

# From stone (bowls) to iron without ceramics; questioning narratives of Neolithisation via the ethnohistory of Northeast India

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**Roger Blench**

**McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge**

**Department of History, University of Jos**

**Kay Williamson Educational Foundation**

**Visiting Fellow, University of New England, Armidale**

**Academic Visitor, Museu Emilio Goeldi, Belem, Brazil**

# Narratives of the Neolithic I

- It is safe to say that archaeologists have invested a great deal of intellectual capital in the 'Neolithic'
- This is the proposed last stage of the 'Stone Age', before metal tools came in and revolutionised productive systems
- It has been associated with ceramics, with farming and with 'early village communities'
- In standard sources it is still something which appears to happen in the Near East ca. 11,000 BP
- As our understanding of global prehistory becomes richer, none these definitions really work
- We know that ceramics can long precede farming, both in Africa and East Asia
- We know that hunter-gatherers form sedentary communities wherever resources are sufficiently rich, for example on the Northwest Pacific Coast (? and Gobekli Tepe)

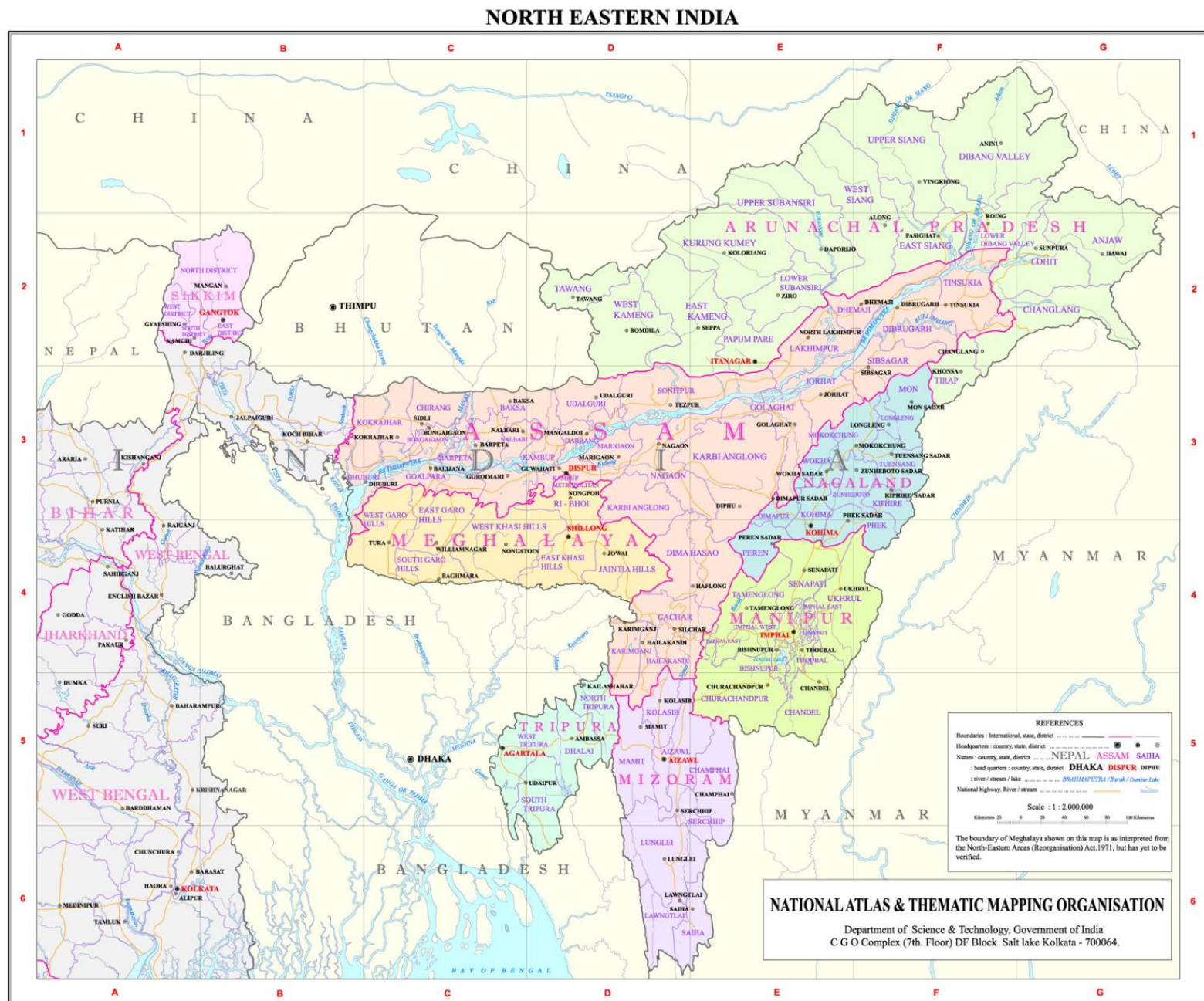
# Narratives of the Neolithic II

- And we know that farming has a very long 'tail' in some parts of the world, that the introduction of domestic plants does not necessarily lead to a revolution in production strategies, for example in the Amazon
- Nonetheless, there is a broad global correlation between sedentism, agriculture, demographic increase and culinary practices (i.e. the use of ceramics for storage and cooking)
- But these play out in very different ways in different regions and whether any overarching term can usefully be adopted is questionable
- This paper focuses on the highly atypical production systems in NE India and in particular a transition to agriculture which seems to have bypassed ceramics, globally very unusual

# Background to Northeast India I

- Northeast India consists of seven states joined only to the rest of India by a thin strip of territory, an accident of colonialism
- Culturally and phenotypically speaking much of it resembles Southeast Asia (excepting Tripura)
- Except for Assam, in the valley of the Brahmaputra, which was colonised by Indo-Aryans from the tenth century onwards
- The terrain is characterised by extremely steep mountains, leading up to the Tibetan Plateau on the west and north
- And hilly areas contiguous with Myanmar and Bangla Desh
- The hill populations, including the Naga/Kuki-Chin on the east and the diverse 'North Assam' peoples in Arunachal Pradesh were regarded by the colonial authorities as difficult to govern and officially classified as 'unpacified'

# NE India; the 'Seven Sisters'



# Background to Northeast India II

- Arunachal Pradesh in particular is claimed by China and following the border war of 1962 (more like a skirmish) access by outsiders has been restricted
- This has had positive and negative consequences; from the point of view of the indigenous peoples the region has remained very underdeveloped
- But on the other hand, the Chinese loggers and traders in wildlife have been kept out (and Laos is a good example of what happens when they do have access).
- In terms of ethnography and linguistics, the consequence has been that all types of research have been severely restricted
- Although, curiously, there is a fairly large ethnographic museum in Itanagar and research is in principle approved of.

