

Identities of Pa-O Language in Harmony with Pa-O Living Culture

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Abstract

Eastern languages and cultures are not less important than the western ones which are big sources of data, knowledge and treasures of wisdom and learning. This article aims to present, admire and approve the identities of Pa-O language in harmony with Pa-O living culture. Language is used not just as a tool for the exchange of information, but as a symbolic system with the power to create and shape symbolic realities, such as values, perceptions, identities through discourse. Moreover, the relation of culture and language is the way they share human values, realities and behaviours of a social group. The author absolutely realises to present, admire and approve Pa-O language and culture, the world's heritage to be conserved which reverses the change of the globalisation and the world of materialism! More details of Pa-O are presented in introduction and passages below to show how identities of Pa-O language is related and linked in harmony with Pa-O living culture.

Keywords: Identities, Pa-O Language, Harmony, Living Culture, World's Heritage.

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Introduction

Den Si Lar Bwe, Pa-O word, can be best described the Pa-O National Day in February (Den Si is the name of the month in Pa-O, and Lar Bwe means the full moon).

According to the Pa O history, people annually commemorated the birth of Pa-O King Suriya Chanda that fell on the Full Moon Day of Tabaung by offering their first collection of crops at Shwe Sar Yan Pagoda in Thaton that was built by the King who was born 2600 years ago. The event later changed into National Day, which is an annual event in Shan, Mon and Kayin states and Bago and Yangon regions where the majority of Pa-O people are residing.

The event will be held four days from 27th February to 2nd March with sport competitions, Pa-O cultural contests and entertainment.

National Day is celebrated at the township and village level across Kayin State. Shan. Mon, Bamar and Kayin people also participate in the celebration of national day.

According to legend, the Pa-O migrated out of Central Asia and settled in the Thaton area east of Rangoon (Yangon) long before they developed a written language. They have no historical record of their origins. The legend of Weikja and Naga provides the Pa-O with an account of how they came to be.

Weikja is a wise and powerful man who can fly through the air. Naga is a serpent/ dragon who is able to change into human form. But she turns from a pretty young woman back into a serpent/ dragon when she falls asleep.

One day Naga came down from the *naga* kingdom to the human world as an attractive young woman. She met Weikja and fell in love. They lived together in a cave. Soon Naga became pregnant. One day when Weikja was out, Naga fell asleep. When Weikja returned he found a dragon sleeping where he had left his beautiful

wife. He left the cave and flew up into the sky, and he never returned. When her time came, Naga laid two eggs.

She waited for Weikja to return, and when he didn't, she gave her eggs to two religious hermits to take care of. She then returned to the *naga* kingdom. Eventually, the two eggs started to crack open. The religious hermits peeled the two eggs to reveal a human boy in one and a girl in the other. In the Pa-O language "Pa" means crack, and "O" means peel. The boy and girl became the ancestors of the Pa-O people. The boy was named Teikta Tiha and became the first Pa-O king of Thaton, which is also called Suvannabhumi, or Land of Gold.

Because the Pa-O are descendent of Weikja and Naga, today the Pa-O women that can afford, wear two ornaments in their colourful turbans representing the top of the head and eye of Naga.

Back to the history of Pa-O Nation, Pa-O or Pa-Oh is the seventh largest ethnic nationality in Burma with a population of approximately 2,000,000 or 2,600,000. The Pa-O settled in the Thaton region of present-day Myanmar around 1000 B.C. Historically, the Pa-O wore colourful clothing until King Anawratha defeated the Mon King, Makuta of Thaton. The Pa-O were enslaved and forced to wear indigo-dyed clothing to signify their status. Moreover, Pa-O is a Karen language spoken by a million Pa-O in Burma. Dialects are Southern Pa-O and Northern Pa-O. Northern Pa-O is the only Karen language that has final stop consonants.

The Pa-O are one of Burma's many ethnic minorities. They live primarily in southwestern Shan State, in the plateau and hill country surrounding Inle lake. They are the second large group in Shan State, after the Shan themselves, numbering probably over 500,000. A smaller number, possibly 100,000, live in the Thaton area of Mon State in Lower Burma. There are possibly another 100,000 living in the Sittang River valley north of Toungoo. There are also sizable communities of Pa-O in Rangoon and Mandalay. The total population may be around 750,000, certainly less than a

million. The last credible census was conducted by the British in 1931. However, it was based upon “the language ordinarily used at home” rather than ethnicity. Some Pa-O may have used Shan or Burmese rather than Pa-O as their day-to-day language. Christensen, 2006. projected the same rate of increase from the 1931 census for the Pa-O as for recent estimates for the entire country. There are thousand Pa-O in Thailand. Total estimated population in 2014 is 1,8000,000.

