronounced the word with an initial sibilant reminiscent of Vossion's transcription of Burmese. A system of correspondences was already showing up between Marma and Burmese, as were traces of the evolution of the latter from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Finally, the word 'pagoda', `kyō among the Marma, `caō⁴ for the Burmans, gave clear indication of a correspondence between the Marma moist velar and the Burmese palatal affricate.

This first fieldwork suggested much but left much in confusion. Obtaining greater clarity would require hearing modern central Burmese, the language of the majority of the Burmese population, that is, comparing two spoken dialects of the current period. But over the years Marma, both spoken and written, its tales and sung poetry, rich in poems in fixed form, monopolized my attention, relegating central Burmese to a lesser place.

Rangoon Burmese

In January, 1958, I arrived in Burma. In Rangoon, wanting to buy some matches, I

⁴ The initial *c* is actually a simplification of the sound *tch* which one hears at the beginning of 'tcha tcha tcha.'

asked a marketwoman for `muing khroi⁵, without success, because my pronunciation was Marma. I then demonstrated what I wanted and she cried out, "Mi chi" as she handed me a box of them. I had read that the *r*, *pr*, *phr*, *kr*, and *kh* of old Burmese had merged with modern Burmese *y*, *py*, *phy*, *c*, and *ch*, but it was exciting to get such direct proof. This simple word 'match', written *mi: khrac* also reminded me that one mustn't confuse written signs and phonemes, as I had already learned from the Marma word for 'daughter,' written *sami:* and pronounced *se`mui*.

There was nothing to do but to start my apprenticeship all over again, starting from zero as far as contemporary central (and national) Burmese was concerned. Since I was staying at Inya Hall, one of the women students' dorms at the University, I once again used the direct methods I had practiced in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, only this time with Burmese students.

In Rangoon, moreover, I was able to make many useful contacts. Dr. Hla Pe, vacationing in his home country, gave a lecture on "Burmese, a Tibeto-Burman language." I of course went to hear it and made his acquaintance. Thanks to him, I heard classical Burmese music and sung poetry, and I was able to observe that the repertoire of poetic genres was exactly the same as among the Marma. From that time on, Dr. Hla Pe was an important teacher for me, with whom I could correspond or discuss matters, whether at conferences at SOAS, when he did us the honor of giving us wonderful lectures in Paris, or, finally, during his retirement in Moulmein.

It happened that G.H. Luce lived almost directly opposite Inya Hall. He sat me down

⁵ ' represents a final glottal stop.

in front of lithic rubbings of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries and pointed out the correspondences between the characters etched in stone and their modern equivalents. It was a difficult but gratifying exercise: for example, I recognized in the inscriptions the Marma words 'to be' *hi*, and 'to go, go away' *la*.

I also met J.S. Furnivall and Bohmu Ba Shin at Luce's home. All three men communicated to me their passion for Burmese culture, in which they were so thoroughly versed, and fueled my desire to travel repeatedly to the fabulous site of Pagan. And then a group of Burmese friends of all ages took me to the movies. A film, *Oh Men!*, based on a short story, first introduced me to its author's irony, at once tender and biting, and her skill at evoking an atmosphere or a character by providing a few details from everyday life. Trying to talk with Burmese friends about this was instructive and the film aroused my curiosity about contemporary Burmese literature, in which I came to recognize Khin Hnin Yu's skills and those of many other writers.

During that same stay, putting up at the home of a family in Akyab, in Arakan, confirmed my interest in the evidence dialects provide. People there spoke almost like the Marma, which is not surprising, since the Marma were Arakanese who had emigrated in the eighteenth century, when the Burmans had reduced their kingdom to the status of a Burman province. The Arakanese have impeccable spelling, and since they distinguish between *ky* and *kr*, and between *py* and *pr*, in their pronunciation, a Burmese proverb advises, "If you don't know how to spell [what you pronounce as] *c* or *py*, ask an Arakanese."

