

The journey of the dead in NE India: eschatology of the Idu and Kman

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The journey of the dead in Northeast India

- ❖ Northeast India is a large, complex region, bordering Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangla Desh
- ❖ It is ethnolinguistically one of the most diverse regions of Asia
- ❖ It is also characterised by highly complex religious systems, which bear family resemblances, but which are also quite distinct from one people to another
- ❖ In all of these, shamanism plays a major role. Shamans are required at all major ceremonies, and perform lengthy chants in hard-to-interpret language
- ❖ In particular, they are required to manage the journey of the soul after death

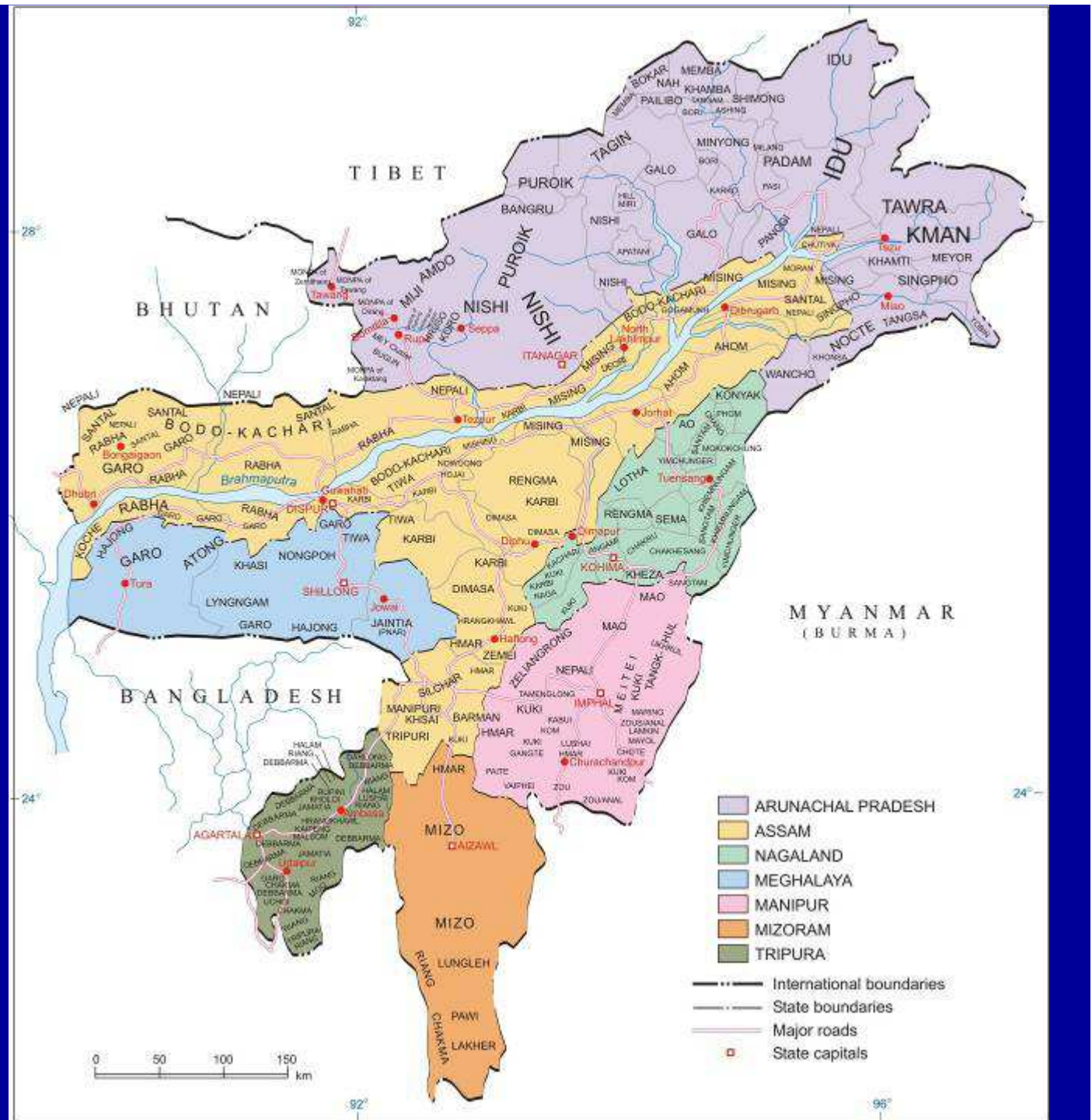
The 'tortuous path'

- The anthropologist Christoph Fürer-Haimendorf noted in 1953 p. 42
- The most characteristic feature of the eschatological beliefs of most of these tribes [in Arunachal Pradesh] is a very detailed picture of the Land of the Dead, including the often tortuous path by which it is reached'

