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► **To cite this version:**

Catherine Scheer. Christian NGOs: From Marginal Liberation Theologists to Regional Policy-Shapers. Gabriel Facel; Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux; Astrid Norén-Nilsson. The Palgrave Handbook of Political Norms in Southeast Asia, Palgrave, pp.103 - 119, 2024, 978-981-99-9654-4. 10.1007/978-981-99-9655-1\_6 . hal-04717677

**HAL Id: hal-04717677**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04717677v1>**

Submitted on 2 Oct 2024

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# Christian NGOs: From Marginal Liberation Theologians to Regional Policy-Shapers

*Catherine Scheer*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past half-decade, international NGOs active in humanitarianism, development and social work have been losing the influence that they gained in several Southeast Asian countries from the 1980s onwards (Clarke, 1998: 28–39). In post-2021 coup Myanmar, work has become difficult to impossible for foreign non-state actors, with numerous aid programs disrupted, all NGO staff being confronted with the ongoing violence and some facing physical threats (Tun, 2022). Even in a country such as Cambodia, where development organisations had enjoyed more than two decades of relative freedom, their room for manoeuvre has become severely constrained. The Cambodian government initiated an NGO Law in 2015 which subjects civil society organisations to strict control. It has also turned increasingly authoritarian (Norén-Nilsson, 2021; Norén-Nilsson & Bourdier, 2019), and as part of this process has come to favour Chinese support over Western aid. Notwithstanding such recent constraints across Southeast Asia, NGOs continue to exert a form of soft power whose impact on political norm dynamics remains non-negligible.

But why focus on Christian organisations, which only make up part of the diverse Southeast Asian NGO landscape, next to secular and other religious

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organisations?<sup>1</sup> Christian Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) share with their fellow NGOs the statement of a “vision” and “mission”, charged with norms and values. However, one of their particularities is that they explicitly propagate Judeo-Christian values, values implicitly shared by numerous secular organisations.<sup>2</sup> Christian FBOs appear as the most overt heirs of the European missionaries who have attempted to spread these norms and values in Southeast Asia for centuries. Thus, their relations with the state are not only influenced by the contemporary politics of global humanitarianism and development, but also by historical politico-religious arrangements in a region that has remained largely impervious to Christianity (Bautista & Lim, 2009; see also George & Willford, 2004).

While Christian missionary efforts in Southeast Asia reach back to the sixteenth century (Alberts, 2013), Buddhism remains predominant in most of the peninsula Southeast Asia, and Islam in the archipelago, with the notable exceptions of the Philippines and Timor Leste. Even if Christianity is a minority religion in most of the region, missions have left their traces over time (Brown & Tran, 2020). In Thailand, for instance, although only around 1% of the population is Christian, Catholic missionaries were influential in the making of the “modern” nation through the promotion of Thai secular education (Bolotta, 2018: 141). The relationship that King Narai established in the seventeenth century between the Thai royal family and French Jesuits, who were put in charge of educating ten children of the royal family, lasted over the following centuries (*ibid.*: 143). However, the Thai monarchy managed to appropriate the Catholic missionaries’ interventions to serve Buddhist ethno-nationalism (Bolotta, 2018; Keyes, 1993). While the Jesuits’ “modern” approach of education was picked up, explicitly Christian values were sidelined (Bolotta, 2018: 144).<sup>3</sup> This is only one example among others of the diverse alignments of missionaries with Southeast Asian powers, and of the sometimes unexpected ways in which their work has left an imprint on political landscapes across the region.

Current perceptions of past missionary work play a role in defining the margin of action that governments today grant Christian NGOs. For instance, the Cold War alliance between mostly Protestant American missionaries and the U.S. Army is still invoked in Vietnam to brand certain forms of Christianity as a Western, dissident religion (Phan, 2010: 139; Salemlink, 2009: 51).

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting reflection on the place of religion within global development and a regional section on Southeast Asia, see Tomalin (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Several critical anthropologists of development have shown that the conception of humanitarianism and development as clearly delimited secular fields is relatively recent (Mosse, 2011), see also Fountain (2015) and have drawn attention to these fields’ Christian (missionary) legacy (e.g. Barnett, 2013; Calhoun, 2008; Fassin, 2010), see also Feener and Scheer (2018).

