



## Redefining “Thainess”: Embracing Diversity, Preserving Unity

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### **Abstract**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is an age of rapid change. Language loss, like the loss of biodiversity, is accelerating at an alarming rate. Sixty to ninety percent of the world's languages are in danger of disappearing (Krauss 1992). This leads directly to a significant loss of human knowledge. Globalization and nationalism have contributed to the forced assimilation of diverse linguistic and cultural resources into dominant cultures. International organizations have responded by calling for the protection and preservation of language and cultural diversity through consecutive campaigns to raise awareness of this global issue.

This paper examines the consequences of the successful promotion of the concept of “Thainess” as used for the purpose of nation-building. However, despite its obvious national benefit in unifying the country for administrative purposes, it has also had a serious detrimental effect, in particular, contributing to the loss of language diversity as now evidenced by the 15 most endangered languages of Thailand (Suwilai 2007). In large language groups in border regions, such as the Patani Malay in Southern Thailand, language identity issues and cultural conflict underlie the violence and political unrest. There are concerted efforts by grassroots communities to reverse the situation, with the technical support of academics, to revitalize and maintain their language and culture in various ways, including education. One especially important method is through the teaching of the ethnic language as a main subject and the provision of mother tongue-based bilingual education, in a number of languages, including Patani Malay.



As for society at large, a multilingual / multicultural society should be promoted to accommodate this undervalued cultural diversity. The notion of “Thainess” needs to be broadened to offer ethnolinguistic groups their own space within Thai political society on an equal basis so that they may be empowered to live a dignified life with security, justice and opportunity. Central to this is access to quality education and employment, to reinvigorate their culture and linguistic identity. A national language policy that supports the use of ethnic languages in public life, education and local mass media is a must to meet the demands and needs of the various marginalized minority groups in Thailand. Such a policy will open up opportunities to positively exploit the variety of accumulated wealth and wisdom embodied within such unique cultures and linguistic histories, and will provide sustainable public benefits in terms of both economic and security gains.

**Key words:** language endangerment, national language policy

### **Topics for discussion**

- I. The Reality of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Thailand
- II. Language Endangerment Issue
- III. Language Revival Efforts from Grassroots Communities and Indigenous Rights Movements (focusing on education)
- IV. International Responses
- V. Redefining “Thainess”
- VI. Reconsideration of National Language Policy
- VII. Conclusion

### **I. The reality of linguistic and cultural diversity in Thailand**

Geographically, Thailand is situated at the center of Mainland SEA which is one of the most complex areas of languages and ethnicities in the world (with around 1,000 languages).

The linguistic diversity of Thailand is evident by the fact that with a population of 60 million, speaking more than 70 living languages, belonging to five language families: Tai (24 languages), Austroasiatic (23 languages), Austronesian (3 languages), Sino-Tibetan (18 languages) and Hmong-Mien (2 languages). Thai is the official / national language. Details can be found at Suwilai Premsrirat (2009).

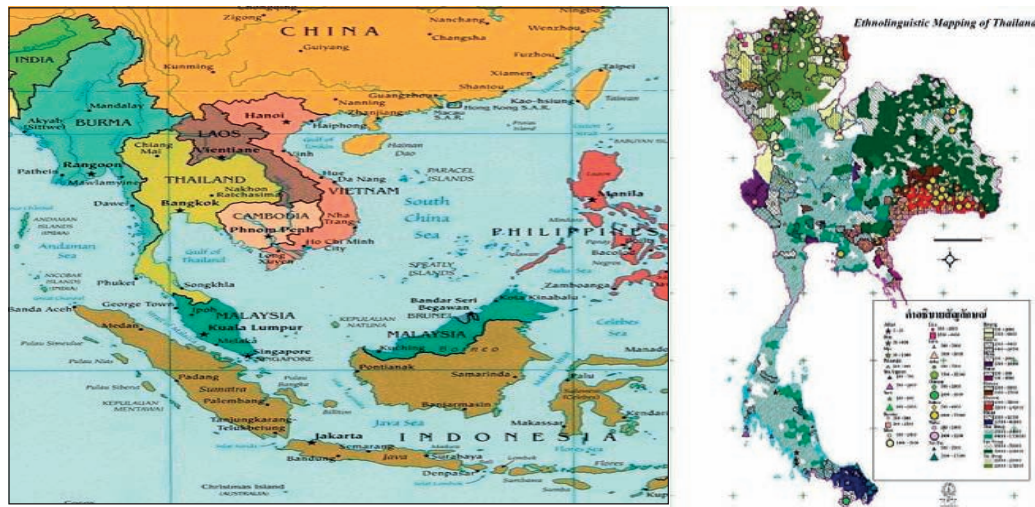


Figure 1: Map of language diversity in Thailand at the heart of SEA.