# Background to Northeast India III

- Archaeology, such as it is, has focused almost entirely on the ruins of possible early Assamese settlement and an obsessive desire to prove long-term Hindu presence
- One of the disappointing aspects of the whole region of NE India is the complete absence of stratified sites excavated using modern dating techniques and of archaeobotany
- This can only get worse under the present nationalist regime in India ('Sanskrit in the schools')
- This is disappointing because the whole area, far from being a backwater, was formerly a crossroads between India and Yunnan and the middle-point of Tibetan/Assamese trade
- And a focal point for trade, Tibetan goods coming south/down and Assamese wares going north/up



# Ethnolinguistic diversity in Arunachal Pradesh

- Arunachal Pradesh (and NE India in general) is a remarkable area for ethnolinguistic diversity, probably due to the mountainous terrain
- Due to its special status in colonial times, and more recently its proximity to China, its languages and anthropology have been very little studied
- The region is an interface of three global religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, in a matrix of strongly persistent local religious traditions
- The societies are also structurally very diverse, exhibiting a wide range of social organisation
- There is now a strong urge for local peoples to document their own language, culture and customs





# Ethnolinguistic map of NE India

# 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

# The peopling of Arunachal Pradesh I

- ❖ Arunachal Pradesh has a large number of language isolates, which are very different from one another
- ❖ They include Miji, Bangru, Puroik, Mey [=Sherdukpen], Bugun, Hruso, Koro, ?Milang, Idu, Tawrã and Kman [Miju]
- ❖ The linguistic diversity of these groups indicates their long-establishment in the region
- ❖ They are split almost exactly in two by the Tani peoples
- ❖ Tani languages are all relatively close to one another which suggests they began to expand 2000-1500 years ago
- ❖ The Tani have a wide ecological range, from the groups on the snowline, such as the Nah, and rice growers in the Brahmaputra valley, such as the Mising
- ❖ However, they are underlyingly neither yak or rice people and it is possible they began their expansion as cereal cultivators in an area of vegeculturalists.
- ❖ The original inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley look to have been the Bodo-Garo, to judge by their distribution



# Kachari ruins of Dhimapur



# The peopling of Arunachal Pradesh II

- ❖ The Bodo-Garo have been scattered by the Assamese incursions around the 10<sup>th</sup> century
- ❖ East of the valley are the peoples of the Naga/Kuki-Chin complex, a very large (? 80 distinct languages and more in Myanmar and Bangla Desh)
- ❖ Their very different dress and house-form suggests a quite different origin
- ❖ Later came the Tibetic languages, spoken mainly in the west of Arunachal Pradesh and related to those in adjacent Bhutan and Tibet
- ❖ Tibetic languages are very close to one another and their incursions must be quite recent
- ❖ One of the puzzles is the dating of the Khasi populations
- ❖ We know that Austroasiatic speakers must have crossed this region towards Orissa etc. since the Munda speakers established themselves there
- ❖ So it suggests they were in the region *before* the main expansions of the Naga-Kuki-Chin

# Subsistence and the transition to agriculture

- ❑ Production systems in NE India remain highly atypical for the larger region
- ❑ To the north, Tibet has cereals and livestock, agropastoralism underpinned by regionally important small manufactures
- ❑ The Brahmaputra Valley is paddy rice, humid-zone vegetables and arboriculture
- ❑ Until recently, most Arunachali communities depended on a mix of hunted and gathered foods and vegeculture (bananas, sugar-cane, taro, yams)
- ❑ Their only livestock was the semi-domesticated mithun
- 🌐 Strikingly, the Puroik [formerly Sulung] are still hunter-gatherers and depend largely on sago as their staple starch
- ❑ Many other groups still exploit sago as food for pigs, suggesting it played an important role in diet until recently



# Vegetative crops, plantains and taro

- Plantains are both widely grown and semi-wild types exploited throughout the region, along with yams and taro





# Mithuns

- The semi-domesticated mithun (*Bos frontalis*) is the characteristic bovid in NE India, the most prized cultural species.



# Sago processing

- Ethnographic accounts of populations such as the Puroik (Sulung) suggest that they *are* still largely hunters and sago-exploiters and the Milang were until 1 or 2 generations ago .



Milang  
washing sago  
log



# Puroik sago processing, 2017

*tʃao kuʔuu* 'remove the crownshaft'





# Puroik sago processing, 2017

ṭṭao tæə 'chip the sago trunk'





# Puroik sago processing, 2017

ꠘꠞꠞ ꠋꠞꠞ 'wash the sago fibres'





# Puroik sago processing, 2017

*wau* 'trough for sedimentation of starch'





