

**Languages of Arunachal  
Pradesh: more Amazonia than  
the British Isles?"**

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**BERNER LINGUISTISCHE ZIRKEL**

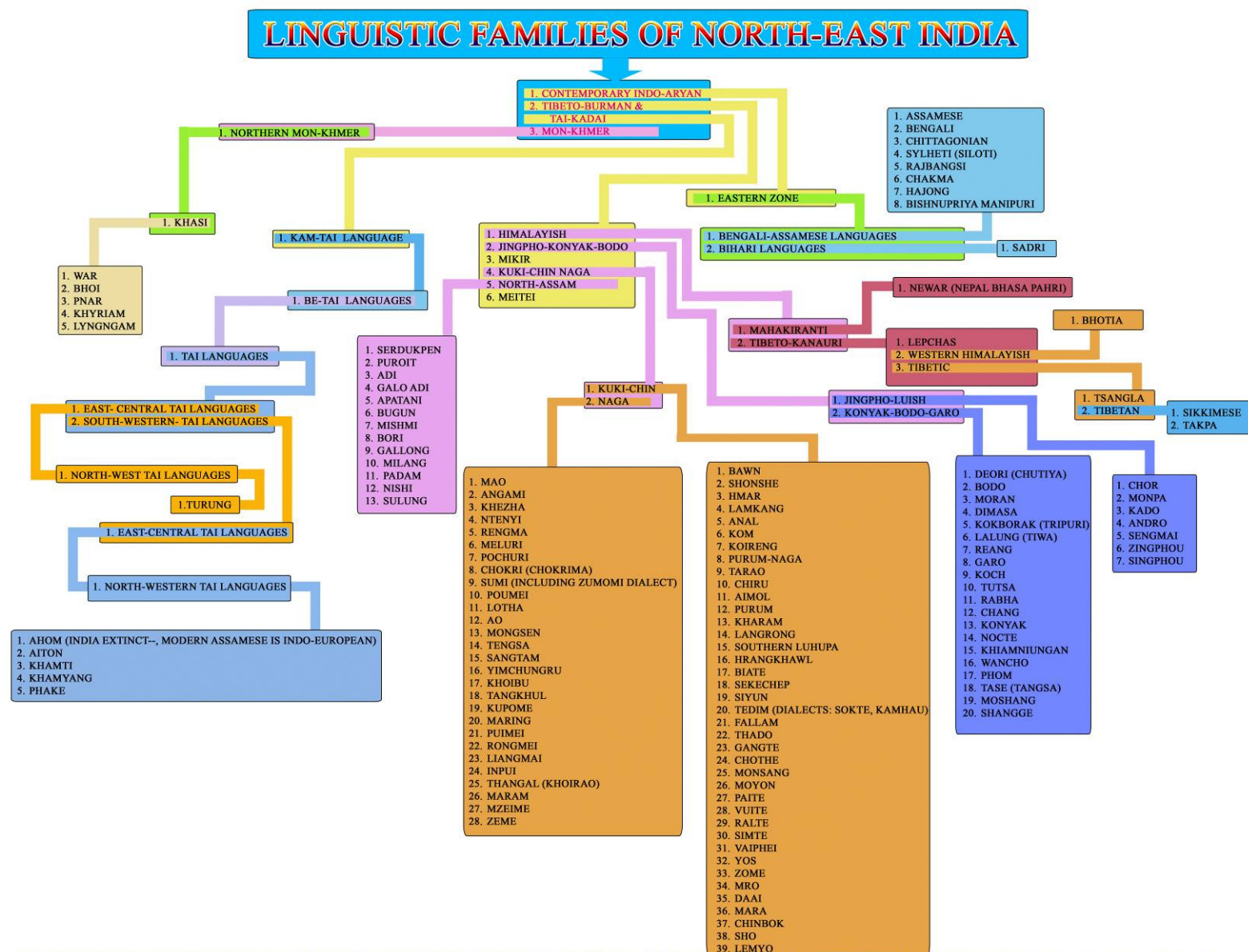
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# An early view of Arunachal Pradesh

- The preceding remarks will have shown there is considerable difference between the North Assam dialects...The home of the North Assam tribes may be considered a kind of backwater. The eddies of the various waves of Tibeto-Burman immigration have swept over it and left their stamp on its dialects.
  - Konow in Grierson 1909:572

