

## A Study of the Wa-LaWa Origin and Orthography

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### Abstract

The absence of Wa-LaWa terms in any written records makes it extremely difficult to provide an authentic account of the Wa people. During the period of our study, the Wa-LaWa did not form a homogeneous group with a single culture. Instead, they were divided into a large number of sub-tribes, each with varied customs and dialects. Hence, this paper attempts a comparative study of ethnic tribes to shed light on the early homeland of the Wa. Additionally, the Wa-LaWa people are a minority ethnic group living in Southeast Asia. They are considered the original inhabitants of mainland Southeast Asia and refer to themselves as Wa or LaWa. Most Wa people reside in Myanmar and China, with some LaWa villages found in Thailand as well. However, the majority of Wa communities are located in Myanmar. Geographically, the Wa people inhabit the region between 22½ and 23½ degrees north latitude and between 98½ and 94½ degrees east longitude. Finally, the Wa-LaWa people typically inhabit mountainous areas, with most of their villages situated on hilltops. As a result, transportation and communication are particularly challenging for the Wa-LaWa people in remote areas.

**Keywords:** Early Home, Wa-LaWa, Migration Route, Language Study.

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief summary of the main trends and developments regarding the migration routes and languages of the Wa-LaWa people, focusing particularly on the Mon-Khmer language group. The classification scheme is based on a general linguistic analysis of the estimated population areas, and relevant

figures are included. Only the most significant bibliographical information is provided in this study.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is primarily based on contemporary documents and primary books written by British administrators and scholars who documented their experiences with the Wa-LaWa people. Additionally, works by other contemporary scholars dealing with the history of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and China, were consulted. These contemporary writings serve as our main source material. Oral traditions, legends, and myths were also considered where available. The migration route map reflects the data obtained. Statistical methods were used for computation, and a generalization was made using both deductive and inductive approaches.