The languages and the cultures they represent provide this region with a rich and rewarding diversity of ideas, philosophies and cultures. To some people, cultural and linguistic diversity can be seen as a resource, to some it is a problem, and to some it represents a struggle for basic rights. Each perspective will lead to a way of addressing the diversity situation: by either promoting and supporting it; by eliminating it as much as possible; or by trying to protect it as a right of the indigenous people.

## II. Language endangerment issue

World languages are now in crisis. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is an age of rapid change. Language loss, like the loss of biodiversity, is accelerating at an alarming rate. According to the estimation of linguists such as Krauss (1992), 90% of world languages are facing extinction by the end of this century (or shortly thereafter) if nothing is done. The 10% that seem to be “safe” are official/national languages or languages with political support. And at the moment, 50% are not being learned by children. Languages in Thailand are facing the same fate. Ethnic minority languages, big and small, are not safe.

Globalization and nationalism are the main causes of the change in the language ecology that lead to language shift and language loss. As for globalization, the global economy and socio-politics and global culture influence the lives of most people. Global communication, especially the powerful mass media, can

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reach into homes of people even in remote areas. Such media uses global languages such as English or a national language. Nationalism too plays a role whereby national language and education policy determine or sculpture attitudes and values. For example, it heavily influences the speaker's negative attitude about their ethnic language. The younger generation does not see the value of their ethnic language and increasingly choose to use the language of wider communication.

### The language situation in Thailand in the present time.

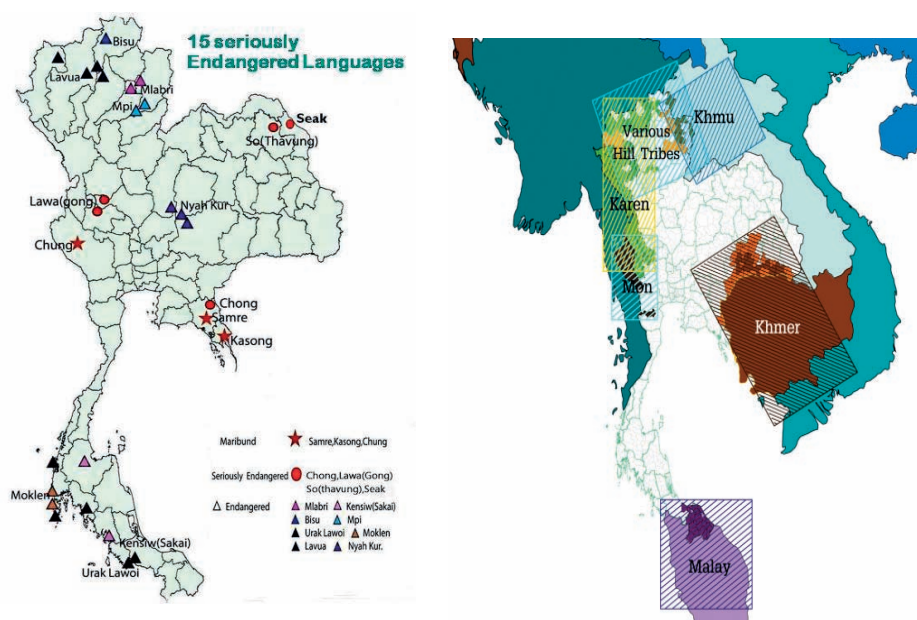


Figure 2: Languages in crisis

Ethnic minority languages in Thailand are declining. The younger generation is becoming monolingual in Thai which is the official/national language. At least 15 languages are seriously endangered. They are small, enclave languages that are surrounded by bigger languages. They are Chong, Kasong, Samre, Chung (Sa-oc), So (Thavung), Nyah Kur, Mlabri, Maniq (Sakai), Lavua, Mpi, Bisu, Gong, Moken, Urak Lawoc and Saek. All major non-dominant languages in Thailand are potentially endangered and show signs of contraction, especially in vocabulary and grammar such as Northern Khmer, Patani Malay, Mon, Lao Isan, Kammueng etc. Oral traditions such as folktales, poetry, songs etc., are severely endangered and are disappearing even faster than the spoken language itself.



Large language groups in border regions are not only facing the problem of language decline among the younger generation, but most also cannot access government services such as education or health. In general, ethnic minority peoples are considered, by outsiders, as slow and not likely to succeed in the modern development process. In some areas such as in Thailand's Deep South where the majority of the population is Muslim Melayu-Thai speakers there is resistance to many government services. The language identity issue and cultural conflict are amongst the underlying factors that contribute to the violence and political unrest.

According to the eight stages of Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scales (GIDs), by which the degree of language endangerment can be identified, all languages in Thailand (large and small) with the exception of the official language (Standard Thai) are classified as being on the weak side for reversing language shift. Only Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Lavua, and Mon can be put in stage 4 (strong side) if their mother tongue-based bilingual education which is now being conducted as action research in formal school system will be accepted.

