Muslim schoolchildren lining up before entering their classrooms at a religious school, where the Yawi language is taught. A high-pitched chorus pours out from a Muslim nursery school in Thailand's insurgency-battered south, as girls in crisp, white hijabs read aloud the elegant curls and flourishes of a script unique to their homeland but virtually erased from public life by the Thai state. — AFP photos

Revival of Thai south script points way to peace

A high-pitched chorus pours out from a Muslim nursery school in Thailand's insurgency-battered south, as girls in crisp, white hijabs read aloud the curls and flourishes of a homegrown script virtually erased from public life.

Thailand annexed the Muslim-majority south more than a century ago and ever since has sought to railroad the distinctive local culture into accepting rule from Bangkok. Resentment at the perceived assault on the region's identity has galvanised support for an insurgency that has left 6,100 people dead - the majority civilians - since 2004.

Jawi (pronounced Yawi by Thais), which deploys the Arabic alphabet to write the Patani Malay language, is used by elders and taught to youngsters at private Muslim schools in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

But repeated assimilation drives mean it is not on the curriculum in state schools while village names once written in jawi have been changed to Thai, leaving locals desperate to revive the writing and the cultural lineage it represents.

“We have to preserve our cultural uniqueness,” says local historian Ismaill Ishaq Benjasmith at the end of jawi classes at a tadika-religious school-in the coastal Sai Buri district of Pattani. “It is a small issue but it feeds into violence, because our history has been changed by the government and little by little people get angry.”

Like many others in the mountainous, forested neck of land between Thailand and Malaysia, Ismail says years of cultural degradation have crystallised support for the rebellion.

In a move to restore the much-loved script he is leading a campaign to bring jawi names back onto village signposts.

What's in a name?

After a slalom through barbed-wire topped checkpoints, the road reaches a fishing village on a palm-fringed beach.

A signpost reads 'Mengabang' in the romanised rumi script for Malay common across the peninsula, but the name is also written below in jawi and Thai.

It is a small, but deeply symbolic, victory for Ismail who with a local cultural group called PUSTA lobbied for 10 villages to get a jawi sign.

The former top Thai civilian official for the south, Taowee Sodsong, endorsed the pilot scheme in a rare nod by the state to the underlying causes of the conflict.

But Taowee was removed from his job shortly after the army toppled the elected government in May, taking with him Ismail’s dream of seeing all 2,000 villages across the south given their jawi name.

The script, which has variations across the Malay peninsula, is far from simply a cultural relic, also functioning as a way into the Koranic language of Arabic for the poorly educated Sunni Muslim population.

But as children stream out of their language classes, the sea breeze sending their hijabs flowing behind them, Ismail says now only the old or very young have a grasp of the script.

“Our ancestors tell us about our history, our language, but the government wants to tell us a different story.”

Colonial rule has seen several attempts to impose “Thainess” and the country’s shibboleths of ‘nation, religion and king’ over the deep south - once a proud sultanate and wealthy trading point.

Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram, Thai prime minister through the late 1930s and then again from the late 40s, made Thai language teaching compulsory on the school curriculum, parachuting Buddhist officials into key bureaucratic positions, at the expense of local Malay-Muslim leaders.

Jawi was gradually culled from public life and locals were told to take Thai names in addition to their own. In the 1960s hardline military ruler Sarit Thanarat went a step further, bringing all Muslim schools under the yoke of the national system.

To many the memory of those periods, which were accompanied by crackdowns on resistance, remains sharp.

“If you have something of your own and then someone takes it, it’s natural to want to take it back,” says Abdullah Bin Abdulrahman, 54, a local businessman involved in the renaming project.

Prospects for peace

Several rounds of peace talks fizzled out last year as focus turned to political turmoil in Bangkok. Now, junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha says he is ready to return to the table.

Last week broadcasters began adding Jawi subtitles to Prayut’s weekly televised address, normally delivered in Thai with English subtitles, in seven southern provinces.

But trust is still in short supply. On Saturday the deep south will mark the 10th anniversary of the deaths of 85 anti-government protesters at Tak Bai, the majority of them by suffocation as they were stacked-hands bound-on top of each other in army trucks.

Thai security forces stand accused of widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, abuses and extrajudicial killings.

For their part, rebels conduct near-daily ambushes or bomb attacks on security forces and terrorise civilians - both Buddhist and Muslim - with assassinations and arson attacks.

Teachers have been a particular target, with scores shot dead by insurgents who see them as agents of the Thai state.

A source close to the talks told AFP the rebels are “in principle” ready to talk, but have yet to formally agree.

Locals such as Abdullah Bin Abdulrahman say peace depends on the Thai military easing its grip on the region, but they are desperate for a resolution to the bloody conflict. “We are ready for a change, ready for peace... but after so long I don’t know if we will get it,” he said. — AFP