### **Results and Discussions**

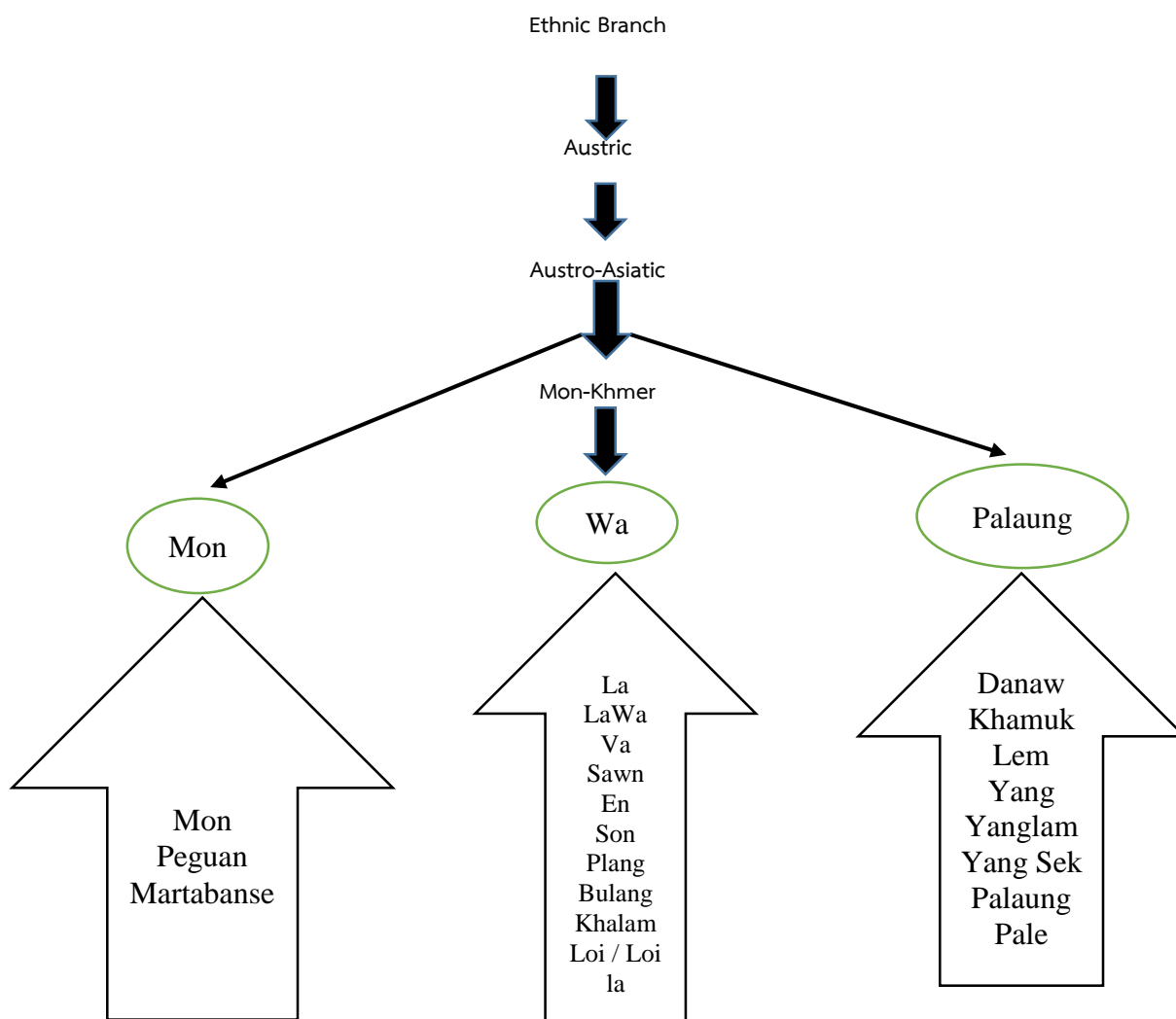
The Wa-LaWa people who live in Myanmar and its surrounding areas are mostly Myanmar nationals. Although they speak the same language, Wa, their speech differs in some aspects from the standard Myanmar language, which is the official and common language. Variations in pronunciation and vocabulary are observed in the dialect of Wa-LaWa compared to the standard Wa language, and these differences can be found in Myanmar. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this paper, hoping that it will contribute to the understanding of the LaWa language and enhance social relationships in Myanmar.

### **Early Home**

The Wa is one of the Mon-khmer ethnic groups. In order to delineate an ancient history of a LaWa a wider scope of study is necessary. From this point of view, a brief

survey of their early accounts needs to be examined. For this exercise, as one factor, the ethnology is the first to be investigated. Scholar classified the whole human race into three broad races. Out of the three migratory waves of racial groups that entered Myanmar from the north, namely the Mon-khmer, the Tibeto-Burmans and the Thai-Chinese. The Mon-khmer was the earliest group that reached Myanmar (Thomas, 1964, p. 149)

Mon-khmer is used to designate one of the hypothetical major racial stocks of mankind and is applied widely to all peoples of Asia and other parts of the world whose racial characteristics are found similar with those of the Mon-khmer stock. Hence, the LaWa belongs to the Mon-khmer race because they are said to have fulfilled all the morphological characteristic of the Mon-khmer as summarized by bowels (Schiller, 1985, p. 104). All this point is to the original habits of the Mon-khmer race. Ethnic evidence is also to be taken into accounts as another factor. Scholars have sub-divided Astro-Asiatic family into sub-groups and sub- sub groups are as follows:



**Figure 1-1:** In these various, it shows the divisions of the Wa-LaWa are groups as Mon-khmer family. From Moe Moe Oo, n.d., (p. 63)

In these various divisions the Wa are groups as Mon-khmer family. One can assume that it might have been existence in 600BC. The home of these people is not known but somewhere between Yunan and Myanmar is believed to be their earliest known home. Historian suggested the original home from which they descended differently. Enriquez historian thought that the original home might have located near the Yunan, south of the Nan Chao Shang, and probably entered Myanmar down the valley of the Shweli. When the Chinese speaking people from the north move to south

ward the Mon- khmer speaker left their place and move farther south, and southwest. Some scholar firmly asserted that the “earliest known home of the Mon-khmer speaking people was somewhere between China Yunan, Myanmar and Thailand” (Wa State History Committee, 2017, p. 34).