<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, the teaching of religious doctrines in Catholic schools was overruled by an official curriculum founded on “Thainess”.

This justifies a strict control of churches and, to a certain degree, of Christian NGOs. Conversely, in Thailand, which joined the Western bloc during the Vietnam War and where the Catholic Church largely stood behind the state, Christian organisations have enjoyed greater latitude, at least up to the 2014 coup d'état.<sup>4</sup> In Thailand, as in several other countries in the region, faith-based organisations enjoy the same legal status as other NGOs (Bolotta, 2018: 153; Berkeley Center of Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2010). While this legal openness leaves it up to Christian organisations to choose whether to profess their faith-based identity or not, in practice it is sometimes preferable to keep it concealed or at least to remain discreet. Reasons to do so include not only problematic historical alliances, but also fears of proselytization by stealth, that are sometimes nourished by scandals of organisations going beyond their officially declared humanitarian or developmental mission to bring about conversions.

The variety of forms historically taken by Christian missionary engagement with Southeast Asian politics prefigures today's FBOs landscape that is further diversified by the broad range of denominations that make up Southeast Asian Christianity (Cornelio, 2018; Hefner, 1998). Rather than univocally depicting Christian NGOs as agents of democratic change, protectors of established hierarchies, or as oil in the neoliberal machinery, this chapter aims to outline their diversity and, subsequently, identify some of the different manners in which they contribute to shaping political norms in Southeast Asia. It will then focus on how one specific organisation—the Summer Institute of Linguistics—influences the region's normative landscape from within the Southeast Asian headquarters of an international institution—UNESCO. While not generalisable, this ethnographically informed example illustrates how an influential international Protestant organisation acts as an agenda- and value-setter, through complex negotiations—both with other NGOs and with governments.

## FROM SUBVERTING TO ENFORCING THE EXISTING ORDER

Let us start with the idea that Christian actors, and by extension Christian FBOs, may promote emancipatory and democratising messages.<sup>5</sup> This conception underlies Julius Bautista's (2020) analysis of the influence that the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) had on Catholic actors in the Philippines and Timor Leste, the two predominantly Christian countries in Southeast Asia today.<sup>6</sup> Bautista argues that Vatican II's emphasis “on protecting the dignity

<sup>4</sup> On ongoing plans to restrict the margin of manoeuvre of Not-for-Profit-Organisations in Thailand, see for instance (Amnesty International, 2021; Vitit, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> For a critical analysis of this idea, see, for instance, Doyt (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Bautista (2020: 315) quotes the American sociologist and theologian Peter L. Berger's (2004: 76) argument that Christianity and democracy share the principles of putting emphasis on human rights and subscribing to the secular principle of differentiation of

of the human person, particularly that of the poor” (2020: 310) probably favoured a shift within the local Churches in both countries in the 1970s and 1980s from state complicity to critical contestation. By expressing their opposition to injustice and authoritarianism, local church representatives contributed to provoking political change.

In Thailand, the inculturation of the Christian message after Vatican II ensured, on the contrary, “the continuity of a harmonic political relationship [of the local Catholic Church] with the Thai monarchy” (Bolotta, 2018; 146). In other words, a “thaified” Christianity reproduced and fortified existing Indo-Buddhist hierarchical social structures, with priests on par with other Thai “big people” (*phru-yai*) such as aristocracy, monks, military and state officials (Bolotta, 2018: 148). Not only do Catholic schools display a photo of the king as well as of the Thai flag, merely replacing the image or statue of the Buddha with a crucifix, but the relationship that Christian laypeople entertain with priests is modelled on that between Buddhist laypeople and monks, who are considered to have more merit. In the same vein, urban poor appear as sinners responsible for their deplorable situation, similar to Buddhists with bad karma (Bolotta, 2018: 148–149).