# Don Bosco version of language situation



# EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

- ❖ Since Konow there has essentially been a repetition of this approach characterised by;
  - The assumption that these languages *must* be Tibeto-Burman, often because they are typologically similar
  - And that they somehow fit together
  - And that an absence of further data absolves Tibeto-Burman scholars from trying to resolve their classification
- ❖ This is highly unsatisfactory. The usual approach (which would certainly be taken in the Amazon) is that languages are considered isolates until proof of their genetic affiliation is offered

# EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

- ❖ In reality, there is data on almost all these languages. Not very well transcribed and sometimes hard to lay your hands on
- ❖ But no longer..
- ❖ New fieldwork in 2011 has resulted in modern data for a number of languages such as Bugun, Mey, Sartang and Milang
- ❖ And a complete collection of locally published descriptions is now in Europe and being scanned

# EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

- ❖ The basic tool is a comparative wordlist, in a spreadsheet-like format of all significant distinct speech forms in Arunachal Pradesh, summarising Tani languages with proto-Tani forms
- ❖ These are compared with purported PTB forms. This is something of a problem in itself, since the only PTB forms available are those of Matisoff (2003) which are manifestly Lolo-Burmese, Tibetic and Sinitic
- ❖ Using these as a proxy what we see is a complete absence of any regular relationship; scattered loanwords (of course) but surprisingly few of those for some languages like Bugun
- ❖ And a remarkably weak relationship between these languages

# EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

- ❖ All of this leads to only one conclusion; the so-called North Assam languages are extremely diverse and not necessarily Tibeto-Burman
- ❖ And that typological and lexical similarities are just that; borrowing (probably in many directions)
- ❖ Given this, what can be said about language relationships?
- ❖ The following slides present a few examples of new hypotheses that are being developed