Years later, it was once again in Akyab that knowledge of Burmese dialects proved

rewarding. I had stopped in front of some clay toys at a market. Among them were doves that cooed when you blew into them. As soon as I picked up one of the doves, a marketwoman said to her neighbor, "Buying herself a toy at her age!" But when I explained in Arakanese that it was for my children, the woman, stunned that I had understood her jibe, gave me the dove as a present, laughing heartily.

Burmese civilization, which had gone through so many dark periods of history— anarchy, colonization, the ravages of the second world war—yet whose language and literature were as lively as ever, was starting to make an impression on me. And it offered many research topics: too many, in fact, since I lacked sufficient knowledge to pick out any one.

Hesitations along the way

Chance events later pushed me in various directions. Once, when he was giving a lecture on Arakanese at SOAS, John Okell described how the pronunciation of consonants is closely linked to the preceding or following words. When he was done a listener cried out, "Never heard of such a slaughter of consonants!" That reminded me how in central Burmese the influence of context is even more determining, and that, as John has pointed out many times over, that the way consonants, and even whole syllables, are pronounced reveals syntactic relations, word types, and so, meaning. For example, *zegebyan* is a noun meaning 'interpreter,' whereas *ze`ga pyan* is a simple assertion, 'to translate', literally, 'to turn back' *pyan*, 'words' *ze`ga*. The two phrases are made up of the same components but in the first instance they are bound together, whereas in the second they are not.

I also became aware that I heard the same phrases pronounced slightly differently in

Rangoon and Mandalay. For example, '[We] have to go there' was pronounced `θwa ja' ya' rε in Mandalay, and `θwa ya' a' rε in Rangoon: these were local differences within central Burmese. The Rangoon pronunciation softened the ja' of Mandalay to ya' and shortened ya' to a'. Since both conventional wisdom and a proverb agree that Mandalay is the city of beautiful language, the speech of the "cosmopolitan" city of Rangoon is automatically demeaned. At the same time, in central Burma, peripheral dialects, even those that are very similar and easily intelligible, such as that of the Yaw, come in for pejorative judgements: "The Yaw speak badly," people told me.

From all of this I learned a number of things: to listen very closely; to distinguish between what affected meaning and what did not; not to take a way of speaking as a dialect; and not to take Burmese to be a simple language.

In London, once again, an insightful remark of Anna Allott's about a verbal particle caused me to consider the distance between Burmese verb use and our Indo-European notion of conjugations. This matter deserved renewed consideration.

Yet another apprenticeship

However, starting from 1960 circumstances put a stop to my excursions among the dialects and other evidence concerning Burmese linguistic history. These circumstances obliged me to devote more attention to contemporary Burmese, not simply as the central dialect but as the national language and lingua franca of Burma—a language I was now going to have to teach, even though fifteen years earlier I was resolved to do anything at all but teach!

At the time, in fact, certain linguists, professors and researchers, most of them Orientalists, whom I admired and some of whom had been my teachers, concluded that Burmese deserved to number among the languages taught at the École nationale des langues orientales vivantes in Paris. On the basis of my recent stay in Burma and my first timid endeavors in linguistics, they determined that I could take this responsibility on.

The prospect appalled me, since I had no pedagogical experience and had not made the study of the national language of Burma a priority in my research. I nevertheless agreed, in anguish, to provide a course in Burmese.

There was no time to agonize. I had to deepen forthwith my knowledge of the language, figure out how to present it to students, and put together the necessary materials: a collection of reading materials, a guide to the grammar, a lexicon, etc.

The Orientalists who had wanted to establish this course in Burmese also influenced its implementation, by virtue of their encouragement and the knowledge and experience they put at my disposal. François Martini was particularly important in this regard. Professor of Cambodian but master of several Southeast Asian languages, he was greatly interested in Burmese and spoke of it in his course in comparative linguistics, which he had me come and address as soon as I returned from Burma. And it was he who then proposed that Burmese be taught at ENLOV. I also owe a great deal to the sinologist Paul Demiéville, who was intrigued by languages sharing points in common with Chinese and was up on all the most recent work on Burmese. He advised me to write up my research findings as quickly as possible, served as a critic when

the time came, and finally, published my first article based on a Burmese text in *T'oung Pao*.

