



## **Dissertation Abstracts**

### **Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c.1830-1930**

William Womack

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London  
PhD 2005

Dissertation Chair: Ian Brown

English-language histories of Burma have cited the nineteenth-century introduction of Karen literacy by Protestant missionaries as an important precursor to the rise of pan-Karen ethnic consciousness. They have argued that Karen literacy and the literate institutions that developed in its wake gave rise to the Karen nationalist movement in Burma. Burmese ethnographic and historical works, in contrast, tend to present the missionary script as one in a range of different Karen writing systems. In fact, at least eleven different systems of writing the Pwo and Sgaw Karen languages appeared in Burma during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of these were tied to the great literate traditions, being the product of Christian or Theravada Buddhist missionaries or state bureaucrats. Other scripts came from syncretistic Karen religious leaders on the fringes of Buddhist and Christian literate practice. In each case, the patrons of Karen writing made use of pre-existing ideas about the function of writing in Karen communities. The proliferation of Karen scripts stands in stark contrast to the presumed integrative force of literacy on social identity invoked by many historians to explain the phenomenon of nationalism. By analysing the various cultures of writing, domains of literate practice, and networks of people,

places, and texts that gave rise to different Karen scripts, this thesis reinterprets the relationship between Karen literacy and social identity. It concludes that Karen literacies have contributed to social cohesion along the lines of specific literate networks. These networks have not always coincided with the notions of pan-Karen identity that appear in the discursive frameworks of nationalism and ethnicity. On the contrary, Karen scripts have served as markers of difference—regional, linguistic, sectarian, and political—between disparate, and sometimes antagonistic, Karen groups.



**History and Ethnicity in Burma: Cultural Contexts of the Ethnic Category 'Kachin' in the Colonial and Post-Colonial State, 1824- 2004**

Mandy Sadan  
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London  
PhD 2005  
Dissertation Chair: Ian Brown

The thesis considers the impact of the colonial and post-colonial state in Burma on the formation and transformation of notions of ethnic category, in particular the category 'Kachin' during the period 1824-2004. The first part of the thesis considers not only the emergence of meanings for the term 'Kachin' as it evolved through the colonial archive, but also the interaction of textual and oral discourses between the administration, the various Christian missions, and the colonial military establishment. The thesis also considers the local impact of the globalisation of the term 'Kachin' through the work of Edmund Leach. These various discursive developments have in turn led to attempts to repossess the term 'Kachin' locally by the construction of a parallel local ethnonym, Wunpawng, which will also be discussed. The second and third parts of the thesis address the internal problematics of the development of ethnic category at a national level, and some of the contradictions and historical tensions between the terms 'Kachin', Wunpawng, and other constructs of identity. The transformation of social memory as it relates to understandings of history and multi-group relationships will also be considered. The key issues discussed in this regard relate to the visual, oral and material

culture domains of historical photography, oral ritual language, and the transformation of ritual performance in the festival called manau and festive 'traditional' textiles. The fourth and final part of the thesis considers the 'animist' or 'traditional' model of multi-group identity formation that underpins Kachin nationalist claims to political autonomy within the state of Burma, and which has been reconfigured as a political discourse through the construct Wunpawng. It discusses the saliency of notions of ethnic category within this traditional model by considering how ritual practices could be formulated as an integrative model of multi-group relations, and the boundaries to that model in complex ethnographic environments and in response to the integrative inclinations of the modernising Burmese state.



**The State of Vaccination:  
British Doctors, Indigenous Cooperation, and the Fight  
Against Smallpox in Colonial Burma**

Atsuko Naono  
University of Michigan  
PhD, 2005  
Dissertation Chair: Victor B. Lieberman

While many forms of British medical knowledge were used to complement preexisting indigenous medical knowledge, throughout the colonial-era dialogue, vaccination made very little head-way. This is remarkable as the operation was portrayed by colonial medical authorities as a quintessential example of the supremacy of Western medical science. This dissertation examines British vaccination efforts in colonial Burma from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s, in order to explain why vaccination failed to become popular among the indigenous population of Burma. This dissertation does not view the colonial vaccination project as a medical failure, for medical technical problems were gradually resolved over time. Rather, the vaccination project failed for the same reasons that brought down the colonial state, with which its fortunes were intimately related. The major problem was that the colonial medical establishment was confused as to why the Burmese did not voluntarily submit to

their 'superior' medicine. Rather than regard inoculation as a competing medical system, the British chose to interpret indigenous support for inoculation as an anti-colonial political statement. Seen in this light, to question the superiority of vaccination over inoculation was to question British superiority over the Burmese, and thus the legitimacy of the entire colonial project.