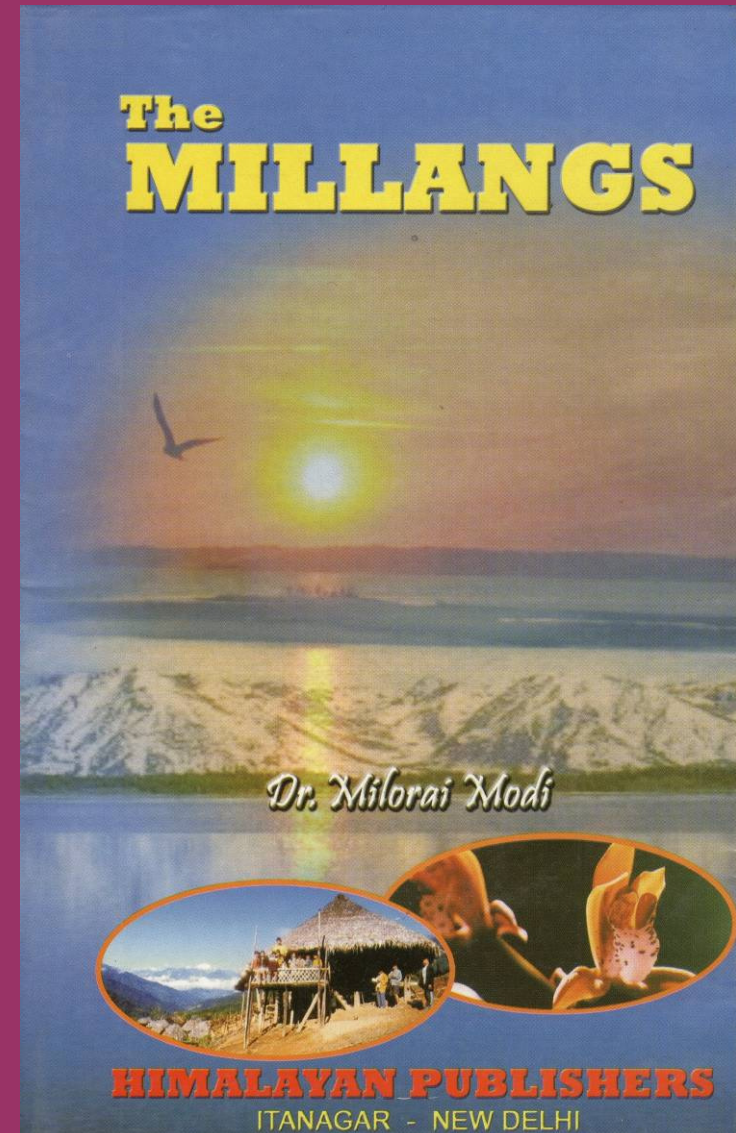
# Siangic I

- ❖ Koro is a purportedly newly discovered language spoken by a small community among the Hruso (=Aka)
- ❖ This was announced with great hoo-ha by National Geographic, despite it already being listed in the Ethnologue
- ❖ Indeed, the fact that the Koro have been making music videos, does rather suggest they don't necessarily see themselves as 'unknown'
- ❖ Be that as it may, Koro does indeed bear virtually no resemblance to Hruso
- ❖ But it does share lexicon with another language, Milang, which is spoken quite some distance away, northeast of Pasighat, and which is usually classified as Tani
- ❖ Together with Mark Post and Yankee Modi (a native speaker) we have compiled a table of shared lexemes and grammatical morphemes which are not common Tani



# Siangic II

- ❖ We therefore propose there was formerly a language phylum, tentatively christened 'Siangic' which was distributed across this region
- ❖ The expansion of the Tani would have split apart the two groups and Taniised Milang
- ❖ Even so, borrowings from Siangic *into* proto-Tani may well explain some of its deviant lexicon
- ❖ Further investigation of Milang has revealed many more features which do not resemble Tani, including a set of breathy vowels.
- ❖ Now we need deeper data on Koro..





# How to discover an unknown language





# Museum presentation of Arunachal Pradesh ethnography



# The Mey cluster

- ❑ One of the problematic languages of Arunachal Pradesh is known in the literature as Sherdukpen, spoken in the west along the road to Tawang
- ❑ Sherdukpen is a composite name given by outsiders, which covers the language spoken in Rupa and Shergaon
- ❑ The people and language are correctly known as Mey.
- ❑ There is, however, another language spoken not far away, known to its speakers as Sartang.
- ❑ This is clearly also a relative of Mey (although speakers professed to be ignorant of the relationship)
- ❑ Even more remarkable are the villages of Chug and Lish, off the Dirang-Tawang road
- ❑ These are very much under the influence of Tawang and their language and people have been classified as Monpa
- ❑ But they are also Mey...