# Puroik sago processing, 2017

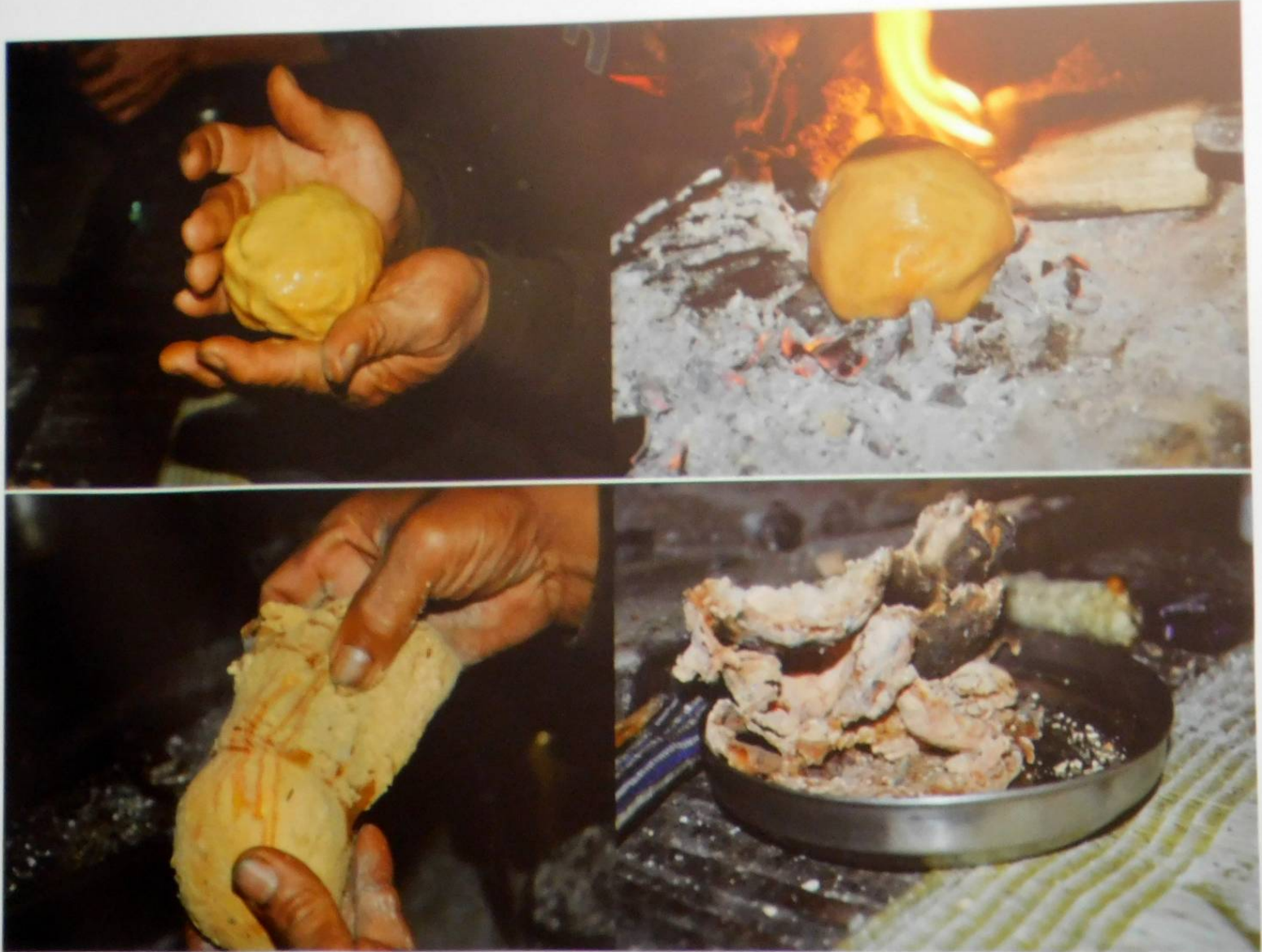
*bii nagjaN* 'sago basket'





# Puroik sago processing, 2017

*bii sao* 'roast sago'



# Pathways to neolithisation I

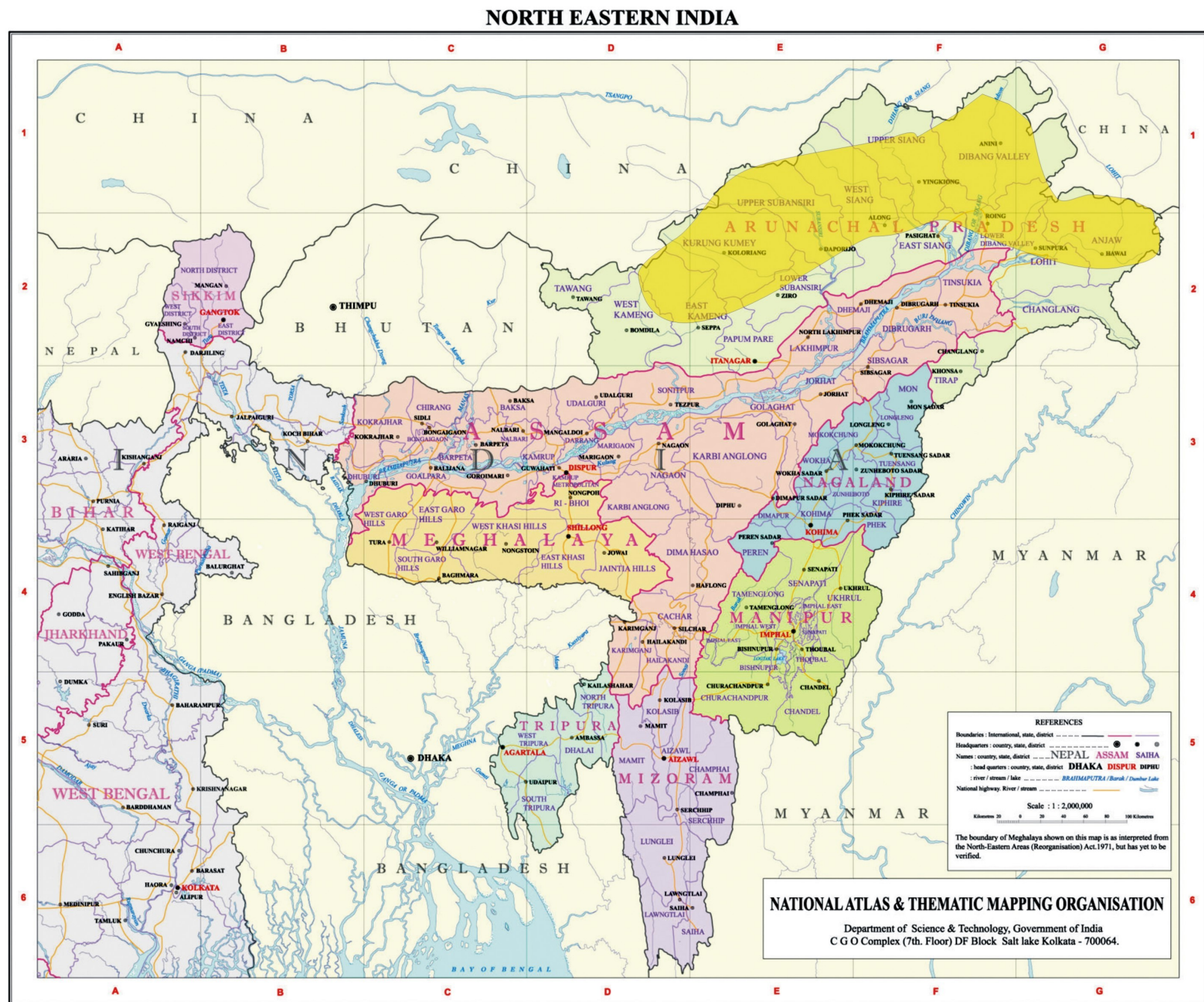
- However, Arunachali societies present a major structural puzzle; they don't seem to have any pottery
- At first I thought this was the consequence of replacing cooking pots with iron cauldrons
- But in discussion it became clear that iron cauldrons had replaced stone bowls. The Idu showed me a stone bowl used for cooking in former times, some of which are still kept around for heritage reasons.
- And intriguingly, there is no evidence that these communities ever made or used pottery (or indeed smelted iron)
- The classic characterisation of Highland New Guinea was 'from stone to steel'

# Pathways to neolithisation II

- And this is, perversely what seems to have happened in this region, although along a very different trajectory
- So next I plotted out the region where the non-ceramic tradition had taken place



# Non-pottery societies in NE India



# Pathways to neolithisation II

- Agricultural societies pretty much always go through a ceramic phase as part of neolithisation, usually lasting millennia
- The Mishmi peoples (and the Koro, Hruso and Mijiic peoples) may have omitted this stage
- and never got around to smelting iron because it could be traded with Tibet
- All of which points to high dependence on gathered resources until recently
- Presumably in combination with vegeculture, sago etc.