However, there are also Christian actors who question the elitist relationship between the Thai Catholic Church and the ruling class. As Bolotta (2018) observed in 2012, an Italian nun who, since 2003, had been in charge of an NGO supporting disabled children and their families in the slums of Bangkok, criticised the Church’s focus on working with rich Thai elites rather than with marginal groups who were often non-Thai. Acting through an organisation funded by Catholic and non-Catholic Italians and officially recognised by the Thai government as an NGO, the nun brought material support to slum children and their mothers. She also provided the mothers with a spiritual formation that was inspired by liberation theology and aimed at building up a socio-political consciousness among them. The nun sought to question the idea engrained in Thai society that disabled children were a malediction, a result of bad behaviours to feel ashamed of. Rather, she presented them as gifts of God, whose dignity was to be reclaimed. She also drew attention to the political and economic circumstances that led to the marginal position of the children and their families (Bolotta, 2018: 155). By politicising the children’s situation, the nun and her fellow Catholic NGO actors positioned themselves both against the Thai Church’s subservient attitude towards the existing order, and against a purely technical and neutral position, common among secular NGOs relying on Western medical and psychological categories (Bolotta, 2018: 157). This example of a Christian organisation engaged in liberatory movements with politically left sensibilities remains marginal within the Thai Catholic sphere. It does however find equivalents, especially

power. He specifies that Vatican II led to what sociologist and theologian José Casanova (1994: 71) described as “the transformation of the Catholic Church from a state-centered to a society-centered institution” (2020: 320).

among organisations defending the rights of people considered vulnerable or marginalised, such as children and ethnic minorities (Bolotta, 2021; Erb & Widyawati, 2018).

Among declaredly emancipatory and state-contesting actors, there are also organisations with very different political leanings, partly funded by donor state sources, such as the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), supported by American evangelicals and the U.S. military (Horstmann, 2018, 2019). Formed in 1997 by David Eubank, a former U.S. Army special envoy and son of a veteran missionary, the FBR aim was to support people from the Karen ethnic minority suffering Myanmar military reprisals (Horstmann, 2019). The emergency healthcare that FBR provides is closely tied to evangelising and to military training: while men are armed, children listen to Bible stories in “The Good Life Club”. The FBR claims it aims to publicise human rights abuses and restore dignity to the Karen “ethnic nationality”, but it does so by highlighting the bravery of the “white saviours”, in a military-religious rhetoric that is reminiscent of the Cold War era.

On the other end of the spectrum, one finds evangelical FBOs, such as the South Korean Pentecostal NGO “Good People”, which promote a hyper-modern model of economic success that works in favour of donor state interests, without offending regional governments. Since 2000 South Korea has seen the emergence of Neo-Pentecostalism which, contrary to classic Pentecostalism, does not reject engagement with a “fallen” secular world, but adopts an activist stance that aims at transforming society (Kim, 2018: 195).<sup>7</sup> As the South Korean government sought to promote itself as an example of economic success and Asian modernity in Southeast Asia, an approach formalised in its 2010 Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity with ASEAN, Pentecostal actors such as Cho Yonggi’s Full Gospel Church (FGC), out of which the “Good People” NGO had grown, became “unofficial diplomats” of this simultaneously Korean and Christian model (Kim, 2018: 196–197, see also Kim, 2014).

The support that this NGO has provided from 1995 onwards to marginalised urban Cambodians in Phnom Penh and its surroundings must thus be read keeping in mind that, in the second decade of the new millennium, Southeast Asia was the second most important destination for South Korean investments (Kim, 2018: 197, 200).<sup>8</sup> On the ground, educational projects and free medical help provided by South Korean short-term missionaries were connected to a prosperity theology, within which economic success in the here and now was seen as granted by God to the faithful, who were expected to follow a strict moral code (Kim, 2018: 201). This Christian NGO

<sup>7</sup> See also Freston (1999), Corten and Mary (2000), Han (2010).