Correspondence and meetings with Professor Hla Pe and with Luce became more frequent and were of inestimable value. Working with Burmans at ENLOV, meanwhile, taught me a great deal. My first collaborator was the daughter of the historian and linguist U Pe Maung Tin; with her I (finally!) concentrated my attention on contemporary Burmese, and together we drew up the first materials for students. Then came Mrs. Yin Yin Myint, a born teacher and subtle analyst of her own language. It will soon be forty years that we have been working and publishing together, four hands joined, as it were. Other Burmans, among them grammarians, scholars, literary figures, lexicographers, intellectuals and artists, have helped me on each of my trips to Burma and also through correspondence and by participating in our publications. They have been endlessly generous and so numerous that I fall far short naming only U Wun, Professor Than Tun, U Nann Wai, U Saw Lwin, Zawgyi, Daw Khin Mya Kyu, U Thaw Kaung, U Hla Tin, and U Tha No here.

It was the spoken style that concerned me most. My research, both oral and face-to-face, and written, by means of the many dialogues to be found in modern literature, grew more systematic starting in 1960, and it resulted in my thesis on the predicate in Burmese, which I defended in 1973.

At the same time, curiosity about the history of the language still intrigued me and drew me toward various diachronic approaches: the study of dialects, and reference to lithic inscriptions and travelers' tales, in which Burmese terms appeared in their older pronunciations.

I started to study the Intha dialect⁶ in Rangoon, where I came upon a student from Inlay Lake. I carried on with this research at the lake itself in the 1970s. Alerted by U Pe Maung Tin to the similarity between the dialects of Inle and Tavoy, it then behooved me to go to Tavoy, which I did several times. I was able to pursue research on these two dialects long enough to notate or tape record vocabulary, conversations, and tales, as I had done previously for Arakanese. Once again, both Inle and Tavoy showed the conservatism of minority dialects: in both one hears the *kl* and *pl* sounds of lithic inscriptions.

Canvassing was more difficult for the Danu and Taungyo dialects. In Mandalay, some young Danu students at the university introduced me briefly to their dialect with some standard phrases and legends, but I was unable to travel to their own region, near Inle Lake. On the other hand, I was able to make a short research trip to a Taungyo village in that area.

I have done research from time to time on Yaw, on two occasions (in 1995 and 2006) in the region. Very similar to central Burmese, the dialect appears to have diverged from it relatively later than others: it has not retained *r* or *kr* and *pr* as Arakanese has. But it has retained certain archaic pronunciations noted in travelers' journals from the late eighteenth century. The Yaw *-an* was at the time pronounced *-æn* before turning into the modern Burmese *-in*.

Spoken dialects of groups who are at present minorities help to clarify the history of the Burmese language at the level of phonology,

⁶ Editor's note: "Intha" refers to people living near Inle Lake, who speak a distinctive dialect of Burmese.

lexicon, and grammar. They even clarify, by virtue of their lexical borrowings from their surroundings, present-day borrowings from foreign languages in the national language. At the same time, linguists such as A.G. Haudricourt, Jacqueline Thomas, Gilbert Lazard, and René Gsell induced me to look at Burmese in a general linguistic context, where comparisons and contrasts help to home in on the characteristics of a given language.

If I have pursued my journey, full of detours, toward Burmese, and if I have had the ongoing pleasure of working on this inexhaustible and marvellous topic, it is, as should now be clear, because I have had so many lucky encounters. Among these, the most important without a doubt was with Lucien Bernot, companion, support, and exemplar of scholarly tenacity. Without him I might well not have persevered in my apprenticeship in Burmese. Had he not been at my side, so discreetly and effectively encouraging, I would perhaps have abandoned the path.

–Denise Bernot

Why Compile a New English–Burmese and Burmese–English Dictionary?