# Khasi megaliths





# Arunachal Pradesh State Museum





# Ita fort





# Tawang monastery



# Vernacular architecture

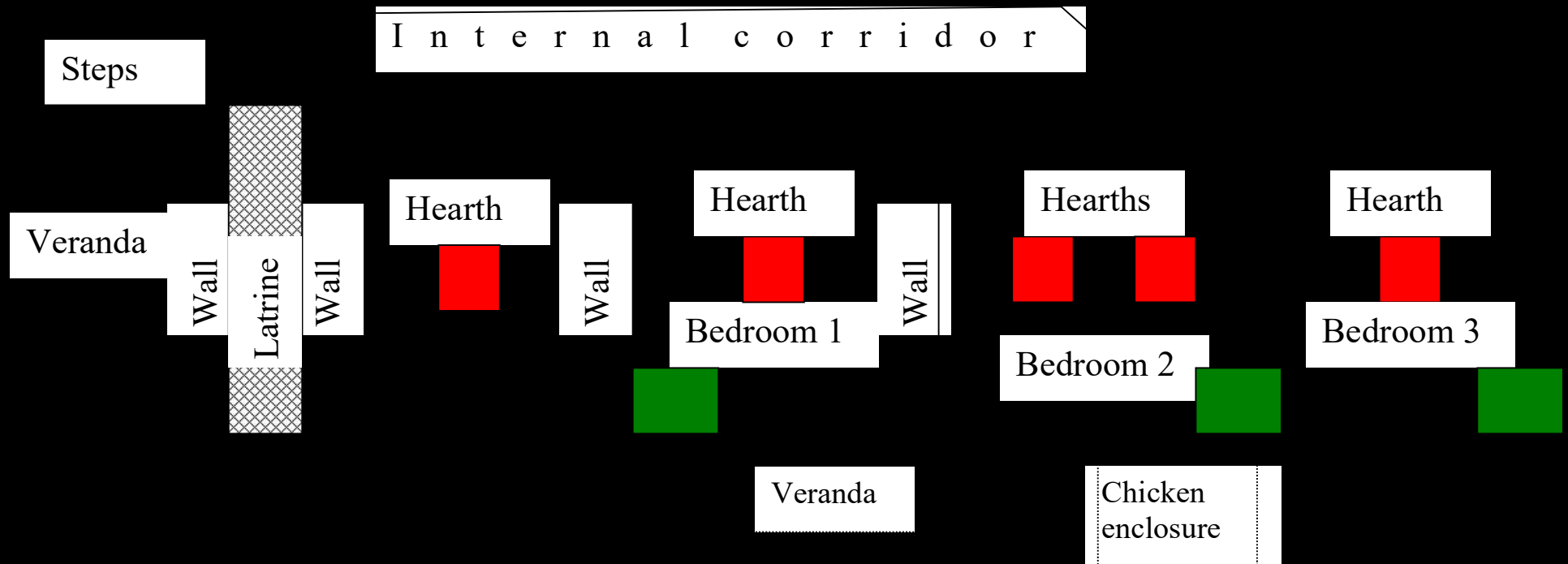
- Apart from historical monuments, vernacular architecture reflects different lifestyles and social structure
- The three Mishmi peoples all share the tradition of the longhouse, which is connected with polygamy. Each wife has a separate living space and these are accessed by a long internal corridor

## Idu longhouse



# Kman longhouse

- The graphic shows a schematic of a Kman longhouse, showing how the hearths are connected by a long internal corridor





# Milang granaries





# Naga morung





# Monpa house, Old Dirang





# Intriguing developments in archaeology

Fragments of stone bowls  
excavated in Assam two  
weeks ago







# Mishmi: three peoples, one name

- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh consist of three different groups, speaking three distinct languages
- These are the Idu [also Kera.a], the Tawrã [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Miju]
- It is claimed that two of these languages are related, Idu and Tawrã, but the third, Kman, is quite different
- These languages are usually classified as Tibeto-Burman, but the evidence for this is very weak
- They are probably language isolates
- A fourth language, Meyor [=Zha], spoken in Walong and Kibitho, has many common features with Kman, but is probably not related genetically

# Mishmi: three peoples, a common culture

- The Mishmi peoples share many common cultural features which make them distinct from other peoples of Arunachal Pradesh
- The most important of these is polygamy, which is reflected in the distinctive house type, the long house
- In this, each wife had her own space, with associated pig-rearing and the rooms were joined by a long internal corridor
- Headhunting was also (formerly) practised as is the custom of displaying the skulls of sacrificed animals
- Multiple language registers (including poetic, hunting and shamanistic)
- All of this suggests centuries of common interaction, although we know almost nothing about the long history of the Mishmi



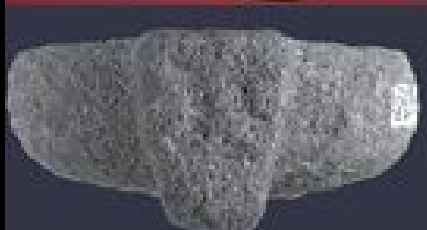
# Mishmi: three peoples, ideological culture

- At the cultural level, relationships are quite different. Despite their overt linguistic differences, Tawra and Kman are held to be two aspects of the same culture and unrelated to Idu.
- Since 2000, a slew of local publications have appeared which include comparative wordlists, dialogues and culture guides in the two languages.
- Among these are reading and writing books which attempt to force them into a common orthography, despite the obvious differences in their phonology.
- Kman shamans chant largely in Tawra, and that innovative church-like organisations such as the Mishmi Faith Promotion Society (MFPS) hold services in a mixed Kman/Tawra shamanic register.