<sup>8</sup> By 2010, the initial FGC in Phnom Penh assembled 200 church members. Eight further churches were opened in the capital’s surroundings. Each of the church complexes comprised a kindergarten and a primary school. According to Kim, the building and staffing of these complexes as well as the sponsoring of local church members involved the financial support of thousands of South Korean Christians (Kim, 2018: 203).

thus worked to equip Cambodians with the necessary skills and connections to become functional elements within the global market economy. The emancipation it promoted was presented as a gift of God, a Christian reading that, far from questioning the roots of inequality, contributes to neoliberal depoliticisation.<sup>9</sup>

Even if “Good People” can be seen as an example of a more “engaged Pentecostalism, that gets involved with social matters in Asia” (Cornelio, 2021), the NGO still acts as an individualising force since the message it conveys remains focused on personal salvation. Furthermore, the Christian morality that Pentecostal organisations similar to many other Christian organisations promote tends to be highly conservative, notably with regard to gender equality or same-sex marriage.<sup>10</sup> This puts these FBOs in a more problematic position when it comes to interacting with other development and advocacy organisations than with certain Southeast Asian governments (Cornelio, 2021).

This eclectic range of examples shows that within the Christian NGO sphere and sometimes even within one and the same denomination, political norms and values can vary significantly, ranging from conformism to dissent, and from promoting disciplined labourers for a neoliberal system, to educating critical citizens. To examine how Christian organisations’ normative stance and impact are shaped not only by their religious convictions, but also by the contexts which they navigate, we now turn to look at one specific FBO and the way in which it established itself as an influential regional player.

## PROTESTANT DEVELOPMENT EXPERTS WITHIN REGIONAL UNITED NATIONS BRANCHES

### *The Summer Institute of Linguistics and its establishment in Southeast Asia*

Founded in the early 1930s by William Cameron Townsend, a U.S. Protestant evangelical missionary, and headquartered in Texas, the Summer Institute of Linguistics—today called SIL International—is a transnational Protestant NGO. It focuses on the study and documentation of little-known languages, as well as on the creation of writing systems and literacy materials for languages that have none. This work lays the foundation to then render the Bible available for everyone in her or his mother tongue, an underlying goal of the SIL and its recruiting and funding arm, the Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT). In the interconnected histories of the SIL and the WBT, these sister organisations’ double agenda of expertise in linguistics and education on the one hand,

<sup>9</sup> Elena Shih’s work (2018) on US-based Protestant FBOs fighting human trafficking, notably in Thailand, shows not only how their mission involved the imposition of a strict Christian morality upon former sex workers, but also how it led to integrating “aid recipients”, as cheap labour force, into the global market economy.

<sup>10</sup> For an extended discussion on the role of Christian actors with regard to same-sex marriage and LGTBQI+ rights in the Philippines, see Cornelio and Dagle (2019).

and in Bible translation and evangelisation on the other, has played an important role for finding a place in contexts otherwise critically disposed towards American Protestant missionaries. For instance, soon after its foundation SIL managed to establish good relations with the Mexican government under the revolutionary and anti-clerical President Lazaro Cardenas. This was because the government expected SIL's educational work to turn indigenous peoples into "proper" Mexican citizens, a mission that corresponded to the government's nationalist agenda, but that it could hardly have afforded to accomplish itself (Hartch, 2006).

SIL's establishment in Southeast Asia reaches back to the 1950s, in states aligned with the Cold War-era Western bloc. SIL set up its first Southeast Asian base in 1953 in the Philippines, with the support of fierce anti-communist President Ramon de Fierro Magsaysay. The organisation then started to work in South Vietnam in 1956, where it was welcomed by Magsaysay's friend President Ngo Dinh Diem (Jammes, 2016: 78). As in the fight between North and South Vietnam, the support of the country's highland minorities was highly important, SIL was immediately contracted by the South Vietnamese Ministry of Education to develop school primers for the minority-language speakers of the Central highlands, and by 1966, the SIL-led bilingual education program started receiving financial support from USAID (Saleminck, 2003: 216). With the Communist victories across the Southeast Asian peninsula in 1975, all SIL envoys left Vietnam, as well as Cambodia where SIL had been present since 1973 (Miller & Person, 2021: 166). Many settled down in the Philippines or in Thailand (Jammes, 2016: 81; Lynip, 2013: 84; Miller & Person, 2021: 165). SIL was thus established in Thailand in 1975 through collaborations with universities including Mahidol, Thammasat, Chulalongkorn, Payap and the Royal Institute of Thailand, now the Royal Society (Miller & Person, 2021: 167). These various collaborations gave rise to linguistic analyses of Thailand's minority languages, training programs in applied linguistics aimed at minority-language speakers and multilingual education programs.