At the same time, scholars hold different views on the original habitat of the human race and most of them think that man made his first appearance in China: Burkitt said that the later Stone Age people (Neolithic Period) made their movements from China to Central Asia and thence to Europe. It is, therefore, speculated that China is not only the home of the human race but also the home of the tribal peoples who were scattering in the southern provinces.

According to the census report, 1911 showed that the Mon-khmer invasion was the first great historic eruption from central Asia into the Indo- Chinese peninsula. Its main line of advance was South down the Mekong valley into Cambodia and Siam whence by a literal westward movement, it reaches Myanmar and spread thinly over it. Subsequently, it was forced back upon itself by later Myanmar invasion, and Mon-khmer groups are found now in isolated pockets all down the South East frontiers of Myanmar (Aye Kyaw, 2004, p. 45)

When the LaWa entered and spread out in Myanmar had been written differently. The era about the Wa entering into Myanmar had been presented by various historians. The western historian Enriquez his imaginative suggestion of how to the LaWa arrived in Myanmar. According to his suggestion, the wave of Tibeto-Burman races moving down the Irrawaddy valley drove the scattered Mon-khmers south till they consolidated in force round Prome, and there began the age-long conflict which deluged the country in blood up to recent times.

The Tibeto-Burman tribes, as we have seen, consolidated at Pagan in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Pegu was a Mon capital from 573 to 781 A.D. but at the time of Anawratta’s famous raid in 1057, the Mon government was at Thaton. The most ancient settlement town was Thaton. Moreover, it is said that there were more of the Mon-khmer linguistic descendants’ farther west.

These include what is now the Mons in lower Myanmar so they all belonged to the Mon-khmer racial groups, that the LaWa race together with the Wa and the Mon racial group entered Myanmar from the Tibetan Plateau, move down to lower Myanmar to such places as the mouth of the river Irrawaddy. Sittaung and then Lwin and settled in towns and villages from which they again moved up country and spread mostly and Wa Autonomous State (Tin Yee, 2004, p. 65).

The western scholar thought that it might be the first of the Mon-khmer tribes to occupy our attention are the western most of them, the LaWa whose home is the Shan states proper and the state of Momeik. There are a certain number of Wa Nation in the Southern Shan States and to the east of the Thanlwin, but the tribes is most strongly represented in the Northern Shan States, and notably in the state of Se

gpong, Maing Ping which may be looked upon as the tribal headquarters, Hopang, Khun lung, TanYan and Lashoe were the areas in the Northern Shan State, and other areas in the South where the Wa inhabited (Ko San Lwin Group, 1962, p. 51). Moreover, it is learnt that some went as far as China to settle there. This was how the LaWa settled step by step in various regions. In those regions the Wa had to get along with the native, who were already there before the LaWa arrived, but sometimes problems did come out among them. Wa-LaWa were those people who had to get along especially with the Shan first and then with the Myanmar. Not only the Wa People have

conflict political with them, but also, they do peace agreement with Myanmar government since 1989, until present time they accept peaceful life style about 34 years.

Figure 2: Map of the WA-LaWa race area and place of abode of the sample of Wa Speakers.

#### Appearance of Wa in Myanmar Historical Perspective



When Wa-LaWa people were appeared is not known exactly, the mention of Wa village (LaWa Ywa) is often found in Bagan inscriptions. There is another inscription dated in the year c. 1198, the Wa who dwelling in mountain range are termed as LaWa. The term Wa has various meanings. The term Lwa or loila derived from the LaWa race. "LaWa" to "Lau" and thence to "Wa". Another expression showed that the "Blang" and Lwa exist, and thus the Wa could be presumed as descended from the racial stock (Ko San Lwin Group, 1962, p. 72)