Readers will recall that Nance Cunningham explained how complicated writing a dictionary is in our last issue. Here she explains why such gargantuan labors are still justified, even after the publication of a good Burmese/English dictionary (at last) in the 1990s in Rangoon. –The Editor

As I mentioned in an article in the previous number of this journal, Aung Soe Min and I are compiling a bilingual dictionary. Many people, including us, wondered why we should make a new Burmese–English

dictionary when the 1992 Myanmar Language Commission (MLC) dictionary was so good. The answer lies not in any shortcoming of the MLC dictionary, but in the English–Burmese dictionaries available. Almost all that I have seen have the weakness for the language learner that they are based on an English monolingual dictionary, usually the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary. This leads to two disadvantages for the learner: a bias toward words more important in the English-language cultural environment than in the Burmese, and a tendency to translate definitions rather than find single words as definitions.

We are getting around these two problems at once by using SIL’s Shoebox (now Toolbox) database.⁷ At the same time we put in a Burmese word, we put in the English words it will be listed under. While this wordlist will still have to be expanded, we find it produces a far superior English–Burmese dictionary for the Burmese-language learner than those we have seen, both in word choice and precision of definition. The disadvantage for us was that to get this word list, we had to make an Burmese–English dictionary first.

The long definitions in most of the current English–Burmese dictionaries are not a great obstacle for the native speaker of Burmese, but are difficult for the Burmese-language learner. The learner finds a long definition confusing, seeking a single word equivalent where possible. Of course, there are words like ‘penultimate’ which simply do not have a short translation. In many other cases the dictionary compiler (perversely, the language learner may feel in his heart) puts in a long definition where there is a clear translation. The Guide Dictionary, for

⁷Available for download at: www.sil.org/computing/toolbox/downloads.htm.

example, defines ‘epidemic’ as ကူးစက်တတ်သော(ရောဂါ) (‘communicable disease’) instead of ကပ်ရောဂါ, the more usual, accurate, and compact term. Sometimes this results from an admirable urge of the compilers to find a strung-together Burmese word that means nothing but what the English word means. Again, this is fine for the Burmese, but leaves foreign learners with vocabulary that is difficult and rarely used, and deprives them of the easy and common words that they have been hearing. In my opinion, the native speakers are also better served by a well-chosen example than by an awkward string of words.

In addition, some words have been mistaken very early in their translation, and this has persisted through generations of dictionaries, presumably because native speakers of English rarely participated in the work. For example, ‘jars’ has been living under cover as ကရား၊ ရေတကောင်း in Burma for decades, though that former word is defined as ‘beaker, jug with a beak and handle, vessel with a spout and handle; kettle’ and in the MLC dictionary, and the latter is a carafe. And any beer drinkers know that asking for a ‘jar’ gets you a pitcher of the stuff. (Fortunately this error has been rectified in the 2003 MLC English–Burmese Dictionary.)

Working from an English source results in a blindness to usages which are not in close parallel to the English. Look at the definition for ‘temptation’. What you find in dictionaries under ‘tempt’ and ‘temptation’ is some variant of ဖြားယောင်းသည်၊ or ဆွဲဆောင်သည်၊ သွေးဆောင်သည် which relate to the ‘tempt’ in ‘temptress’, or စမ်းသည်, as in test someone, try someone, a sense with religious overtones in English. These words would be absurd or overdramatic in places you commonly hear ‘tempt’ in English: ‘I’m tempted to go first class this time.’ ‘That

iced coffee looks tempting in this heat.’ ‘I couldn’t resist the temptation to knock on her door, even though I knew she might be asleep.’

A native speaker would likely say စိတ်ပါသည် or the equivalent of ‘I want to...’, tempering it with a few particles. As this is not very specific, it will not appear in the definition of ‘want’. စိတ်ပါသည် is translated as ‘be willing, keen, interested’.

‘Not resist temptation, give in to temptation’ will often come out as စိတ်မနှိုင်းဘူး, but this word does not even appear in most dictionaries, not qualifying as a word to many native speakers.

I am quite sure that everyone who has spoken Burmese with native speakers has heard many variations of the question, ‘There is no အားနာတယ် in English, is there?’, as though English-speaking vulgarities were condemned to a brutal life where no one regretted giving bad news, was sorry to not do as promised, was reluctant to impose on a stranger, nor had a way to urge guests to enjoy some delicacy. While this is not the place to discuss the underlying cultural differences and meanings between them, many English phrases stand quite well for varieties of feelings brought together under the concept of အားနာတယ်. However, none are the primary meaning of the English words, so it disappears from the English–Burmese definitions.