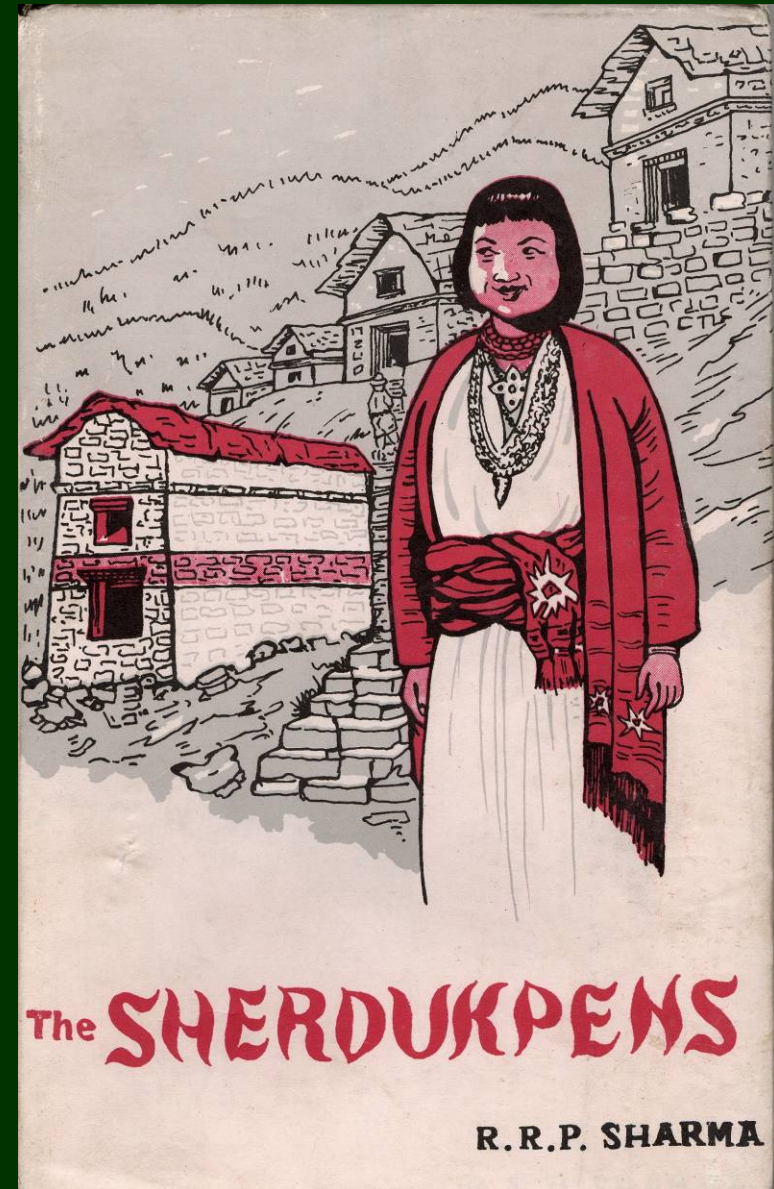
# Bugun

- ❑ Not far from the Mey live the Bugun, a single group living in about eight villages with about 1500 speakers
- ❑ Bugun is also quite distinctive; nonetheless it shares quite a number of lexemes with the May cluster
- ❑ However, the relationship is not very regular
- ❑ Interviews suggested that in former times, there was a patron-client relationship between Mey and Bugun and Bugun has to speak Mey to their masters
- ❑ So it is conceivable that the similarities are due to borrowing
- ❑ Or both, in other words they are related, but there has also been recent borrowing, which is my current hypothesis



# Kamengic

- ❑ Under both hypotheses, Mey and Bugun show very little in the way of a relationship with PTB
- ❑ It is therefore proposed to establish a distinct language phylum with the name Kamengic, which would bring these languages together



# Puroik [=Sulung]

- ❑ Another language which is problematic is Puroik, a language spoke by former hunter-gatherers/vegeculturalists, who live from xx to the Chinese borderlands
- ❑ Indeed the first (and only extensive) monograph on the language is in Chinese.
- ❑ This monograph has a highly problematic account of the phonology (especially the tone) and lexicon (or else the language is quite different)
- ❑ Puroik is also very hard to classify, Sun (1993: fn. 14) says; 'Sulung is a newly discovered distinct Tibeto-Burman language showing remarkable similarities to Bugun, another obscure Tibeto-Burman language spoken to the west of the Sulung country.'

## Puroik [=Sulung] II

- ❑ This is a gross exaggeration; but it does have some common lexicon with Kamengic as a whole, though again the relationship is not very regular
- ❑ If Puroik is genuinely related this would then be greater Kamengic; but further research is needed to establish such a genetic grouping