<b>Weak Side</b>	<b>Stage 8</b>	So few fluent speakers that community needs to re-establish language norms; often requires outside experts (e.g., linguists). [ <i>Kasong, Sumre and Chung (Sa-oc)</i> ]
	<b>Stage 7</b>	Older generation uses language enthusiastically but children are not learning it. [ <i>Chong, Lawa(Gong), So(Thavung)</i> ]
	<b>Stage 6</b>	Language and identity socialization of children takes place in home and community. [ <i>Maniq (Sakai), Kensiw, Lua (Lavua), Urak Lawoi, Moklen, Mlabri, Mpi and Bisu</i> ]
	<b>Stage 5</b>	Language socialization involves extensive literacy, usually including non-formal L1 schooling or teaching L1 as a subject "Local Studies" in school. [ <i>Chong, So(Thavung), Nyah Kur,</i> ]
<b>Strong Side</b>	<b>Stage 4</b>	L1 used in children's formal education in conjunction with national or official language. [ <i>Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Lavua, and Mon</i> ]
	<b>Stage 3</b>	L1 used in workplaces of larger society, beyond normal L1 boundaries.
	<b>Stage 2</b>	Lower governmental services and local mass media are open to L1.
	<b>Stage 1</b>	L1 used at upper governmental level.

Figure 3: 8 stages of language endangerment (levels of language vitality) according to Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDs)

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### What is being done to slow down the death of languages?

1) Academics and language speakers are being encouraged to document as much as possible **the language, culture and oral traditions** before they are lost forever.

2) The language speakers / ethnolinguistic communities are being encouraged to conduct language revitalization programs with technical support of academics (linguists, anthropologists, education experts etc.) and with initial financial support from the TRF and other funding agencies.

3) The national language policy is being reconsidered to facilitate and support the use of ethnic minority languages along with the national language (Thai) and international languages.



Figure 3: Language and oral traditions documentation by linguists

### III. Language Revival Efforts from Grassroots Communities and Indigenous Rights Movements (focusing on education)



A Mon lady uses a vivid metaphor to describe the Mon language endangerment situation comparing it to a fruit which ***“is breaking off from the stem”*** and the language revitalization activity as ***“the last breath of the speakers”***.





Language Revitalization is an attempt to provide a new domain of language use in order to increase the use of the language and the number of users. According to Crystal's (2000) six postulates to guide attempts of revitalization, an endangered language will progress if its speakers; 1) increase their prestige within the dominant community; 2) increase their wealth relative to the dominant community; 3) increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community; 4) have a strong presence in the educational system; 5) can write their language; and 6) can make use of electronic technology. Since many ethnic minority languages (large and small in Thailand) have been classified as being potentially endangered at various stages, a group of linguists at Mahidol University has pioneered a cooperative program to preserve these languages. Endangered language speakers and communities will participate in language documentation and description as well as in the language revitalization and maintenance program. The focus is to put community members at the heart of revitalization efforts through involvement in almost all steps of the revitalization process, such as orthography development, creation of local vernacular literature, collection of local knowledge, and instruction of the language to the next generation of speakers. This Mahidol revitalization model has been implemented with the cooperation of 22 language groups and the technical and psychological support of the Mahidol research team. The community – based language revitalization and maintenance model that has emerged from these efforts incorporates basic principles of reversing language shift (Fishman 1991), yet is sensitive to the distinct needs of each individual community.

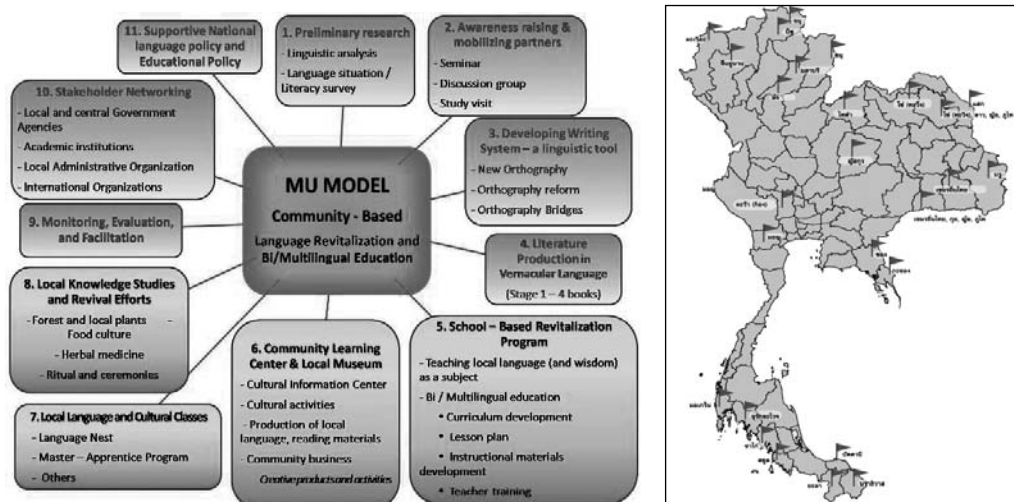


Figure 4: Mahidol Language Revitalization Model, Figure 5: On-going Language Revital Efforts in 22 language groups