# Where else in the world do stone bowls occur?

- Archaeologically speaking, the most interesting parallels are found in California and Korea
- The problem is often to know what they were used for, as many examples seem to be mortars rather than cooking pots.
- Both seem to be present in California as early as 9000 BP (if these sort of dates can be trusted)
- But no evidence for cooking pots

# Near Eastern stone bowls



## STONE VESSELS IN THE NEAR EAST DURING THE IRON AGE AND THE PERSIAN PERIOD

(C. 1200-330 BCE)

Andrea Squitieri

ARCHAEOPRESS  
ANCIENT  
NEAR EASTERN  
ARCHAEOLOGY 2

# Korean stone bowls, still in use





# California stone bowls



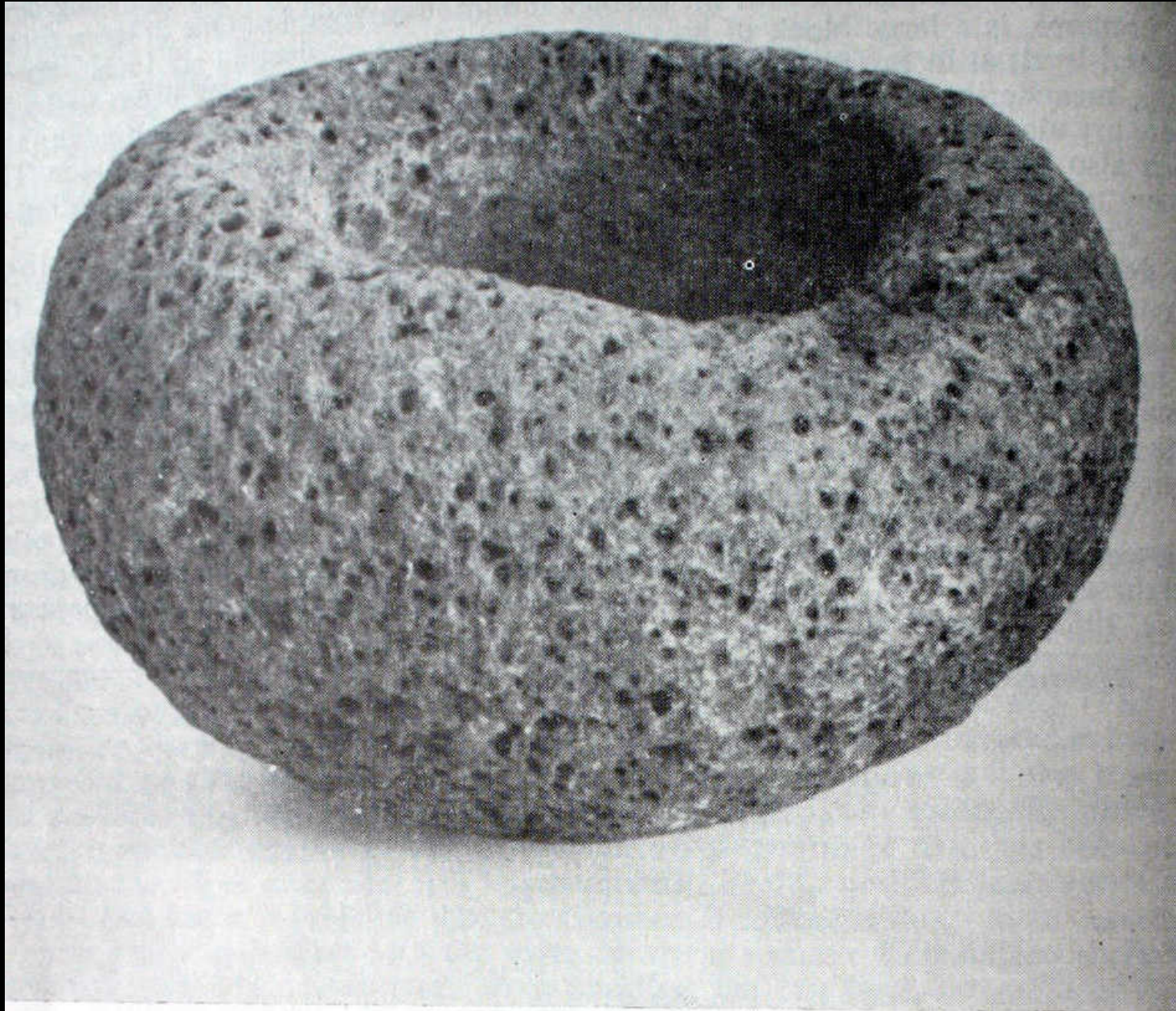
**Gabrielino sandstone bowl  
7000 BC**

**Chumash stone  
bowl**





# Kenya stone bowls, probably mortars



*Stone bowl from Ol Molog.*



# Architecture

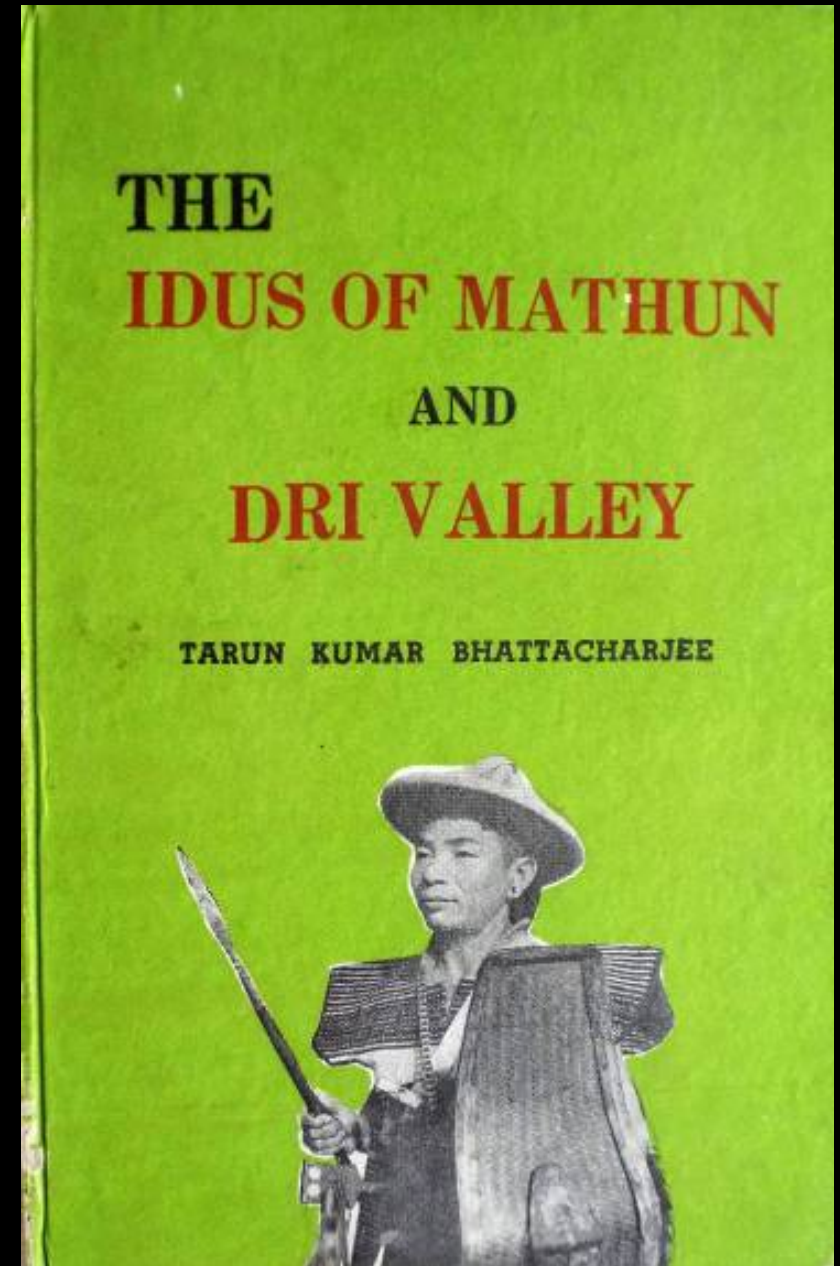
- The three Mishmi peoples all share the tradition of the longhouse, which is connected with polygamy