# Sartang shaman at Rahung village

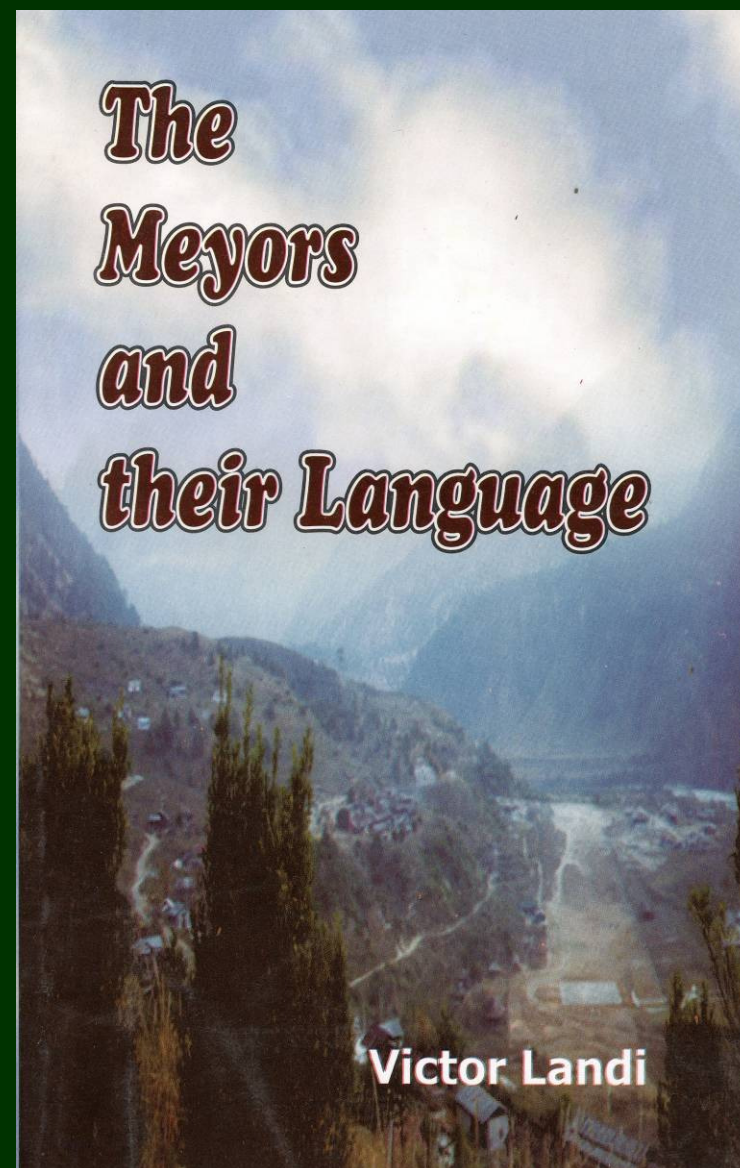


# What type of language is Meyor?

- ❑ The Meyor language, also known as Zakhring, is spoken in Anjaw District, Walong and Kibithoo circles, Arunachal Pradesh. In 2001 there were some 376 speakers scattered in fifteen villages.
- ❑ The only published source on the language is Landi (2005).
- ❑ The core data shows that it is related to the Tibetic type languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, such as Memba and Monpa. These languages have a relatively high proportion of Tibeto-Burman roots.
- ❑ However, Meyor appears to have a significant number of lexical similarities to Miju, an isolate spoken nearby

# What type of language is Meyor?

- ❑ Landi argues there are also similarities with Singpho, but these are either lookalikes or common Tibeto-Burman inheritance
- ❑ So Meyor appears to be Tibetic but has been influenced by Miju in the recent past





# Muddles over Monpa

- ❑ 'Monpa' is essentially a cultural classification which has been confused with a linguistic grouping
- ❑ Chug and Lish Monpa have proven to be Mey
- ❑ Lists of Dirang and Tawang Monpa turn out to be very different
- ❑ The closest relative of Dirang appears to be Tshangla known as Sharchhopkha in Bhutan which also corresponds to Cangluo spoken SE Tibet.
- ❑ The Monpa of Kalaktang, spoken in West Kameng district isolated from the other Monpa appears to be similar to Dirang with some Mey substrate effects
- ❑ Tawang is still not properly classified, although its nearest relatives appear to be the 'Memba' languages spoken in NE Arunachal Pradesh
- ❑ But is certainly 'greater Tibetic'

# Old Dirang





# What else?

- ❑ Languages which continue to be hard to classify include;
- ❑ Hruso may form a cluster with a language called Levai spoken on the Tibetan borderlands but is potentially an isolate
- ❑ Miju
- ❑ Miji
- ❑ Mishmic, a small cluster consisting of Idu and Digaru

However;

- ❑ Turung is part of the Jingpho group
- ❑ Tangsa, Wancho, Nocte are 'Naga' type languages
- ❑ Tani may include more unexpected substrate languages like Milang. The source of much deviant lexicon in Tani is unknown

## IDU MISHMI

PROVERBS

AND

SAYINGS



JIMI PULU



# Where next?

- The whole of Northeast India remains a problematic area and the other highly debatable grouping are the many languages that fall under the label 'Naga'
- Unlike Arunachal Pradesh, there is no one source for linguistic information
- There are locally published dictionaries and a number of theses at NEHU, Shillong and elsewhere
- But there seem to be languages noted on lists and maps for which no data is available at all
- The first task is to try and track down what has been done; and then to try and fill in the blanks
- Not all of these areas are accessible, but once you get in, research is possible

# And that title...

- Once you stop accepting received and repeated wisdom the languages of NE India simply do not resemble Tibeto-Burman or one another
- As a consequence, we have to regard this region not as some sort of backwater, but rather as a major region of diversity in global terms
- Which makes it more resemble the Amazon, or NE Asia or Arnhem Land rather than any region of relative uniformity
- And for this reason it deserves serious attention by descriptive and historical linguists
- But also suggests we should not keep recycling the same old statements without evidence



# Adi women singing and Kuki flute-playing



# THANKS

- To Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for supporting my fieldwork
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