In one of the historical records of the Wa-LaWa, the terminology was regarded as a Myanmar origin that existed in the Wa period. According to it, when arose the rebellions in the country, trousers- clad highlander crowded into the king's court and simply confronted the Tagaung monarch to warn of the state of the affairs. Their direct quotes were, your Majesty's kingdom is in Chaos (Wa bale in Myanmar phonetic version). The Tagaung king was said to be very pleased with these people that concern for the country's affairs, and especially the term they used for expressing it. The king realized that they were a reliable race and recognized them by the name "Wa" from which it was said the term "LaWa" derived (Mitani, 1978, p. 21)

Another version according to the li-natta lexical Treatise, it was the decree by king Alaungsithu for people who got burnt up to the thighs in forest fires while they were asleep in the woods. The expression he used was "LaWa" (burnt thighs in Myanma, and from thence derived the present term "Wa". The Wa-LaWa history had it that the prince of the son lord and the dragon princess of the sea lord were united in marriage and generations proliferated out of the wed lock were known in Wa as the "PaRauk" race, meaning residents of high mountains and slopes. From "LoiLa" the literary term "Loi" or "LoiLa" derived called by the Saim People until Present time.

Finally, as we know the Wa people by LaWa (LoiLa) in Myanmar and Thailand and in Chinese also the Wa-LaWa were known as "Wa, Va, Awa, Waju". As historical references varied, so were the dialects and intonations among the Wa-LaWa according to the locations of settlements.

### Language

In very ancient times, many different peoples have passed through Myanmar, Mainly from North to South. Their language, Austro-Asiatic, is related more or less distantly to other languages reaching from Madagascar to Easter Island and from Central India to New Zeland. They came to this region in different periods in various waves from different directions. Grierson deals with those tribes from the linguistic point of view. (Grierson)

The Austric-family has two main sub divisions and the first is called Austro-Nesian or languages of the Southern Islands. The second sub-family is called Austro-Asiatic or the languages of the Southern Mainland of Asia. The Austro Nesian or languages of the first group are spoken in the Malay Peninsula and in the southern islands as far as New Zeland.

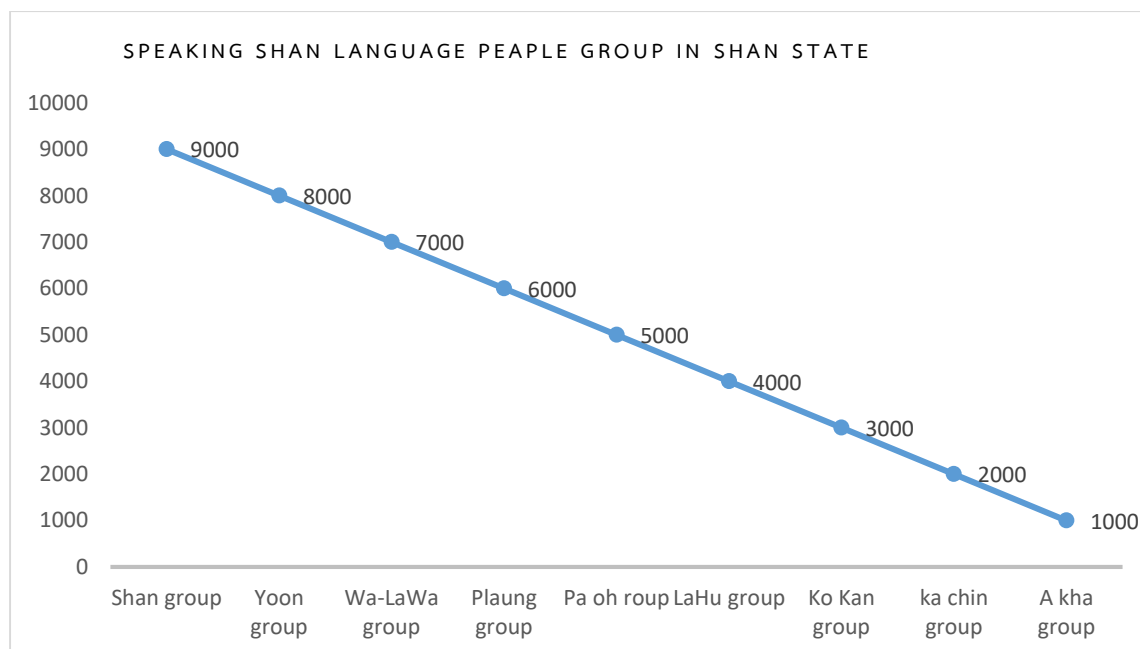
The Austro-Asiatic, languages of the second sub-division extend from India