## Idu longhouse





# Anthropology of the Idu





# Kman longhouse



# Shamans

- Shamans are known as *igu* in Idu, *gwak* in Tawra and *katowat* in Kman
- They are called upon to recite chants and conduct sacrifices for sick persons, sometimes with drumming and gongs
- Pigs, chickens and mithuns are sacrificed
- The chants are in a special language which is only known to the shamans





# Idu Shaman

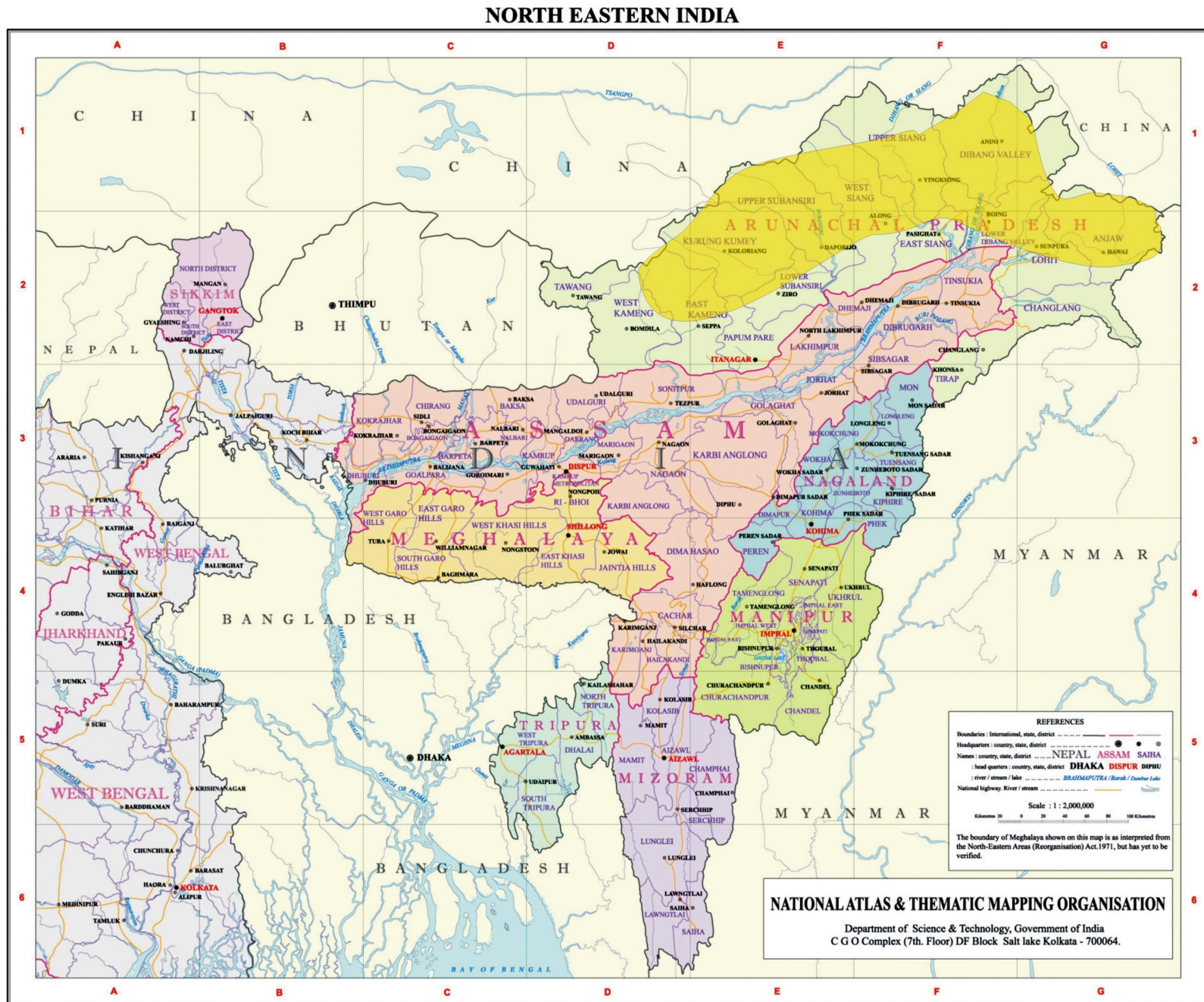
- The language of shamans is not a 'secret' language, and people are quite willing to teach it to you if you have a command of the base language



# Shared culture

- Another very striking common feature is the 'trophy wall' where the skulls of larger animals, either shot by a hunter or sacrificed, are displayed along the inner corridor of the house