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The model is comprises of 11 component activities which are adapted to utilize the best fit for the unique contextual needs of individual communities. The first step in the model is 1) preliminary research, which consists of assessing the morbidity of a language in an area, surveying the literacy of the people, and performing a linguistic analysis. 2) Once the linguistic situation is understood, awareness raising activities such as seminars, discussion groups, and study visits are arranged to mobilize partners in the effort. 3) After partnerships have been established, a writing system is developed for the language. 4) With a writing system that has been deemed acceptable by the community, then literature production commences; local authors create stories for big books, small books of different stages, and dictionaries that the language speakers compile themselves. 5) The next step is to introduce the language into the formal school system. For small, seriously endangered languages such as Chong, Nyahkur and So (Thavung), the language is taught as a subject in local schools. This involves developing a curriculum and instructional materials, lesson planning, and teacher training. For the bigger language groups or languages that the children still speak, such as Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Lavua etc., a mother tongue-based bilingual education is conducted in order to address the language identity crisis or cultural conflict and to raise students' level of achievement in school. This form of language revitalization starts when the child first starts school. 6) A way to strengthen the presence of the language is through the establishment of a community learning center and local museum for the community at large. It serves as an information center for the public where cultural information can be provided, cultural activities and language classes can take place, production of new literature can occur, and community business can be conducted. 7) A Language Nest for small Bisu children prior to kindergarten and Master-Apprentice for Kasong at the last stage before extinction have been conducted. 8) Of fundamental importance is using the language to document local knowledge of forest plants for use in herbal medicine, rituals and ceremonies, and for food. 9) All of these activities undergo continuous monitoring and evaluation, with facilitation as necessary. 10) Networking 11) The eventual goal is to influence the national language and education policies so as to guarantee that ethnic minority languages be protected and promoted alongside with the national and international languages. Ultimately, it aims to ensure full government support for children's rights "to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language." (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14 Section 3)





Figure 4: Oral traditions are documented by the language speakers

For unwritten languages, a writing system will be developed using a practical Thai-based writing system. The language speakers and linguists will work together to develop a writing system that is accepted and standardized. For those with traditional writing systems, an orthography bridge may be needed such as Mon (Mae Klong), where a practical Thai-based orthography is used as a tool for studying the Mon script and Mon traditional writing system. Once the language speakers have practiced the writing system and have helped to develop it, they can write whatever they have in mind. They can write stories (stage 1 – 4 books), songs, poetry, personal experiences, and folklore. To be empowered to do these, the language speakers are so happy and so proud of their work.

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A dictionary can be compiled and literature in local languages can be produced. The writing tools can also be used for recording oral literature from the elderly such as stories and folktales, poetry and local knowledge about herbal medicine, etc. For those ready to offer an ethnic language class in school teaching-learning, materials will be produced in the local language. Those mentioned are attempts from the language speakers at the grassroots community and academics (mainly linguists).

### **School-Based Language Revitalization**

School-based language revitalization is highly prestigious and a dream of the language speakers. Of the language groups that still have enthusiastic speakers, they would prefer to have their language taught in school as part of a language revitalization program. There are two types of programs.

- Teaching Mother Tongue (MT) as a Subject (Chong, Nyah Kur, Northern Khmer, Mon (Ratchaburi))
- Teaching Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTB BE) (Patani Malay-Thai, Northern Khmer-Thai, Mon-Thai, Lavua-Thai, Hmong-Thai)

Chong and Patani Malay have been selected as case studies to present two kinds of school-based language revitalization programs that involve strong participation of the language speakers and community.

#### **1. Chong Language Revitalization Project (CLRP)**

Chong is an indigenous language, spoken in Chantaburi Province, Thailand. At the moment there are about 2,000-4,000 speakers. It belongs to the Austroasiatic language family (Pearic branch) and is very famous for its four registers. There has been a rapid decrease in the number of speakers over the last 30 years. Chong people under 30 years do not speak Chong. Thai is their first language. Only the older people use Chong in many situations.

The CLRP began with minor cooperation between Chong elders and Mahidol linguists with whom they had formed good relationships following earlier linguistic field work in the Chong area, where the Chong people were invited to join the Field Methods in Linguistic classes. The Chong people are aware that their language is declining. They also realize that their language can be written down and can be taught to other people as well as to their younger generation. They then joined hands with their Mahidol friends for language revitalization.



The pilot project began with community motivation and commitment. They then got financial support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) to conduct community-based research to solve the problem of language shift and to work on a language revitalization program. Apart from that they received technical support (as well as moral or psychological support) from an academic institution, (Mahidol University and network-linguists and education experts).