to China Sea coast. More narrowly, they comprise the Mons of Burma and Thailand, Khmer of Cambodia, Khasi of Assam. (Choudhury) and they have connection with the old Munda languages of Central India. Professor G.H Luce considered that Austric-speaking peoples inhabited the whole of South East Asia during the first millennium B.C. He also remarked in one of his lectures that out of the Austria family, the Mons and Khmer have the two oldest civilizations (Diffloth, 1980, p. 11)

There are many jungle tribes in the Malay Peninsula, Indo-China and Central India who to this day use a series of numerals up to seven which are substantially identical with old Mon numerals. Linguistically, they are akin to the Khmers. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Wa or LaWa did not have a written language, and they studied the Shan language instead. The Wa language of which very little indeed is known would appear to be monosyllabic and is even more guttural and indistinct than lahu. They have no written language of their own, but have adopted the literature of the Shan (Interviewed with Ta ai Kyaw, 2 January 2023).

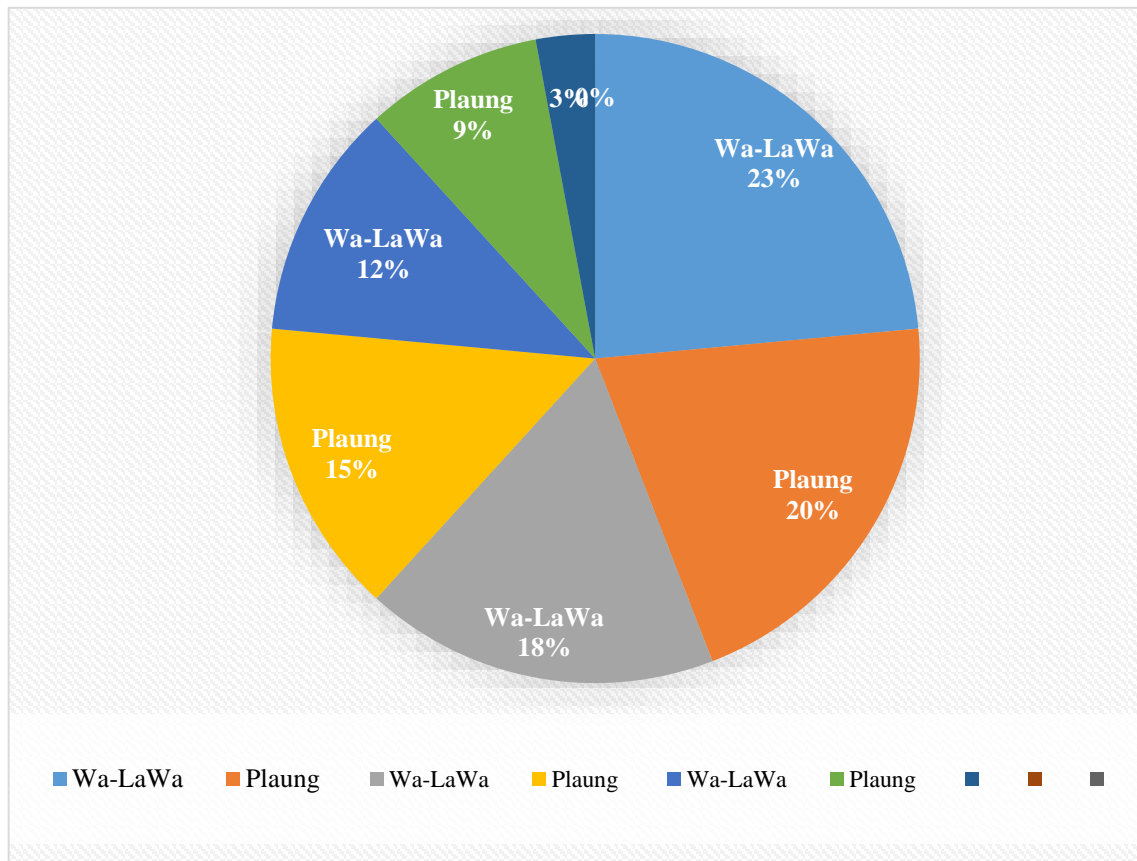
Myanmar as the language of the home, has made but little progress amongst the Shans of the Shan States. Conversely about 23 thousand persons who are not Shan by race have returned Shan as their language as shown in marginal statement. According to the 1921 census reports are as follows: (Grantham, 1923). I think that no one had seriously studied the language of the Wa. They had never given our government trouble and so it is possible to conduct all necessary business in Shan all the men knowing more or less of that language. The arrangement of the table itself is adapted rather to provincial conditions. According to the 1911 census reports show that the Palaung's nearest connections in the Shan States are as follows:



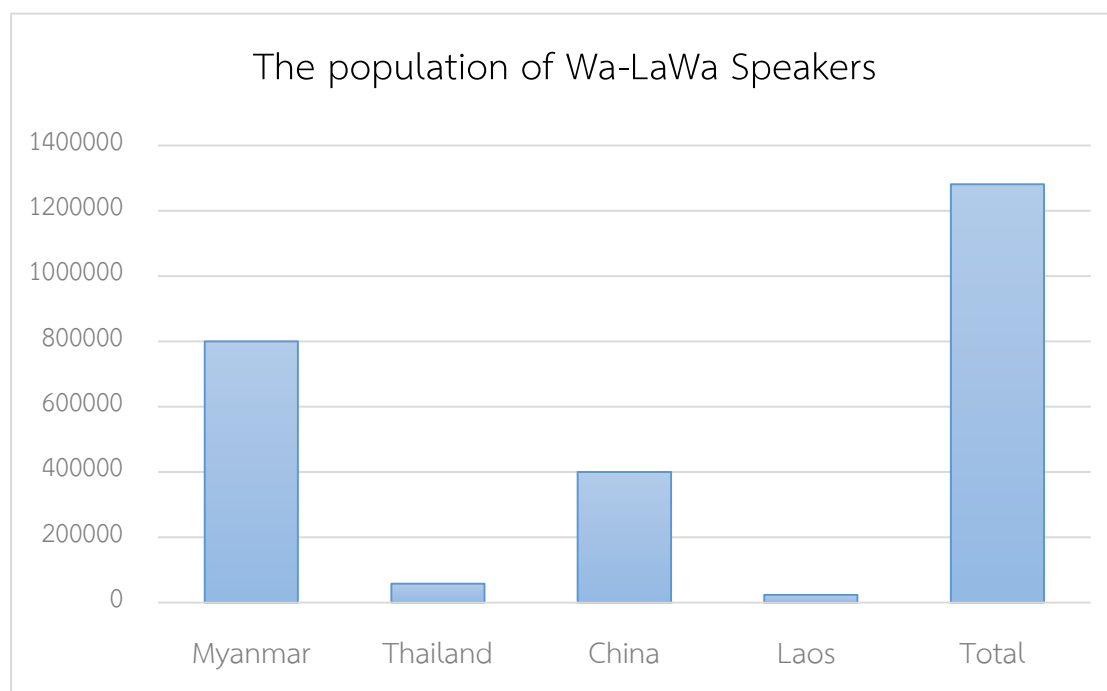
**Table-1:** Persons Other than Shans who Speak Shan Languages.