# The area where pottery was absent

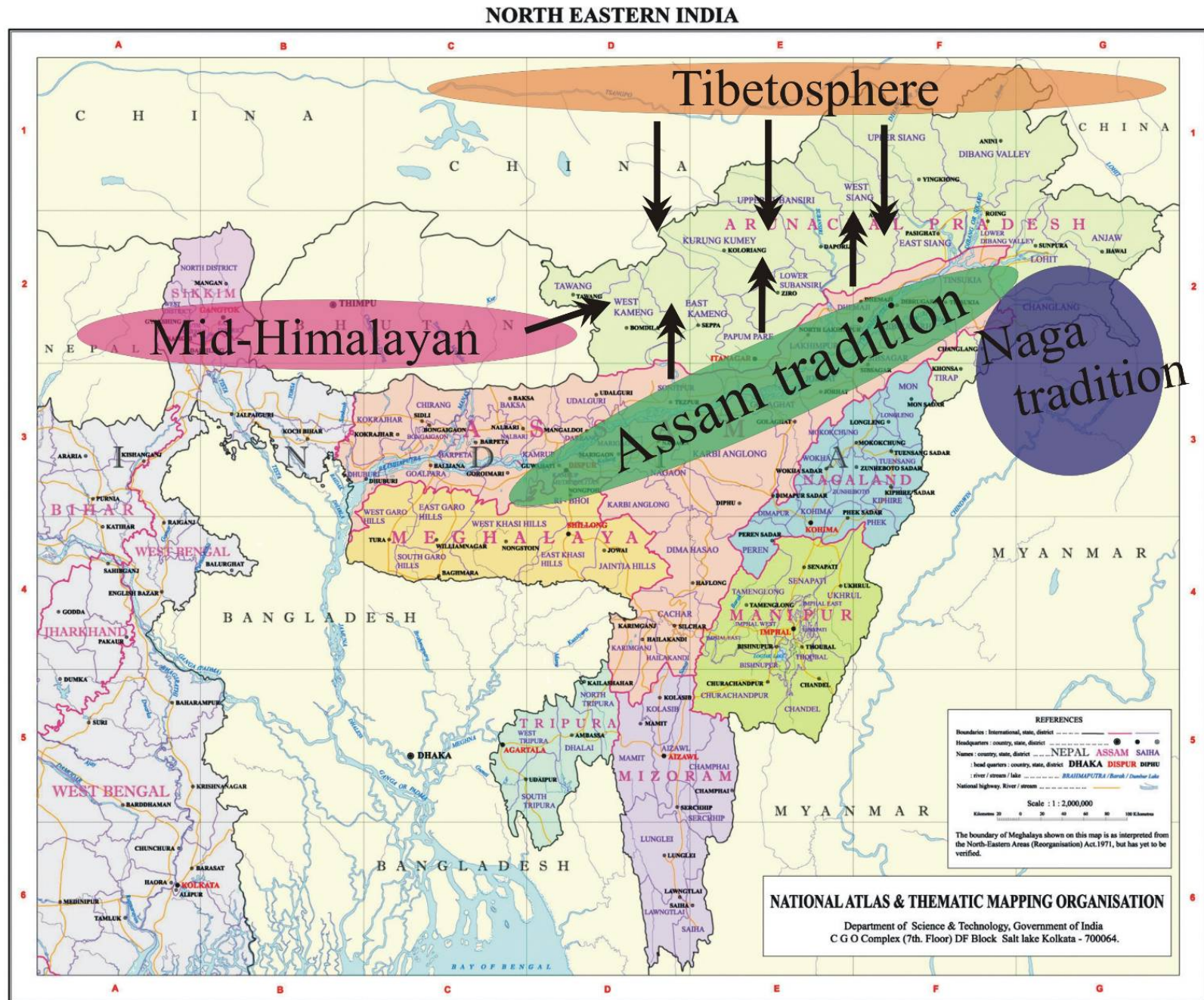




# Where could ceramics come from?

- Pottery, both practical ceramics and modelled terracotta, is made on all four sides of Arunachal Pradesh;
  - Assam to the South
  - Tibet to the North
  - Nepal/Bhutan to the West
  - And Myanmar to the East
- The most obvious source of all types of ceramics is Assam, the valley of the Brahmaputra
- The Assamese have two main castes, specialising in both wheel-turned pots (Kumars) and terracotta models, religious goods and lamps etc. (Hira)
- These relate strongly to broader continental traditions, and there is no reason to think they were not brought when the Assamese first entered the valley (ca. 1000 AD)

## External ceramic traditions





# Craft ceramics in Assam

## *Terracotta* ~ पक्की मिट्टी से सजावट की चीज़ बना ने की कला

There are two communities in Assam. They are Hira and Kumar. They are specialize in clay and terracotta craftwork. Both the communities work in their own style. The compression method is followed by Hiras. They are specialize in clay and terracotta craftwork and womenfolk are mostly engaged in this work. On the other hand the Kumars pursue the wheel method. They are specialize also art of pottery work. Initially these products were made on the wheel with experienced hands. Lastly they dried those things in oven. Diyas, Earthen lamps, clay dolls, plates, incense sticks holders, chains, pitchers and cups are some of the common products made by them. Goalpara of Assam are famous for its terracotta idols. Kamrup is popular for its terracotta industry. Asharikandi village ous of of Assam is for ethic art. The contemporary terracotta artisans not only focus in making traditional images of gods and goddesses but also involve in producing an array of fashionable items like toys, dolls, vases, pots etc.



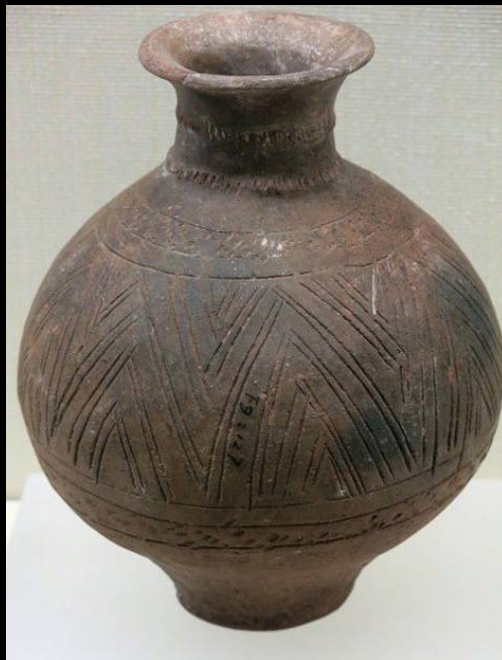
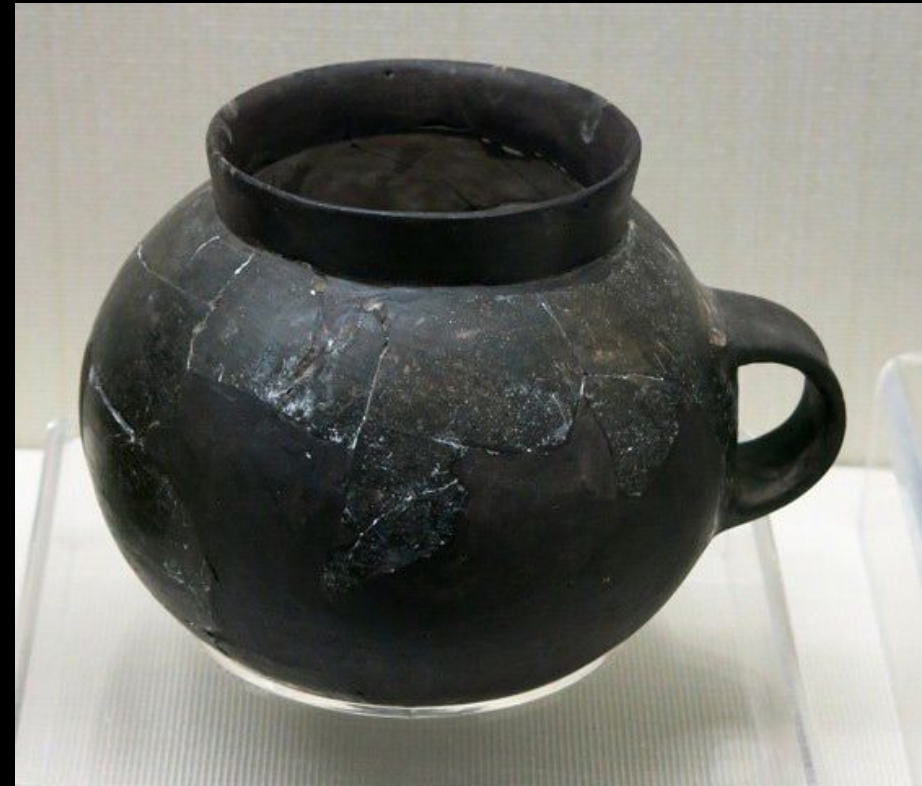