Education is used as a tool for language revitalization. Since most ethnic minorities, like the Chong would like to have their language taught to their children at school, language documentation and language development are needed so that ethnic minority languages can be used in education as a tool for language revitalization. As part of the school-based-language revitalization, a writing system for Chong was developed, and reading materials were produced. The Chong language is now taught as the subject “Local Studies” to students in three primary schools in the area. The CLRP includes orthography development, literature production, curriculum development, teaching Chong as a subject in school, and a Chong Community Learning Center for the community at large. Other ethnolinguistic groups with the same problem such as the Nyah Kur and the So (Thavung) use the Chong project as a model and adapt it for their own purposes.

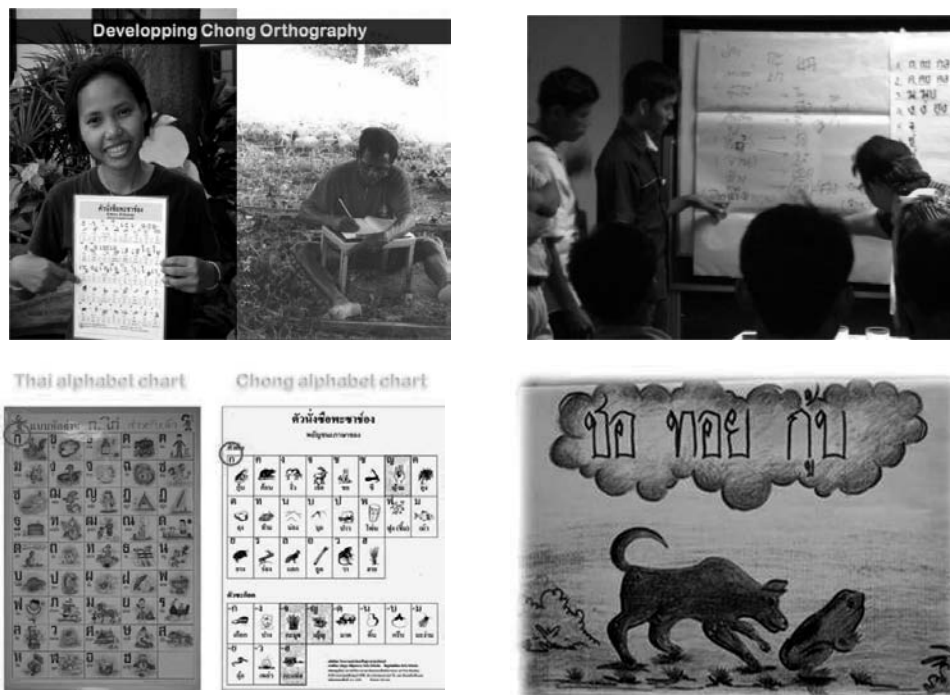


Figure 5: Developing Chong orthography and producing literature in Chong language

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Figure 6: Chong reading materials

## 2. Patani Malay-Thai Mother Tongue – Based Bilingual Education Project in Southern Thailand

The Patani Malay (PM) language is spoken by more than 1 million Muslim-Thai people in Southern Thailand living along the Thai-Malaysian border. In this area, language identity is an issue. It is believed to be one of the main causes underlying the political unrest and violence. The PM language is not officially accepted or used in education. It is also declining as evidenced in urban areas of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, where a mixed language or creole is being developed, and in Satun, where language death is obvious. Another big problem which is related is chronic under-achievement in schools. Children attend schools where Thai, the official/national language (but a language which is not their mother tongue), is the only Medium of Instruction and the content is not relevant to their local context. Because of this, the Patani Malay children scored the lowest in the national examinations given by the Ministry of Education. That means 35% - 40% of the grade 3 students are still illiterate.





A Patani Malay-Thai mother tongue-based bilingual education has been conducted as an action participatory research project in 4 schools in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. To address the problems of these learners, Mahidol University started a Mother Tongue-Based Education Bilingual Project in a selected Patani Malay community in Southern Thailand, after conducting preliminary research such as the language situation survey. The goals are to facilitate Patani Malay speaking children to speak, read and write well in both Patani Malay and Thai, to retain their Malay identity at the local level and Thai identity at the national level, and to be able to live with dignity in the wider Thai society to foster true and lasting national reconciliation. The project was designed to develop the cognitive skills of the learners as well as their ability to use Thai as a language of learning in the later years of their primary education. The project adheres to the following principles of curriculum design: 1) Academic development based on Ministry of Education standards coupled with the community's values and goals 2) Language development in a step-by-step process, starting with their mother tongue (Patani Malay) and gradually bridging to the official language (Thai), developing the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in both languages simultaneously and 3) socio-cultural development that helps the students preserve their local cultural identity as well as develop a national Thai identity.