We see that Judson’s definition (see next page) rests on the word ‘deter’ but his definition of ‘deter’ reads something like ‘discourage someone so they will not do something’, nor does အားနာတယ် appear under ‘offend’. The Myanmar Language Commission defines ‘embarrass’ and ‘restrain’ without mentioning အားနာတယ်, and is not alone in its omission. So after all it is

no wonder that so many people think there is no အားနာတယ် in English. They will certainly not find it in the English–Burmese dictionary. Perhaps this has been part of the reason that this concept has become for the Burmese a popular way of describing how very different the ‘English’ are from them.

Definitions of အားနာသည်

Judson 1893: ‘be deterred by feelings of respect (delicacy, constraint), or fear of offending [the most expressive word in the Burmese language]’

Judson 1953: ‘be deterred by feelings of respect, delicacy, constraint, or by fear of offending’

U Hoq Sein: ‘deterred by feelings of respect’, ‘deterred by fear of offending’

Myanmar Language Commission: ‘be embarrassed by feelings of respect, delicacy; be restrained by fear of offending’

Aung Soe Min and Cunningham: ‘feel bad about, be sorry (for sthg beyond one’s control, etc); be embarrassed (by one’s failings, by inability to fulfil one’s duty, act according to one’s standards, etc); feel shy (about the necessity of imposing, sthg which may offend, etc); be restrained by feelings of delicacy or respect; feel one must hold sthg back to avoid offence or embarrassment of others; be reluctant to impose on others, be reluctant to claim, ask for, or state sthg; be restrained by a reluctance to create an awkward situation; act out of sympathy to sb’

There is also a curious tendency to ‘correct’ the Burmese to match the English. For

example, I have rarely heard ဘော်ဒါ (baw da, borrowed from English) refer to an actual ‘boarder’, it having instead having slid into meaning ‘your crowd’, but in မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ dictionaries, it remains in its original meaning only. In the MLC dictionaries, ဗလာစာအုပ် (‘blank book’) is defined as ‘copybook, exercise book’, but these terms in the English–Myanmar are defined as လက်ရေးလှစာအုပ် ‘penmanship book’, and ‘exercise book’ is given as an example under လေ့ကျင့်ခန်း: ‘exercise’. In another place, an exercise book is a (ရေးစရာ)စာအုပ်, a ‘(writing) book.’ These are valid definitions of the English word, which should be included in the definitions, but if you ask for a လက်ရေးလှစာအုပ်, I don’t think you would get a ဗလာစာအုပ်. It has been corrected out of existence. The words conform tightly to the English definitions, ignoring the real usage, and thus making these definitions in the MLC English–Myanmar Dictionary useless for the Burmese-language learner.

The best way to make a dictionary is to start from a huge corpus including a variety of sources of language. This is not available for Burmese (though the founders of the 1940 Burmese–English Dictionary did create a corpus of words from literary sources), so dictionary compilers have to rely on their wits.

This lack of a corpus leaves unanswered questions about usage. For example, I am convinced (through experience gained shopping for cloth) that the word ညို, commonly translated as ‘brown’, includes many colours native English speakers would call ‘grey’. But others firmly disagree, insisting that these colours fall into the unambiguous မီးခိုးရောင် ‘smoke colour’. But then how to account for the classification of areas as white (government controlled),

black (insurgent controlled), and brown (disputed)?

No dictionary can please all, and particularly, a bilingual dictionary must choose between favouring the needs of the readers needing definitions of English words, and those needing translations of them. In the large number of English–Burmese dictionaries on the market, all seem to favour the former, leaving Burmese-language learners struggling uphill a little more than necessary. I hope that our project will smooth their way.

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–Nance Cunningham

Review of Secret Histories

Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop. Emma Larkin (pseudo.) London: John Murray, 2004. 232 pp.; published in the United States as *Finding George Orwell In Burma*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005, 294 pp.