During the 1970s and 1980s, heavy criticisms were voiced against SIL across the world, but particularly in Latin America, blaming the FBO's double agenda for conveying politico-religious norms along with its literacy programs. Several studies focused on the Cold War-ties between SIL and the U.S. government (Hvalkof & Aaby, 1981). In addition to the organisation's double-layered belligerent vocabulary, in which the war in Vietnam and the spiritual "war of souls" came to be associated (Hart, 1973: 22), SIL members were suspected of involvement in counter-insurgency activities, notably by providing intelligence to the CIA (Saleminck, 2003; Stoll, 1982). While the latter charges are in part difficult to prove, the former, insisting on the organisation's culturally unsettling and socially divisive impacts, have been largely acknowledged within academia. Voices from within the SIL also questioned the organisation's position and priorities, as shown in an internal report first published in 1978, in which the author anticipates questions, which, he suggests, are likely to cross people's mind when trying to understand what SIL is about:



“(…) Do they work in collaboration with the government or with an academic intelligentsia? Are they humanitarian workers intervening on the ground or are they bearing a more promising message?” The answer to all of these questions is... yes.<sup>11</sup>

### *SIL and the Production of a Moral Economy of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education*

In 2003, SIL, together with its long-term partner Mahidol University, organised the first conference on Multilingual Education in Bangkok to promote native-language education in linguistically highly diverse Southeast Asia. This scientific event laid the groundwork for the 2004 creation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Working Group, with the involvement of UNESCO’s Asia and Pacific Bureau for Education in Bangkok. While SIL had already enjoyed special consultative status with UNESCO’s general office in Paris since 1998, this marked the beginning of an official collaboration with the UN body’s regional office.<sup>12</sup> Gathering three times a year at UNESCO Bangkok, the Working Group started to publish reports, advocacy materials and policy recommendations on multilingual education and continued to organise international conferences on language and education. In the following, I will employ ethnographic observations gathered in the context of a post-doctoral research project on religion and NGOs in Asia to explore how SIL contributed to the creation of a moral economy of the MTB-MLE in Southeast Asia.

When I joined the Working Group in 2015 as a participant observer, it had grown well beyond its initial constituents. In addition to its founding members, SIL, Mahidol, UNESCO Bangkok and CARE Cambodia, it involved a disparate crowd of representatives from NGOs including UNICEF’s East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Save the Children, Plan International, the British Council, the Asia Foundation, the Asia–Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (Arnec), the Myanmar Education Forum, as well as, on several occasions, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO).<sup>13</sup> While there was considerable variation in attendance, one of the constants of the Working Group meetings was the presence of at least one SIL representative. The SIL representatives’ assiduity and their long-term experience within the field of language and education surely contributed to

<sup>11</sup> Initially published by Kenneth Gregerson, the report was republished in 2016, in a translated version, with additions by Kenneth Smith (Gregerson and Smith, 2016: 89–106).

<sup>12</sup> In 2007, the relation between SIL and UNESCO Bangkok was reinforced through a memorandum of understanding. For a broader analysis of FBOs within the United Nations, see Carrette and Trigeaud (2013).

<sup>13</sup> In 2015 and 2016, I joined five meetings in person and, since 2017, I have continued to follow them online as regularly as possible.

their key role within the Working Group, where they often were the most vocal participants.

As a person from another NGO phrased it, SIL members were the group's "technical heavyweights". Their expertise was encapsulated in the Ph.D. title that many of them held and in their fluency in local languages. While for most NGOs, mother tongue-based multilingual education constituted one of several activity areas, it was SIL's area of predilection. Thus, it is not surprising that specialists from SIL represented the Working Group at major conferences in the field, took a lead in the organisation (and initial financing) of its own international conferences and were the authors of a large part of UNESCO reports containing policy-advice on MTB-MLE.<sup>14</sup> It appears as if David Stoll's now forty-year-old analysis of SIL's collaborations with national governments in South America still holds true to a certain degree with regard to SIL's current engagement with UNESCO:

Whether educational, medical or air transport and radio, [SIL's] services are often the best or the only available. (1982: 6)

To establish the Working Group and itself in the regional (and global) development arena, SIL had to rally other actors around the mission of rendering mother tongue education available for everyone. To explore how SIL achieved this, I rely on the concept of "moral economy" as defined by Didier Fassin and Jean-Sébastien Eideliman (2012). The study of a "moral economy" concerns the ways in which "a set of values, feelings and emotions has been established as dominant, legitimate and evident in a certain historical, political and social context, and about how this moral economy is borne, used, fought, re-appropriated, relayed, competed by different social groups and by the individuals composing such groups" (Fassin & Eideliman, 2012: 17).<sup>15</sup> The concept emphasises the "production, repartition, circulation and

<sup>14</sup> Among the UNESCO Bangkok's publications figure "What have we learned? The Conference on Language Development, Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Minority Language Community in Asia" (together with SIL/Mahidol, 2004), "Manual for Developing Literacy and Adult Education Programs in Minority Language Communities" (2004), "First Language First: Community-based Literacy Programs for Minority Language Contexts in Asia" (2005), "Highland Children's Education Project in Cambodia. A Pilot Project on Bilingual Education in Cambodia" (2005, with CARE), "Advocacy Kit for Promoting Multilingual Education: Including the Excluded" (2007), "Improving the quality of Mother Tongue-based literacy and learning. Case Studies from Asia, Africa and South America" (2008), "MTB MLE Resource Kit. Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education" (2016, 2018), "Why language matters for the Millennium Development Goals" (2019), "The Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion" (2020), "Tools for Planning and Monitoring Programmes of Multilingual Education in Asia" (2020). Dr. Susan Malone who was in charge of a range of these publications holds a Ph.D. in education as well as a Masters in theology, and has a long-term experience with SIL, notably in Papua New Guinea.

<sup>15</sup> Translated from French by the author.

utilisation of emotions and values, norms and obligations in the social space” (Fassin & Eideliman, 2012: 12).

To explore the moral economy of MTB-MLE that took shape within the Working Group, it first needs to be acknowledged that native-language protection had been part of the norm set of international organisations for several decades. The concern about language disappearance that socio-linguists and anthropologists started to raise in the 1970s led, twenty years later, to the emergence of “Endangered Languages” as a field of study within linguistics (Grinevald & Costa, 2010: 26).<sup>16</sup> It also drew the attention of international institutions. In 2003, linguists presented their grid to evaluate language vitality at UNESCO Paris, which came to form the basis of a UNESCO-led inventory of endangered languages in the world (Grinevald & Costa, 2010: 30).<sup>17</sup>

Within SIL, on the other hand, native-language education had been seen to hold fundamental value ever since the organisation’s beginnings in the 1930s. This followed from SIL’s “belief that all people are created in the image of God, and that languages and cultures are part of the richness of God’s creation”.<sup>18</sup> It is because SIL considers that people understand the Bible best in their mother tongue, that it has provided training in linguistics to its members (Dobrin, 2009; Handman, 2009). However, during MTB-MLE Working Group meetings or conferences, SIL members never, stated their faith-based rationale for language protection explicitly. Rather than risking to alienate fellows from other religions or of secularist conviction, SIL representatives phrased their aims in universalist terms, notably with reference to the UN Agenda 2030’s Sustainable Development Goal 4—“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all”. For example, at the “Language Policy in Multicultural and Multilingual Setting” conference organised in 2016 by UNICEF Myanmar, a leading SIL specialist based in Thailand underlined how beneficial learning in one’s mother tongue is for children in order to succeed in school, and how the right to MTB-MLE is hence crucial for minority children’s futures. A senior literacy and education consultant with SIL discussing the elaboration of a language policy in Myanmar, insisted on the particular importance of such a policy in a country in which ethnic minorities have long been in conflict with the government. Thus, all SIL representatives attributed the value of mother tongue education to notions broadly promoted in the international development sphere, such as cultural and linguistic diversity, education or ethnic minority empowerment. They invoked feelings of respect for diversity, and concern for vulnerable children and for oppressed minorities, thereby creating bridges for a broad range of actors to relate to the moral economy of MTB-MLE.