They always profess to have come from Tawngpeng and shout any connection with the Wa tribes. The LaWa are among the wildest and the Palaungs among the mildest of the hill folk of the states, there can be no

doubt as to the two tribes possessing a common origin (Lowis, 1949). Distribution of total population by languages concluded (Grantham, 1923).



included in this table. The Wa-LaWa nearest connections in the Shan States, however, are not the Plaung, and Mon-Khmer, but the Burma, Shan, Lahu, KoKang, and Akha (Mya WA dy, Mg Wa, 1994). The Wa of Kengtung on the other hand claims to have been the original inhabitants of all the country down to Chiangmai. This is significant in connection with the Rumai tradition that their ancestors came from Thatton (George Scott, 493). The connection between the Wa and LaWa language is very closed. Apart from other facts, linguistic of the also point, Yunnan as an original home of the tribal including Va because the Wa-LaWa whose languages are scattered populations in YunNan.



**Table-4:** A specimen of dialects given below shows linguistic affinity between the Palaung and the Wa-LaWa.

English	Wa-LaWa	Palaung
One	Tix (te)	Hle
Two	Ra (ã)	E
Three	Oi (loi)	oe
Four	Pun (pain)	Hpon̂
Five	phuan	Hpon
Six	leh	Hpan
Seven	A lia	Taw
Eight	S'te (Satai)	Ta
Nine	Tim (s.tan)	Tim
Ten	Kao (ku)	Ko
Eleven	Kau te	Ko-ra-hle
Twelve	Kao rā	Ko-ra- ā̃

Linguists have been trying to classify languages to indicate genetic relationship. If a considerable proposition of the words and the grammatical forms of two languages are reasonably similar, similar enough to indicate that the resemblances cannot be due to mere accident, these similar words and forms must go back to a common source, and if this source is not borrowing by one language from another, the two tongues are related by descent from a common ancestor. The spoken language of the Wa-LaWa belongs to the Indo-Chinese language

group and the languages of the Myanmar, Shan and Yun are also mixed with the written language of the LaWa (Myanmar Socialist Party, 1967). Therefore, it is difficult to find the origin of the Wa history from linguistic point of view (Drage, 1907, p. 28).

The Wa language in China belongs to the Wabeng language branch, Men-Cambodian language group of the South-Asian language family. Most words in the South-Asian language family are based on monosyllabic roots and in some respects such as their measure words expressing the natural units of things, they are similar to those in the Sino-Tibetan-Burma language group.

The Wa people belong to the Mongoloid race (South-Asian group) (Studies on the Minority Nationalities of Northeast India, 1992). A reference to the comparative vocabularies proves conclusively to the arm-chair students that Wa and Plang are very closely allied languages, not much farther apart than the various dialects of the Chingpaw, or the Chin. But the LaWa will not have it and reject attempted proofs with contumely. The Wa speak various dialects of a common language Plang, which is quite unlike that of any of the other groups here considered (Leach).

Table-5:

English	Wa	LaWa	Plang (Bulang)
Tall	Laong	Lhang	Lhaung
Big	Ting	Ding	Thing
Root	Reh	Reh	Reh
Thorn	Kat	Gat	Kat
Gold	Khri	Khli	khri
Leaf	Lah	Lah	Lah
Tongue	Tak	Tak	tak

Many of the dialects have never been studied and classified and many of the names returned in the hill areas are village names rather than tribal names (George Scott). (In this way the different Plang-Bulang clans and even the different groups of the same clan, separated from one another, and having no link in a written language, developed different dialects. Mon and Wa-LaWa groups deal with bilingualism. Only certain indigenous languages are taken into account, all other languages being ignored. Persons speaking two or more subsidiary languages in the same class or subsidiary languages in two or more classes have been counted once for each class.