# Assam terracottas





# Tibetan pottery (Lhasa museum)





# Craft ceramics in Bhaktapur, Nepal





# Naga pottery I

- The Naga peoples, south and east of Arunachal, also made practical pottery, mainly for cooking and beer. They seem to have not used the wheel and all their pots are made by hand and roughly fired. Pottery was made exclusively by women



# Naga pottery II

## ■ Blackware



## ■ Paddle-impressed. Diorama at Kohima





# So why didn't they adopt pottery?

- ❑ Since all the Mishmi were participants in elaborate trade networks stretching from the Brahmaputra to Lhasa it is not feasible to suggest they didn't know about pottery
- ❑ Therefore they must be refuseniks, they must have been aware of the technology and decided not to adopt it
- ❑ Now there are cases globally where people have pottery and cease to use it. The Polynesians are a case in point; archaeology shows that they had Lapita in the earliest phases, but decided not to carry on with the tradition.
- ❑ This is somewhat different, and could be resources; the right sort of clay was simply not available in the islands where they were heading
- ❑ But there is no evidence that the peoples of Arunachal Pradesh ever made pottery

# Hunters' trophies: Idu



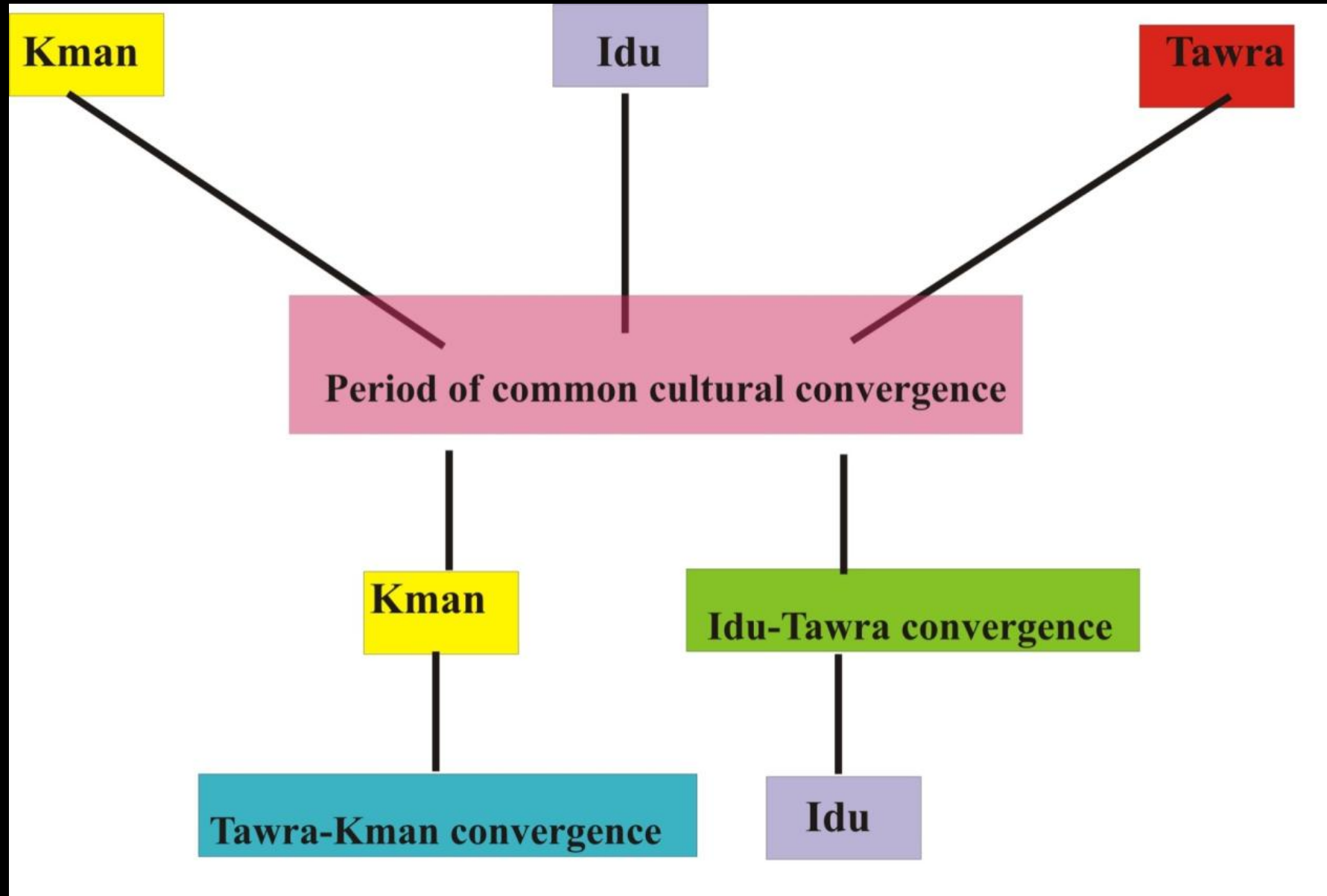


# Vegetative crops, plantains and taro

- Plantains are both widely grown and semi-wild types exploited throughout the region, along with yams and taro



# A speculative model of Mishmi historical interaction





# THANKS

■ To the Idu, Kman and Tawra communities for interest and support

■ Special thanks to Dr. Mite Lingi and the ILDC, Sokhep Kri and Jogin Tamai for patient language work

■ And the organisers