The Relationship between the Language and Culture

NTAI, G., 2017. firstly focused on the definition of these two notions and maintained Byram’s (2008) version for culture defined as “shared beliefs, values and behaviors of a social group”, where social group can be a family at a micro level and a nation at a macro level. For language, Kramsch’s (2002) version would be kept, since it refers to the relationship of language ‘creating’ socially shared realities or cultures – even if they are only temporary, according to whom “language is used not just as a tool for the exchange of information, but as a symbolic system with the power to create and shape symbolic realities, such as values, perceptions, identities through discourse”.

Besides, Guessabi, F., 2017. Language always carries meanings and references beyond itself: The meanings of a particular language represent the culture of a particular social group. To interact with a language means to do so with the culture which is its reference point. We could not understand a culture without having direct access to its language because of their intimate connection.

“Language is culture and culture is language”. Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process, ultimately shaping what it means to be human). In this context, A.L. Kroeber (1923) said, “culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other.”

Language communicates through culture and culture also communicates through language: Michael Silverstein proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another. That is communication is not only the use of symbols that “stand for” beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context.

Language is a product of the thought and behavior of a society. An individual language speaker’s effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his/her understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor, 1979), and it is possible to consider teaching culture through learners’ own languages, which can be used in a specific way to interpret the other culture (Ager, D., 1993).

Pa-O Culture:

The meaning of culture is something created by humans in order to ease people’s lives and to have understandings and peaceful minds physically and mentally. Thus, language, literature, clothing, religions, customs and traditions are developed by humans, and all of them are incorporated together in the meaning of culture.

If the culture fades away, a human race also can disappear. Every ethnic group or race has been maintaining, developing and seeking to promote its own culture in different ways. Culture is a form of building and shaping one particular group and it is also a way of life.

Mental culture includes cultural behaviors, attitudes and mindsets, religions and etc. Humans today devise, develop and value cultural heritage and they maintain it not to get lost. It has its own cultural characteristics, identity and mindsets. Every ethnic group tries to embellish its own cultural characteristics and its values. Pa-O culture also mixes with other cultures sometimes. As Thuwannabumi took the Buddha beliefs from Tha Htone, Pa-O culture is based on Buddhism and its beliefs. Pa-O culture characteristics such as mindsets, clothing, beliefs, religions, societal structures, food, other customs and traditions will be described in the following.

Pa-O Cultural Characteristics:

Generally, Pa-O people's physical characteristics are similar to each other. They have broad shoulder and nice shape. Their faces are square shape, and noses are big and a little bit flat. And, nostrils are flared a little. Their facial features are similar to Mongoloid race. The size of eyes is neither big nor small. They have obvious eyelids, and eyes' color is usually brown. As Pa-O people usually carry heavy loads on shoulders and on heads, their bodies are strong and sturdy. Men are generally five feet to six feet tall, and women are two or three inches shorter than men. Their skin color is between olive and coffee colored skin. They have strong and dark but also rough hair. They have thin eyebrows and sometimes birthmarks are found at the back or buttocks, and these are evident that Pa-O is descended from Mongoloid race.

Pa-O Mindsets:

Pa-O people's mindsets are known as veraciousness. They are honest and hard-working instinctually. Moreover, they are out-spoken and outgoing people. They treat other ethnic groups, other families or even the same Pa-O people very kindly and harmoniously. After the end of feudalism, Pa-O began to settle in hillsides as well as flat areas and started doing farming for their living. There is a Pa-O saying, "if the land is high, it sheds water, and if people's pride is high, others disregard your friendship". Pa-O people treat others equally and friendly regardless of wealth and different social status. Generally, Pa-O people speak very frankly without using eloquent words.

The social relations were quite similar to the Myanmar. The father was the most influential in the family unit. Family members paid respect to the elders in the family.

In Pa-O societies, social customs such as marriage, divorce and widowhood rites, and funeral rites, other social festivals and ceremonies, fortune telling, etiquette, charms, musical instruments and songs are existed in different Pa-O areas.