The population of the estimated area of Myanmar in the Thaton, Amherst, Northern and Southern Shan States, amounting to 7831 (Males 4050, Females 3331) has been omitted from this table because statistics for language are not available. An estimate of the number of speakers of Mon and Wa-Paluang groups in the unenumerated parts of Thaton, Amherst, Northern and Southern Shan States is given in bilingualism of the Wa- Palaung. At the last census the language ordinarily used in the home was entered in the enumeration schedule, at this census the mother tongue was entered (Bennison, 1933). According to the 1931 census reports are as follows:

**Table-6:**

Cities	Mother -Tongue	Mon-Khmer	
		Males	Females
PanSan (PangKham)	Language Of Burma Group	1310	973
	Language Of Tai Group	2113	2612
	Language Of Mon-Khmer Group	3411	3145
	Language Of Chinese Group	4132	5035
Maing Maw	Language Of Burma Group	3120	1492
	Language Of Tai Group	326	523
	Language Of Mon-Khmer Group	6306	9433
	Language Of Chinese Group	1355	921

The system of classification is given in bilingualism of the table and is the same as that used at the 1931 census. The indigenous languages have been formed into groups, branches, sub-families and families; they include groups Mon to Wa and Plang. For the sake of convenience all Chinese language has been included among the indigenous languages.

In the year 1933, from American Boston Society by A William Marcus Young Family attempted at inventing the Wa-LaWa written form based on the Roman alphabets while trying to spread Christianity among the Wa-Bulang. Her efforts came

to no avail as the “Language she invented was not practicable enough for use in writing, reading, and could not represent the exact sounds in LaWa (Drage, 1907, p. 265-266). As the Wa are natives of Myanmar, Animists, Buddhist, and Christians by faith, they would prefer their language and literature to be akin to Myanmar. One LaWa nation by the name Tax San Man, a resident of Si Veng villages, PangKham (PangSang) Township, formulated a dialect for the Wa speakers. He invited all, clergy and laity alike, for the presentation of his Wa dialect at the Haw of the Southern Maing Ling Sawbwa in 1954. It was unanimously accepted as it conformed to the linguistic features of the LaWa dialect both in spoken and written. The Sawbwa gave his approval in 1955 and Tax San Man was awarded a gold medal by the Sawbwa for his achievement in 1956.

At the set of the invention, the Wa-LaWa written language had 27 consonants, and 13 vowels. Pali and numerals were the same as that of Myanmar (Kaw, 2002, p. 3). The 27 consonants are (Bau Ai Rong, 1962)

K kh g ng, p ph b m, T Th d n, C Ch J Ny,  
S Sh Z Y, R L V W, F H (X).

Later the 24 consonants were found to be inadequate and a supplementary was made. The 13 number of vowels 13 are:

A E IE Aw Oi Ao Au Ai I O U EE EU.

**Table-7:** The Transcription of Wa-LaWa polyp thongs as Follow:

Diphthongs		triphthongs	
Iu	Ui	Ui	iau
Ia	Ri	Ua	Uai
Ei		Ou	
		oi	
Ai	Aw	au	

## Conclusion

In summary, throughout history, wars, famines, population growth, and migration have led to significant changes in tribal, ethnic, and linguistic identities. Communities have experienced shifts in their own languages or dialects, often resulting in the formation of distinct and intermarrying clans. Furthermore, the dynamics of warfare and the slave system have facilitated the absorption of individuals from one group into another, leading to the loss of their original identities. This process continued during British rule, especially with the conversion to Christianity, which disregarded traditional clan and lineage affiliations. Many cultural practices that once defined clans, such as sacrificial rites, funeral customs, and dialects, lost their cultural significance as a result of these transformations. Moreover, unrest among the Wa people further weakened ties of descent and alliance, as villages regrouped, migration occurred, and intermarriage became more prevalent. However, a comprehensive understanding of these changes requires thorough investigation through proper linguistic surveys. The language spoken by people in Myanmar and its environs offers fascinating insights into everyday life and social relationships. These linguistic expressions contribute to the development and vitality of the Myanmar language, reflecting the diverse cultural heritage of the Wa-LaWa society and its interactions with the broader global community.



**Figure 1-1:** Map of South East Asia indicating the rough location of each branch Mon-Khmer language Area. See Diffloth, 1974 and Bradley, 1994 for more detailed maps.



**Figure 1-3:** Map of Proto-Wa-LaWa (PLW) Speaking Areas and Places of abode of the sample of Wa-LaWa Speakers interviewed for the comparative Study.

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