Andrew Marshall’s *The Trouser People*⁸ was published in 2002. It is an account of the author’s attempt to trace the career of James George Scott in Burma as he served the Crown, introduced British football to the indigenous population, contributed substantially to the pacification of the Shan States, and chronicled the daily lives of the Burmese. Marshall was largely unsuccessful in locating many of the structures in which Scott had lived and worked. A fair portion of the work was a depiction of the state of authoritarianism in Myanmar during the time of his research.⁹

Two years later, the book under review here was published in Great Britain by someone writing under the pseudonym of Emma Larkin. In *Secret Histories*, Larkin endeavored to trace that part of the life of George Orwell, aka Eric Blair, when he was,

⁸ London: Viking, 2002; New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002.

⁹ In this review, I shall employ Burma for events which occurred before June 1989 and Myanmar for those which take place thereafter.

initially, a trainee and then a full-fledged British policeman in six locations in the Burman regions of Burma for five years starting in 1922. The author's major thesis is that Orwell's *Burmese Days*, 1984, and *Animal Farm*, written after he left Burma, constitute a trilogy: the first exemplifies Orwell's views of colonialism formed during his work there while the other two depict contemporary Burmese autocracy.

It is difficult to measure the credentials of the author when a work of non-fiction is published under a pseudonym. Assuming that the meager biographical details given in either edition are accurate,¹⁰ she is an American journalist who was born and brought up in Asia, studied Burmese at SOAS (and, based on the conversations related in the book, appears fluent in the spoken language), earned a Masters in Asian History (presumably also at SOAS, although that is not crystal clear), is based in Bangkok, and visited Myanmar for ten years from 1995 to early 2003 (p. 3).¹¹ She reports spending months on end in Burma during this period (p. 231). This leads me to assume that she received a business visa under false pretenses, since she writes that one cannot generally obtain permission to visit by

¹⁰ They are somewhat different in each. This may represent deliberate obfuscation to make it more unlikely that Ms Larkin will be denied a future visa by the Burmese government, presumably the reason for hiding her identity. She states that the names of her Burmese informants as given in the book have been altered to protect their identity, so fear of disclosing who they actually are is probably not the reason she remains anonymous.

¹¹ All references in this review are to the British paperback, 2004 edition, unless otherwise noted.

stating on a visa application that one's occupation is that of a journalist, and her itinerary around Myanmar does not suggest that her goal was academic research.

The author provides no references for assertions of fact which she makes, such as that there exists widespread poverty, even in the heartland. Nor does her account contain any economic comparisons with Burma in socialist times. Her interviewees include: the under-employed; former political prisoners; the owner of a printing firm who graphically describes the pervasive state censorship of all published materials; students at universities where no vigorous independent scholarship is permitted much less encouraged and whose education has been interrupted repeatedly; and (of less relevance) aging Anglo-Burmans who pine for British rule. However, she does not report on interviews with business people, artists (some of whom own their own urban galleries and sell their paintings abroad), taxi drivers (many of whom own their own vehicles), and farmers who may be prospering from the widespread growth in the export of beans and pulses. Her acknowledgments and references (pp. 229-232) include only two studies of modern Burma, Lintner's *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1990) and Fink's *Living Silence* (London: Zed, 2001), hardly a representative sample of balanced, informed views on how to understand SPDC policies.

What is more telling is that she supplies almost no explanation as to why SLORC and the SPDC act in such an authoritarian manner and have succeeded, to some degree, in attracting foreign investment to Myanmar, increasing official trade, largely eradicating opium production, and maintaining reasonably good relations with their closest neighbors. The only explication relevant to

any of these subjects is a cursory four pages on the difficulties of maintaining a nation-state in which at minimum eight major disparate minority groups desire at least some, and in many cases a great deal of, autonomy from the center (pp. 170-174), and two pages on the meager history of democracy in Burma over one thousand years of royal and colonial rule (pp. 204-205).¹²

She also fails to consider the widespread analysis that the military so dominates Burmese society today that one does not