## Language Learning and Literacy Process

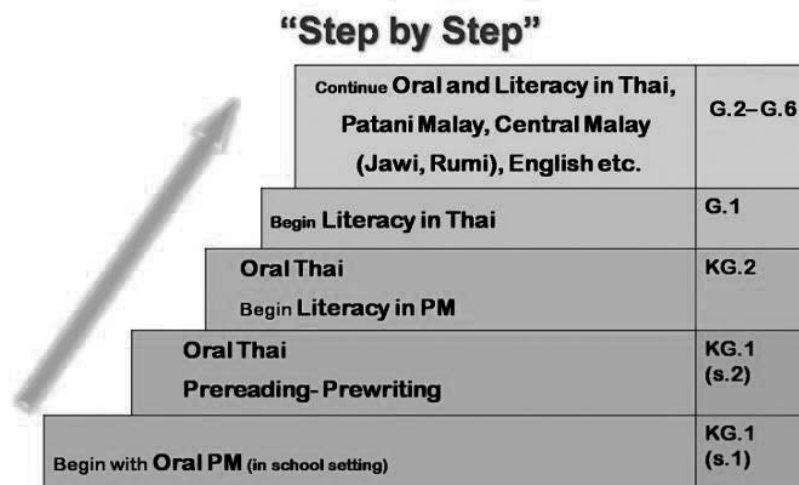


Figure 7: Language learning and literacy process

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Figure 8: Listening to the stories from the community; Figure 9: Telling picture stories



Figure 10: Reading big books;

Figure 11: Learning in 4 skills listening (thinking), speaking, reading and writing

The Patani Malay-Thai bilingual project is being piloted in 4 primary schools in 4 southernmost provinces of Thailand where kindergarten 1 and 2 are taught first in Patani Malay, while the Thai language is introduced gradually. This approach will continue through primary grade 6. The Southern Border Province Administrative Center plans to expand the project into 27 schools in the academic year 2012.

Comparing the test scores of learners (Grade 1 student in mathematics, sciences, social sciences, Thai, Patani Malay) of the Patani Malay pilot bilingual classes with the scores of learners belonging to control groups, it was found that the students in the pilot classes scored higher (avg. 72.14%) than those belonging to the comparison groups (41.91%). Furthermore, it was also observed that the learners in the pilot classes were happy, talkative, and creative. They loved going



to school and loved reading and writing. The teachers were also happy and the parents were proud of their children.