Pa-O Clothing:

Pa-O men wear baggy trousers and black and dark blue taite-pown (Burmese traditional coat) with white vest. Then, they wear colorful turbans from Thai and China and their traditional bag called “Taung Po”. They start to wear shoes from Burma and other countries. Moreover, Pa-O wear mostly black or dark blue color. The reason they wear dark color is that this color absorbs heat, it also can protect from cold weather and it is hardly to get stains as well. Thus, black is Pa-O ethnic color. As they wear the same colors together, it is seen as there is lack of competition over exposing individuals’ wealth.

Women clothing is significant from other ethnic groups. Since Pa-O ethnic group believed that they descended from a father called Zawgyi, a Burmese folk super naturalist as well as alchemist, and a mother dragon, the way Pa-O women dress themselves resembles to a female dragon. There are five different kinds of clothes including turbans. They are black or dark blue colored dress, long sleeve blouse, a longyi and a long-wide trouser with wrap-around skirt. Moreover, women with wealth wear one or two golden head-pins: one the sharp head-pin similar to a banana bud portrays the dragon’s head and the other round head-pin with the size of a beetle nut depicts dragon’s eye. Golden head-pins are polished with bronze.

Pa-O Rural Living Styles (Societal Development) Village Profile:

Normally, Pa-O people earn their living with farming. They choose a wild but fertile region to do farming when they start to settle in one area. Meanwhile, they also have to consider water sources for drinking, irrigation, transportation and etc. Thus, when they start to build a society in one place, they check whether the area is a good fertile land with a safe water source for drinking and farming and convenient transportation. Mostly, they build their villages and households nearby streams. Therefore, Pa-O people populate mostly in areas with those criteria/characteristics. Hence, ones can see Pa-O people with black clothes working

on farms on the left side of Ka Law, Taung Gyi, Loi Lin high way roads in southern Shan State and on the east and west of Aung Pan, Ka Law, Loi Kaw high way roads. Then, their housing styles are both traditional and modern styles. Traditional houses are made up of bamboo or wood with carve roof, and they are short without windows.

Pa-O Food:

Rice from fields, farm, and farmyard are Pa-O main food. Then, they also eat their seasonal food and fruits in their areas. Moreover, soya bean paste and chilly pound is a very delicious food for the Pa-O. Also, tea made from dry leaves is essential at every Pa-O house as people have it during their break from work and leisure time (chatting time).

Cooking is done by the wife and grown up daughters. Being very devout Buddhists they used to offer the first plate of rice immediately it was cooked as alms to the relic of Buddha image placed for worship on the shrine.

Religions:

Pa-O people maintain Buddhism since its arrival to Shan plateau from Thuwannabumi, now called Tha-Htone district. Most Pa-O people are Buddhists. Only a few Pa-O are Christians. In Pa-O areas, magnificent and grand monasteries are seen in every Pa-O village. They denote their savings through their efforts to build pagodas, temples, rest houses around religious compounds, and other religious buildings. Furthermore, one can see glistening and grand temples and pagodas in every village. Besides, Pa-O people are very religious and they also revere Buddhist monks by serving their domestic work, helping and dedicating religious ceremonies and activities. Next, they also celebrate Buddhist festivals such as Buddha day, Shin Pyu (Novice hood during Lenten period), Waning moon day of Thadinkyut pwe (lighting candles after Lenten period), water festival (Burmese New Year) and other religious occasions related to Buddhism. As Buddhism believes that doing merits and good deeds can help a person to reach Nirvana, they are very generous in offering and donating things and treating people.

Pa-O Traditional Names:

For men the prefix '*Khun*' carries the meaning of manly, auspicious, high class etc. For the ladies the prefix '*Nan*' is commonly used which signifies auspicious, gentle, cultured, modest etc. it is also a traditional practice for all males to enter into monkhood once as a boy (novitiate) and once (ordination) when he reached adulthood at eighteen (full-fledged monk). It is also a practice for some men to retain their monk's name such as '*Thawna*', '*Nyarna*', '*Neminda*' etc. another prefix was '*Htwet*' meaning disrobing from monkhood. For example '*Htwet law*', '*Htwet Maug*', '*Htwet Kham*' etc.