<sup>16</sup> Initial preoccupations about language disappearance were voiced by socio-linguists such as Joshua Fishman (1972) and by certain Boasian anthropologists.

<sup>17</sup> The same year, UNESCO published a foundational report titled “Education in a multilingual world”.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.sil.org/about/discover#node-53>, last accessed on 18 March 2016.

### *SIL's Influence on Political Norms in Contemporary Southeast Asia*

Through the broad and increasingly well-established propagation of a moral economy of MTB-MLE, SIL has been able to influence political norms in contemporary Southeast Asia. In a recent guidebook titled *The Languages and Linguistics of Mainland Southeast Asia*, two SIL members—Carolyn P. Miller and Kirk Person—note that “SIL education consultants strive to build bridges of understanding between government leaders, United Nations staff, and ethnic minorities” (2021: 174). A range of UNESCO publications put together by SIL consultants have been distributed to national governments, notably its widely disseminated “Advocacy kit for Promoting Multilingual Education: Including the Excluded”. Biennial international conferences constitute a key occasion to interact with government delegates. These typically two-to-three-day events, set in fancy hotels in major Southeast Asian cities, make it possible for SIL representatives to discuss with participating government representatives, informally as well as during dedicated closed-door meetings. They also allow strong messages to be passed, especially during the well-attended keynote and plenary speeches that showcase countries with favourable MTB-MLE policies. For instance, at the time of the 5th International Conference on Language and Education the working group organised in 2016 in Bangkok on the theme of “Sustainable Development Through Education”, Cambodia had become one of the featured MTB-MLE role models in the region.<sup>19</sup> A Cambodian Under Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education came on stage with the CARE Cambodia representative, who presented the latest progress in the country; the Multilingual Education National Action Plan (2015–2018).

However, there are limits to what can be said in such conference contexts, and thereby also to the values that can be put forth. These cannot offend locally dominant political norms, even if incompatible with values underlying the MTB-MLE moral economy. In February 2016, I joined the conference on “Language Policy in Multicultural and multilingual settings” that was held in Myanmar and co-organised by UNICEF Myanmar, the University of Melbourne and the University of Mandalay. I accompanied several members of the MTB-MLE working group, including the UNESCO project officer, two SIL members and the CARE Cambodia representative, who had all been engaged with the group for years. The four-day event gathered about 300 mostly Southeast Asia-based scholars, development actors, activists and government representatives.

On the last day, I joined a panel with a presentation by an American scholar who proposed to approach indigenous language issues from a human rights perspective. Referring to research conducted between 2008 and 2013

<sup>19</sup> In the 2007 UNESCO report *Mother Tongue-based Literacy Programmes: Case Studies of Good Practice in Asia*, Cambodia and Thailand are the two Southeast Asian countries among a total of seven countries.

in Cambodia's Northeastern Ratanakiri province, he outlined the brutal socio-economic and ecological changes that have affected this highland region. Minority inhabitants whose livelihoods had mainly relied on swidden agriculture were losing much of their land to companies, which forced them to shift to cash crops or to become a cheap labour force. This led him to call for the defence of indigenous peoples' rights, including land rights. The scholar argued that if the Cambodian indigenous highlanders can no longer access their land, their mother tongue will be endangered because it will have lost its functional relevance. He sharply criticised MTB-MLE projects for glossing over this fundamental issue by pretending that it is possible to sustain minority language vitality in a general context of loss. The reactions to his presentation were intense. An Australian linguist countered that he had heard from a senior SIL expert that MTB-MLE was very successful in Cambodia's Northeast. The presenter confirmed, but reiterated that the problem of dispossession had to be addressed, since without land and food security, young highlanders would leave their homelands and local languages would be threatened with extinction. The representative of CARE Cambodia, who had been involved in establishing education in the highlanders' mother tongues in Ratanakiri since 2000, acknowledged that one cannot only focus on education, but also insisted on the extremely sensitive nature of opposing land problems in Cambodia as they involved influential figures, emphasising the huge power dynamics at stake.