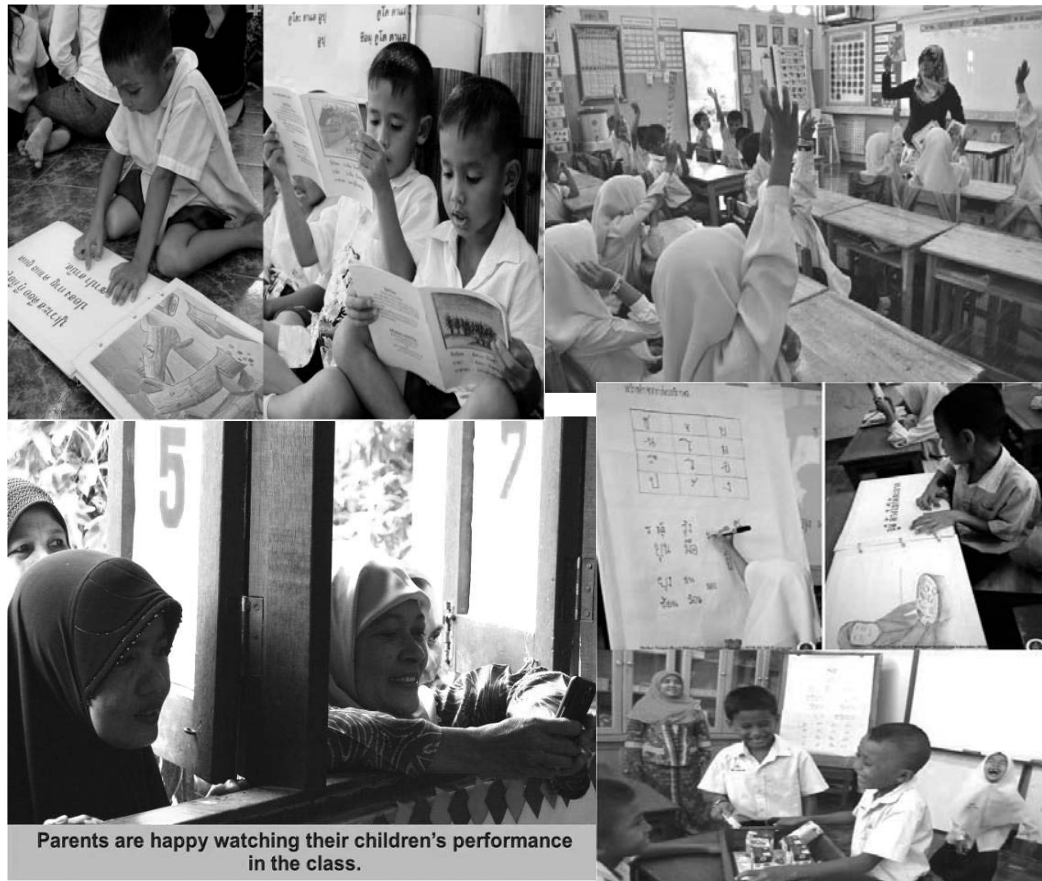


Figure 12: Happy time at school

Two major factors that contributed to these positive results were local community support and a cooperative relationship between the schools and the community members ensuring that the projects are planned and implemented effectively. Multiple stakeholders like local scholars and artists, religious leaders, school administrators, teachers, parents, academics, and other education officials were given intensive workshops by Mahidol University to enable them to develop curriculum and teaching-learning materials which are culturally appropriate to the existing knowledge of the learners and still meet the standards set by the Thai Ministry of Education. The curriculum emphasizes meaning and understanding as

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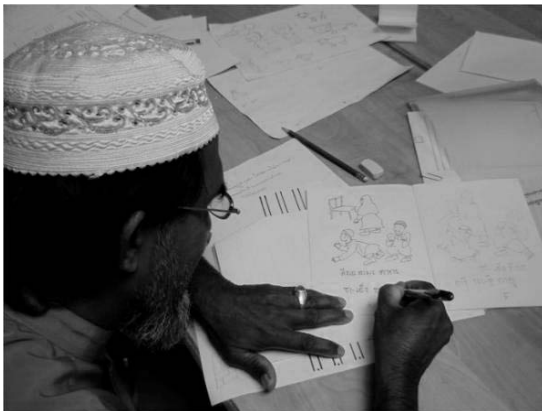
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well as accuracy and higher levels of thinking that will enable learners to know, to understand, to analyse, and to be creative in all types of learning activities.

Specifically, the community members and stakeholders were actively involved in the development of orthography, instructional materials, teaching methodology, curriculum design, and lesson plans; and most importantly in providing technical, financial and psychological support.



The approach pioneered among the Patani Malay is seen as a model for other ethnic minority groups both large and small in Thailand and also among SEAMEO country members.



#### IV. International Responses

Language Crisis is a global issue. Globalization and nationalism have contributed to the forced assimilation of diverse linguistic and cultural identities into the dominant culture.

The reaction from grassroots communities and academics has been witnessed. The UN has responded by calling for the protection and preservation of language and cultural diversity through consecutive campaigns to raise awareness of this global issue. Some of the examples are UNESCO's declaration designating the 21<sup>st</sup> of February as International Mother Language Day. The UN declaration for 2008 as the "International Year of Languages" accompanied by a list of languages related projects, conferences, publications and web forums dealing with such issues as language education, endangered languages, intercultural dialogue, indigenous knowledge, and language needs of handicapped persons. In the UN Secretary General's 2008 speech declaring the International Year of Languages, he called for immediate steps to protect and promote endangered languages and to ensure their preservation for the future generation. ***"The loss of these languages would not only weaken the world's culture diversity, but also our collective knowledge as a human race," (Bun Ki-moon – UN Secretary General)"***.

As for the basic education issue, there is a worldwide UN campaign in support of "Education for all (EFA)" in 2015 and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) provide ethnic minorities with the benefits derived from using the mother tongue – based education. In addition, *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 13I* states "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures" and *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14* requires that "States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language".

UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), UNICEF (United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund), and SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) also play active roles in promoting mother tongue-based education for ethnic minority children around the world to help them to succeed at school and be included with the larger society whilst still maintain their heritage language and culture.

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## V. Redefining “Thainess”: Embracing Diversity, Preserving Unity

### What can the society at large do to help the crisis situation?

In Thailand, globalization and nationalism have contributed to the forced assimilation of diverse linguistic and cultural identities into the dominant culture. The concept of “Thainess” was developed, defined and has been periodically adjusted to the changing society by notable Thai intellectuals since the 1950s. The main purpose has been to support and maintain the centralized political regime and the hierarchical social structure. This ideology has had a profound influence on the Thai way-of-thinking and ideology of Thai society and culture. The practice of “Thainess” in its original senses which is mainly based on three things, the nation (ชาติ), the religion (ศาสนา), and the monarchy (พระมหากษัตริย์), normally refers to the Thai language which is the official/national language used to unify all people into one *nation*, with Buddhism as the *religion* of the majority, under the universal patronage of the *Monarchy*. To be a Thai is to speak Thai, to act or behave as a Thai, to be “good” like a Thai should, and to be educated and maintain one’s socio-economic status according to Thai values. Traits such as a friendly smile by Thais, as “Mai pen rai” (not so serious) attitude and gentle, kind and generous demeanour are all considered, by Thais, as characteristic of “Thainess”. Other cultural markers for “Thainess”, which people are generally aware of are food, costume, dance, music and the ubiquitous “wai”, the Thai gesture for greeting and showing respect. Most people are happy and proud to identify themselves as Thai. These cultural markers together with a consciousness of belonging to the same group, exemplify Thai identity and are generally accepted.

