

Twitter Thread by Ben Mitchell



Ben Mitchell

@OhBendy



It's quite instructive looking at fonts with problems! I see the same mistakes when Latin-accustomed designers tackle Southeast Asian scripts. Here are the main ones...

1. In Latin, we make the arches of m a bit narrower than in n, but this is not a universal principle! As a rule don't assume this applies to other scripts. Don't start condensing letters with more bowls in Burmese or Thai. Use the same element...

nm

wider

narrower

narrower

nm

same same

oo

same same

...but be aware of exceptions! Better to take your lead from locally-designed fonts, where native designers know the proportions. There's no substitute for careful examination of plenty of other designs...

In Latin, though we may not see it, we balance shapes towards the baseline. The bottom half of B, 3, S or H is larger than the top half, as we see when flipping these letters. This is not a universal rule!



Balanced towards baseline



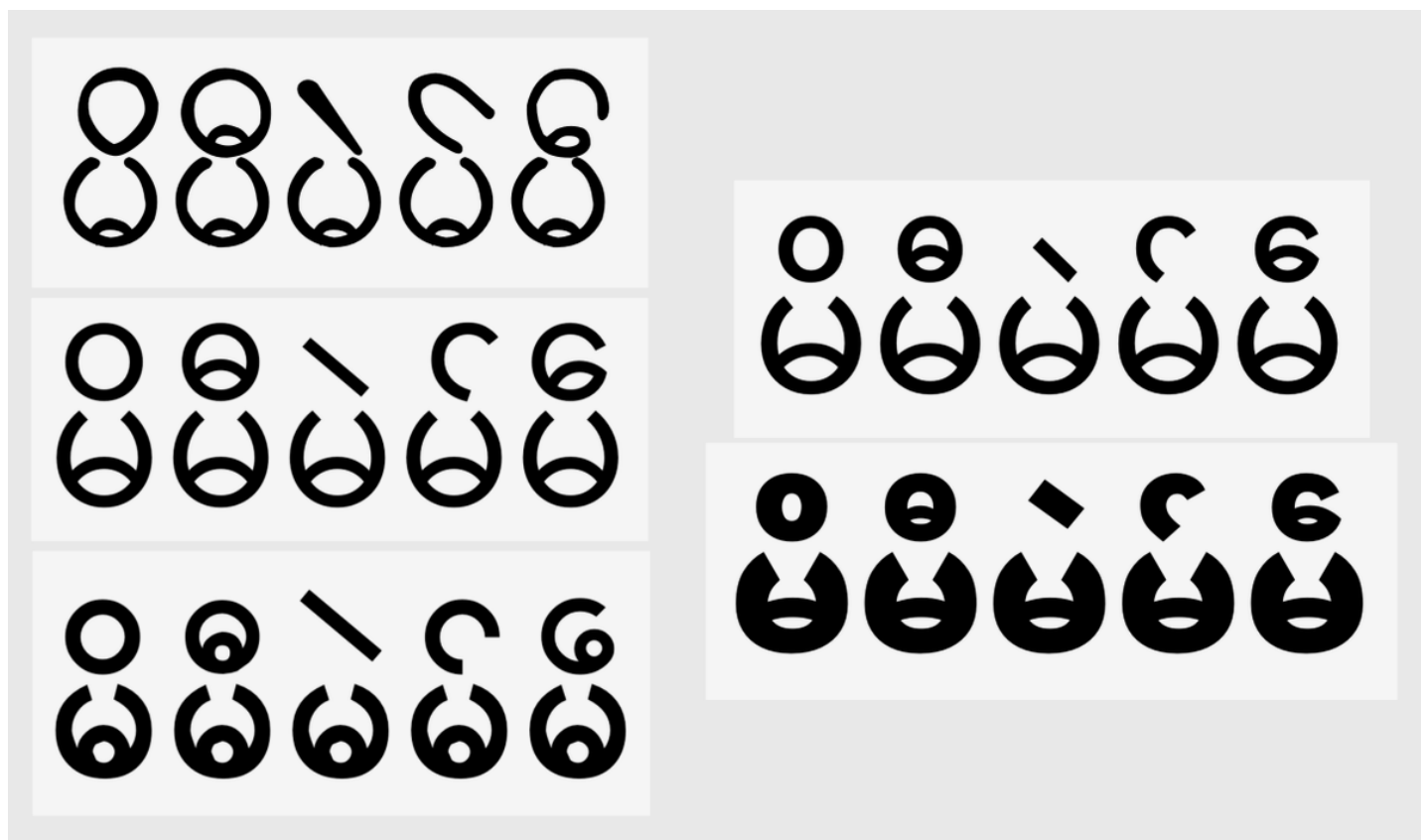
Flipped letters make visible the proportions



In Thai the balance is different

This logic doesn't apply to Thai and Burmese; remember these derive from Indian scripts where there isn't so much a baseline as a headline, from which letters hang. Knowing the history of the letters explains so much.

In Latin, diacritic marks are kind of 'supplemental', and we emphasise them less than the characters they sit on. I've mentioned this about Thai before, but here's a Burmese example. On the left are three fonts with good-sized vowel marks...



...I don't mean to pick on Noto Sans Myanmar, but it's a very good example of such a common mistake. Yes, some of the outlines on the left are wobbly, but it's easy to know what a bumpy curve should really look like. It's the proportions that are important

Southeast Asian script have some quite complex letterforms. For handling those in bold and black weights, it's useful to consider the difference between contrast (angle and amount of overall stroke variation) and modulation (how the contrast is adjusted in individual strokes)...

For example, Noto Sans Cham has almost no contrast, horizontal and vertical strokes are equally bold. But there's a lot of modulation in the small loops. It's not possible to keep the same stroke weight everywhere.

Two large, stylized Thai characters, 'จ' (Ja) and 'ม' (Ma), rendered in a thick, rounded, and highly decorative font style. The characters are black and set against a light gray background.Three large, stylized Thai characters, 'จ' (Ja), 'ม' (Ma), and 'น' (Na), rendered in the same thick, rounded, and highly decorative font style as the characters above. They are black and set against a light gray background.

Don't be tempted to 'improve legibility' by increasing the size of small elements. In Thai, for example, big loops make the letters look childish! Thai readers are perfectly accustomed to noticing small letter details that a non-native might think difficult...

... in fact it's probably best not to talk about legibility for a script if you can't actually read it. Assumptions don't really help, there are all sorts of things you couldn't know until you discuss the details with native designers!

But of course, keep your critical thinking hat on! Don't just ask for opinions, ask your experts why they think things should be done this way or that way. Explore all the possibilities, design is about making informed decisions, not copying.