It is understandable that professionals involved in MTB-MLE projects were upset by the (partly insufficiently backed-up) conclusion that such endeavours are unable to prevent or, even worse, might accelerate the loss of mother tongues. However, the connection that the contentious presentation established between education and land rights complicated the question of language conservation in an important way. Since the start of the conference, I have heard participants express their frustration with an overly smooth and depoliticised approach to an extremely complicated topic. The presentation on the situation in Cambodia's highlands gave voice to a critical perspective that appeared to be otherwise missing.

The provoking presentation and the discussion it triggered can be seen as illustrating two opposed scientific-political strategies; a pragmatic one on the one hand, and a defiantly critical one on the other. Each calls for support of "non-dominant" languages and identities. Whereas holders of the critical view approach the promotion of mother tongue-based education as part of a broader set of rights to be defended, those who opt for a pragmatic approach, such as SIL, hold back a number of criticisms to push one claim forward. This latter strategy can be seen as motivated by an emancipatory vision of education, according to which education could lead to broader subsequent changes. In the case of the SIL, emancipation is not only envisioned in socio-political terms, but also in religious ones. For missionary-linguists, turning highland minorities into self-confident and informed citizens involves "freeing" them from spirit practices and beliefs considered to be obstructive. If

“emancipation” defined in such terms is their underlying priority, rather than the promotion of MTB-MLE education per se, this is likely to add to their choice to withhold certain criticisms. The SIL opting for a cautious diplomatic approach might also reflect an attempt to overcome their historical association with American imperialism. Indisputably, after having managed to establish influential relations with various national governments over the course of the twentieth century, SIL has succeeded in creating a place for itself on the international development scene paving the way for its members to continue working on Southeast Asian ground.

## CONCLUSION

As an example of a Christian FBO active in Southeast Asia, SIL influences political norm dynamics through the promotion of an agenda that is inclusive and emancipatory in the linguistic and educational fields, but involves withholding critique of discriminatory and inequitable political practices. It is arguably problematic that Cambodia, a country that is showcased on UN stages as exemplary in the field of MTB-MLE, demonstrates a marked lack of respect towards the human rights of the minorities this education targets.

The example of SIL illustrates the complex ways in which its norms agenda is influenced by the organisation’s dual needs to position itself within the international development sphere, while remaining acceptable to national governments. The political economy of MTB-MLE has connected the SIL to numerous, largely secular organisations around a set of common denominators. The example of Cambodia suggests the partial, incomplete appropriation by national governments of certain norms, such as the respect of ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity. SIL’s Christian values and convictions, underplayed in these exchanges on the international arena, are likely to be rendered explicit on the ground, in places where MTB-MLE projects are implemented by Protestant partner organisations.

The preceding analysis stops short of addressing how minority-language speakers deal with and make sense out of these sets of norms and values. The outcome of these and any other development projects “owes as much to the understandings and practices worked out in the contingent and compromised space of cultural intimacy as it does to the imposition of development schemes and related forms of disciplinary power” (Li, 1999: 295). To learn how MTB-MLE policies influenced Cambodian highland inhabitants, how the Italian Catholic nun’s critical teachings affected mothers in the Bangkok slum or how the prosperity gospel of the Korean Pentecostal NGO “Good People” resonated with Cambodian urban dwellers, it is necessary to enquire on the ground. People’s ways of making sense of Christian FBO projects are likely to be as diverse as the projects themselves.

**Acknowledgements** The author would like to thank the members of UNESCO Bangkok's MTB-MLE Working Group for having welcomed her and made time for conversations, Noëllie Bon for involving her in the rich discussions of the "Dynamiques du Language" laboratory's "Langues en danger" working group, Nicolas Salem for sharing literature on the language politics in Southeast Asia and Giuseppe Bolotta & Chiara Pilotto for giving her the opportunity to discuss elements of this research, which has been funded by the "NGOs and Religion in Asia" project (2015–2017), led by Michael Feener and based at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Many thanks as well to the Handbook's editors, in particular to Astrid Norén-Nilsson for her careful comments and improvements. Any shortcomings that remain are mine.

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