One positive aspect of “Thainess” is that one is able to move up the social hierarchy and be accepted doing so in the process. However, perhaps more important to its original adherents is that it can unify people of different ethnicities, languages and cultures into a single nation. The use of the Thai language makes it possible for a common education curriculum to be promoted throughout the entire country. As a result, we can witness in Khmer-Thai areas, for example, Khmer elders who have joined the Revitalization Program, writing stories, songs, and poetry in Northern Khmer by using the Thai-based writing system. The identification of oneself as Thai, and the recognition and manifestation of Thai cultural markers, generally indicates an awareness and sense of possession of Thai identity. Notwithstanding this, a young Patani Malay speaking man from Pattani may be happy and proud to be a Thai at a nation level, but at the same time prefer



to maintain his Melayu identity at a local level. So, even though the promotion of the concept of “Thainess” has been very successful as far as its primary purpose of nation building is concerned, it has greatly contributed to the loss of language diversity among the 15 most endangered languages of Thailand and thereby focused attention on identity issues and cultural conflict among the large language groups in border regions such as the Patani Malay in Southern Thailand.

With strife come solutions and there are now concerted efforts by grassroots communities to reverse this situation. With the technical support of academics, progress is being made in revitalizing and maintaining their language and cultural identity in various ways, including through education. Important methods used to this end include 1) the teaching of the ethnic language as a main subject such as those doing it among the Chong, Nyah Kur, Thavung and smaller, seriously endangered languages facing the same problem and 2) the provision of mother tongue-based bilingual education to larger language groups, including Patani Malay, Mon, and Northern Khmer. To be able to cope with the complexity of a changing society, the notion of what is good for the nation and its citizens, and the required virtues for leadership, should be broadened. A multilingual/multicultural society should be envisaged and promoted to accommodate this undervalued cultural diversity. The notion of “Thainess” needs to be redefined to accommodate and maintain the language and cultural diversity of Thailand to offer ethnolinguistic groups their own space within Thai political society on an equal basis so that they may be empowered to live a dignified life with security, justice and opportunity. Central to this is access to quality education and employment, to reinvigorate their cultural and linguistic identity.

## VI. Reconsideration of National Language Policy

Despite an attempt to guarantee the freedom of expression and non-discrimination on the basis of fundamental human rights, and an implicit recognition of the intimate connection between language and forms of cultural expression, the current national language policy is radically out of step with the realities of multilingualism. A national language policy that promotes a multicultural society and supports the use of ethnic languages in public life, education and local mass media is a must in order to meet the demands and needs of the various marginalized minority groups in Thailand. Such a policy will open up opportunities to positively exploit the variety of accumulated wealth and wisdom embodied within such

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unique cultures and linguistic histories, and will provide sustainable public benefits in terms of both economic and security gains. It is hoped therefore, that, along with the promotion of Thai as the national/official language and languages such as English, and Chinese as favoured international languages, support for the use of ethnic languages belonging to the Tai and other language families in public life, education, and the local mass media, is sorely needed to meet the demands and needs of ethnic minority marginalized groups. Such support will lead to sustainable public benefits in terms of both economic and security gain. In this way Thailand will benefit from a language policy that strengthens the Thai language while preserving Thailand's ethnic minority / indigenous languages, encouraging Thais to learn strategic regional and international languages and ensuring information access for Thailand's blind and deaf communities. The recognition and respect that derives from truly interconnected and synergized communities will bring together Thais from all walks of life in true reconciliation, security and happiness.

## VII. Conclusion

A dynamic and changing society demands a contemporary approach to interpreting and managing complex socio-cultural issues. The notion of "Thainess", so effectively absorbed into the universal Thai psyche over more than fifty years, has undoubtedly been a cornerstone of nation building and creation of popular identity. It was also outstandingly successful in justifying and facilitating a centralized administration and validating traditional prejudices and social inequalities. Its significance today is diminished in its current, somewhat archaic, guise and a modern and more sophisticated understanding of what it means to be Thai is overdue – one that meets the hopes and expectations of all Thais and meets universal standards in terms of rights and opportunities. For some, this may require a substantive paradigm shift in perspective, but the potential rewards are limitless. Reconciliation and capitalization of local knowledge and wisdom are just a start. Ultimately, the pride and confidence that comes from true recognition and respect for one's heritage, culture and language is the optimal path to future unity, security and a wealth of human dignity which goes to the heart of true Thainess.



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Redefining "Thainess":

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