¹² Larkin cites without further identifying (pg. 204) an essay by U Maung Gyi as the foundation for this thesis; this is inadequate. This reviewer assumes that, as a recent graduate student, Ms Larkin was familiar with the work of Robert H. Taylor (*The State in Burma*, London: Hurst, 1987) and Mary P. Callahan ("On Time Warps and Warped Time Lessons from Burma's 'Democratic Era'", in *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, ed. by Robert I Rotberg, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), pp 49-67, and *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca: Cornell, 2003). Both of these scholars make that argument with much greater probity. Furthermore, she does not mention the failures of parliamentary democracy during 1948-1960 and 1961-1962, as documented in Maung Maung, "The Search for Constitutionalism in Burma" in *Constitutionalism in Asia*, ed. R.N. Spann (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1963), pp. 114-133; Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed,1991), pp.123-124; Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963); Louis J. Walinsky, "The Rise and Fall of U Nu", *Pacific Affairs*, 1965-66, 38:276-280.

have to support it to seek favors from it. Mary Callahan has written:

For most Burmese living in the central and southern regions of the country, the *tatmadaw* is not a faceless institution, but a shelter, a benefactor and a safety valve for sons, nephews, grandsons and rascals. With nearly 400,000 soldiers, it is difficult to find a family in central Burma that does not rely on some member, distant or immediate, whose service in the armed forces provides the family with access to higher-quality rice, cheaper cooking oil and other necessities that they cannot afford on the highly inflationary market. The same individuals, who in the privacy of their own living room watch the evening news and denounce the always-featured junta members, cabinet ministers and regional commanders, will spend the next day scheming to get their son or nephew into the Defense Services Academy or other new army schools, the only higher education facilities that have remained open over the last decade.¹³

Of course one can argue the merits of the justifications for draconian rule or even whether the economic successes perceived by some scholars are based on reality or benefit only the military elite or the well-connected of Burmese society. But even in a journalistic work to leave the reader unfamiliar with academic scholarship and provide only a portrait of prolonged widespread suffering without a balanced

¹³ Mary P. Callahan, "Cracks in the Edifice? Changes in Military-Society Relations in Burma since 1988," in Morten B. Peterson et al, eds., *Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State?* (Adelaide: Crawford House, 2002), pp. 31-32.

explanatory palette contributes, in this reviewer's opinion, to support for a misdirected strategy adopted by the United States and to a lesser degree the EU in an attempt to persuade the Burmese government to alter its behavior.¹⁴

Lastly, another failing of both *Secret Histories* and *The Trouser People* is the basically ineffectual nature of searching for personal recollections and physical evidence of personages who lived in Burma more than a century ago (Scott) and over eighty years in the past (Orwell). This is especially true for a country whose infrastructure is constantly damaged by the climate and has been subject to a horrific world war and widespread insurgencies. It is no surprise that Ms Larkin finds no livable structure in Myanmar which Orwell occupied in any of the six locations she visited except for the substantially altered Police Training School in Mandalay (where she was denied entrance by the caretaker), a police station in Twante (where she was given a cursory tour), and, in Katha, Orwell's residence and the ruins of what may have been the prototype for the Lackerstein house in *Burmese Days*. As for people who knew Orwell while he served in Burma, outside of what she gleaned from the archives of the various libraries in England

¹⁴ There is an ever-growing body of scholarship that argues that economic sanctions, largely bi-lateral, are counterproductive, e.g. Donald M. Seekins, "Burma and U.S. sanctions: Punishing an Authoritative Regime", *Asian Survey* 2005, 45(3):437-252; Ian Holliday, "Rethinking The United States's Myanmar Policy", *Asian Survey*, 2005, 45(4):603-621; and the collection of articles by six authorities, edited by John Badgley, *Reconciling Burma/Myanmar; Essays on U.S. Relations with Burma*, *NBR Analysis*, 2004, 15 (1).

or other sources in that country, unsurprisingly, the best she could locate in Myanmar was a man in Mawlamyine whose father knew Orwell and who knew Orwell's father (p. 165-166): very little could be adduced there. The author's theory that Orwell might have had Burmese ancestors on his maternal grandfather's side or a Burmese mistress proceeds nowhere (p. 165-167). All of this futility is perhaps best summed up by Ms Larkin when she writes:

It would be wonderful, I thought, but at this distance in time it would be impossible to know what, if any, life-changing event could have happened to Orwell in Burma.¹⁵

This leaves one with the impression that the search in Myanmar for George Orwell may have been a pretext for Ms. Larkin to pen a reportorial and unbalanced account of present-day Burmese totalitarianism.