Pa-O Family:

The Pa-O family preferred boys to girls, because they could send the boy into a novice and ordained into a full-fledged monk and less responsibility compared with daughters. Sometimes the relatives adopted some of the children to ease their difficulties. As the extended family system was still a feature of Myanmar society more prevalent in the rural community, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and grandchildren lived together in harmony.

Pa-P Marriage:

Another interesting and striking tradition concerned the adolescent singles: bachelors and spinsters. Such occasions offer opportunities for the boy and girl to meet and pay courtship. It is called '*laimunam*'. The boy can then choose his life partner to make further steps towards engagement and finally marriage. In Pa-O society the bachelor lad had every right to pay courtship to any girl whom he is interested in whether from own village or outside. After many meets, when the boy is sure that he likes the girl and the girl accepts him the boy with his parent's consent has to give presents as preliminary proposal of intended marriage to the girl. If the girl accepts the presents, it amounts to tacit agreement to the proposal. It is also a pledge to honour and love each other.

There is not restriction for a Pa-O to marry outside their ethnic clan. Even if a bride or groom were a foreigner, the relatives do not ostracize them, but accept them into the family. In the present modern society the Pa-O normally make their own independent choice.

Pa-O Arts and Performance:

The famous Pa-O dancing is called Traditional Martial Arts Dance or *Ka-You-Na-Lai* in Pa-O. The Pa-Os perform it with the traditional long drums, short drums and different gongs. The dancing is one of the modern martial arts which is used for being a self-defense. It is also used for the physical exercise for being healthy. The Pa-Os usually demonstrate it in the special days such as on the Pa-O National Day and also in the Pa-O traditional ceremonies.

There is another kind of dancing called '*Tee-Ree-Ree-Roj*'. Most of Pa-O people are Buddhists, they perform this dancing in the ceremony of entering noviceshood. After harvesting their farms, the Pa-O celebrate the ceremony with the *Tee-Ree-Ree-Roj* song and dance.

Pa-O Music:

Khun Thar Doon (1940–1978) was one of the early recording stars of Pa-O music. He set up the first Pa-O modern band in the early 1970s. One of his famous songs is "Tee Ree Ree", a song about Pa-O solidarity. This song is still sung at traditional festivals today. He is on the cover of *Guitars of the Golden Triangle: Folk and Pop Music of Myanmar (Burma)*, Vol. 2. Some of the artists appearing on the compilation cover songs he wrote.

Pa-O Cultural Patterns:

There are twelve monthly festivals among the Pa-O ethnic nationals all year round. The majority of festivals are religious festivals. There are similarities in the nature, customs, tradition, culture of such festivals among all ethnic groups. For example *Thingyan* festival is held in the twelfth month of the Myanmar lunar

calendar (Tagu), which falls in April by the Christian calendar. The *Thingyan* revelry lasts for three days of water throwing, after which the New Year ushers in with charity, prayers and blessings. The Pa-O ethnic nationals celebrate the *Thingyan* festival and the New Year in same manner like the Myanmar. The meaning of Thingyan is defined in Myanmar language as “transfer, moving”

Conclusion

In conclusion, once a writer has ever been doubtful how a language can be related or harmonious with culture, then began to question where language and culture come from. If we just focus on learning a language only for communication, how we are able to understand the others’ ideas or why they do things that way. A writer has got a very good opportunity to learn and know about Pa-O which became an inspiration to survey and study seriously the facts of language and culture, searching for data from a native speaker, books, dissertations, joining the cultural activities, reading the legendary of Weikja and Naga, Pa-O ancestors, watching Pa-O performances, listening to folklore music and songs, “Tee Ree Ree” (about Pa-O solidarity) performed by Khun Thar Doon, the original one etc. to obtain information, absorb and reach the heart and soul of Pa-O people. Pa-O language is used as a symbolic system with the power to create values, perception, identities through discourse. Moreover, the relation of Pa-O culture and language is the way Pa-O people share human values, realities and behaviors of Pa-O social group. These are what a writer is proud to propagate Pa-O language and culture, the world’s heritage, to realise how beautiful Pa-O Nation is! That is because every step and drop of their concepts and ideas focus on colourful decoration! May a writer call this nation “Advanced Art and Soul” that is because Pa-O people have showed the humanities their incredible artistic minds!

A writer can never substitute this presentation with very simple or less important words but “Posh and Perspective Pa-O with Splendid Ideas!”

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