—Paul Sarno

News from the Myanmar Literature Project

Han-Bernd Zoellner sends the following update on the ongoing Myanmar Literature Project, an excellent and growing resource. The web page for the project contains an overview of the project (in German) and a list of their recent publications (which are in English). See their web site [www.iseap.de/content/view/89/The Myanmar Literature Project](http://www.iseap.de/content/view/89/The_Myanmar_Literature_Project), which aims to document the books published by the Nagani Book Club, has produced some new working papers. Like their predecessors, they have been put on the net by the Southeast Asian Department

¹⁵ Callahan, "Cracks...", 167.

of Passau University (www.iseap.de/contents/view/89/). Following are some details. –The Editor

WP 6 contains material of Nu, s “Gandalarit,” a travelogue of a Burmese delegation to China at the end of 1939. Besides two reviews of the book and some translated excerpts, there are reproductions of photos of the delegation’s meeting with Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai Chek and of the young Mao Tse Tung, whom Nu wanted but was unable to contact.

WP 7 deals with a book written by Mogyo’s on the Philippine national hero José Rizal. (The title pages will be corrected later; the presentweb administrator has lost access to the Burmese font.) The book is an adaptation of Russell & Rodriguez’s biography. The paper includes a comparison of the English model and the Burmese version.

WP 8 focuses on the issue of “World War and Burma” and provides information on two booklets on this theme, one written by Aung San, Ba Maw and Ba Khine, the other by Ba Hein. There are two translations of the first brochure’s contributions and two essays on Aung San’s text.

Forthcoming are:

A complete translation of Soe’s Socialis wada (Socialism) together with Than Tun’s foreword. and four appendices, complemented by the memories of one of Soe’s students, Chit Hlaing, who was the author of the philosophy of the BSPP.

A biography of Lenin together with a history of the Russian Revolution translated by Nu.

Some more material on the issue of student strikes in Burma and Myanmar from 1920 until today. This complements WP 4, Their

Pe’s documentary novels on the strike of 1936.

Comments on the contents of the papers are very much appreciated as well as people who would like to cooperate on the project.

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A Chinese Translation of the Glass Palace Chronicle

After its partial translation into English and Japanese, a complete Chinese translation of the Burmese *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Hmannàn Yazawin) has now been published by the Commercial Press in Beijing, China. Like its Burmese original, the Chinese translation consists of three volumes (1157 pages). The translators are Burmese language professors at Peking (Beijing) University (Li Mou, Yao Bingyan, Cai Zhusheng, Wang Danian, Ji Lianfang, Zhao Jing, Chen Yan, and Ren Zhugen) plus a Peking University graduate (Han Xuewen). The translation project, from its conception to completion, has lasted over forty years. Inquiries about purchasing copies or other matters can be sent to Prof. Li Mou at limou@pku.edu.cn.

Call for Papers: 8th International Burma Studies Conference

The Board of Trustees of the Burma Studies Foundation, the Burma Studies Group and

the Center for Burma Studies cordially invite you to participate in the 8th International Burma Studies Conference, at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois from October 3-5, 2008.

We invite papers on all aspects of Burma Studies, including, anthropology, art history, environment, health, history, literature, linguistics, music, political science, popular culture, religions, and area studies. Panels and papers would be devoted primarily to new research, including recent events in Burma.

Interested participants are asked to organize and submit panel proposals with 250-word abstracts by April 15, 2008. Please provide your name and affiliation, your address, a title for your paper, list of equipment that you need for your presentation, time required for presentation of your paper (15-20 minutes) and an email address. Send this information via email to: bsc2008@niu.edu; or via regular mail to:

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