The Idu and the Kman

- ❖ The Northeast of Arunachal Pradesh is home to the three Mishmi peoples, the Idu, Tawra [=Digaru] and Kman [=Miju]
- ❖ This presentation focuses on the Idu and Kman who have been studied in more detail

Ethnolinguistic map of NE India



The Mishmi peoples



General characteristics of religion

- ❖ The concept of a 'religion' is essentially external to Idu and Kman society, an organised body of belief subscribed to by outsiders.
- ❖ Although relations with the supernatural are broadly coherent, that is because they are a description of the world.
- ❖ The spirits who both plague and benefit human society are as real as the animals and plants around the Kman. Dealing with them is therefore a matter of experience.
- ❖ The terrain in which these peoples live is reflected in their spiritual hierarchies, as is the manner of death of individuals. As a consequence, death is a crucial event which must be dealt with in a manner which is strongly prescribed.
- ❖ For the soul of a dead person to reach its eventual destination, a complex journey is undertaken. Similarly, the world is replete with potentially dangerous consequences to careless actions, and these must be met with appropriate response.

General characteristics of religion II

- ❖ The Mishmi peoples live in an environment which encompasses a wide variety of ecozones, from the snowline of Tibet to the plains of the Brahmaputra.
- ❖ This is also a highly risky environment. Death can come from landslides, earthquakes, floods, epidemic disease, falling from steep cliffs
- ❖ As a consequence, the deities the Mishmi recognise are related to individual ecozones
- ❖ Crossing boundaries is effectively a type of transgression, and, for example, hunting the animals of the snowline is subject significant restrictions.
- ❖ The spirits which control the ecozones are quite abstract, and are not the subject of specific sacrifices
- ❖ These are reserved for more concrete spirits who interact with people on a daily basis, causing disease or mischief
- ❖ The description of the worlds after death corresponds to the manner of death of the individual

Categorisation of Idu deities

❖ The general Idu term for spirits or other supernatural beings is *khānyū*. The *khānyū* can be broadly classified into five main categories;

Ecozonal deities	Unseen, abstract deities associated with landscapes	Abstract	↓
Malevolent environmental spirits	Unseen spirits associated with death and danger in the environment		↓
Disease spirits	Unseen spirits causing disease		↓
Guardian spirits	Abstract spirits looking after people and living things, wild and domestic		↓
Folklore spirits	Visible spirits interacting with people	Concrete	↓

The vertical domains of the Idu deities

High
mountains

Ṅgōlō
snowline

Mid-zone

Ēsō ēpā

broadleaf forest

Plains

Brùù

open grassland, marsh

Idu: the early stages following death

- ❖ The Idu describe four underworlds, situated in some alternate plane of reality.
- ❖ When a person dies, their soul, *màṛà*, is transformed into a *mēgrá* [àhũ thrõ in shamanic register], corresponding approximately to a ghost.
- ❖ After death, the soul first arrives at *ādē*, the doorway in the middle of the house that opens on the corridor which connects the separate hearths
- ❖ Before reaching the underworld, the soul stays around the house awaiting the performance of a complex sequence of mortuary rituals which take place over five days.
- ❖ If the rituals are not performed then the soul will not reach *mēgrā mrā* and soul wanders around the abode of the living.

Problems with poorly performed rituals

- ❖ *Mēgrá* do appear to the living in dreams. This is a sign that the *īgū* has not performed the ritual properly.
- ❖ To protect the household the ritual *ètōnāsà* or alternatively *āmrásè* is performed and the *mēgrá* then disappears. As an example of the problems this causes a case from Dambuk, west of Roing, which happened in 2005. A wife was converted to Christianity and thus failed to perform the appropriate rituals.
- ❖ After a few months the *mēgrá* returned and disturbed the house, like a poltergeist, throwing utensils about and making strange noises.
- ❖ So an *īgū* was called to perform the rituals correctly, the *mēgrá* was apparently satisfied and ceased troubling the household.

Releasing the dead soul

- ❖ One of the key rituals after death is *ìl' àmbrā*, where a pig is killed. The ritual is performed at the time of taking food.
- ❖ The first nourishment of the soul is when then *mēgrá* appears in the form of a housefly. The houseowner feeds the pig and the fly and feasts on the food droppings.
- ❖ Another ritual *àthūyā àthà* is performed when the body is buried. The *īgū* places a packet of food on the fence erected over the grave.
- ❖ At the end of the ritual the *īgū* cuts off the packet, the *mēgrá* in human form will eat the food, which will be its last meal before leaving this world.

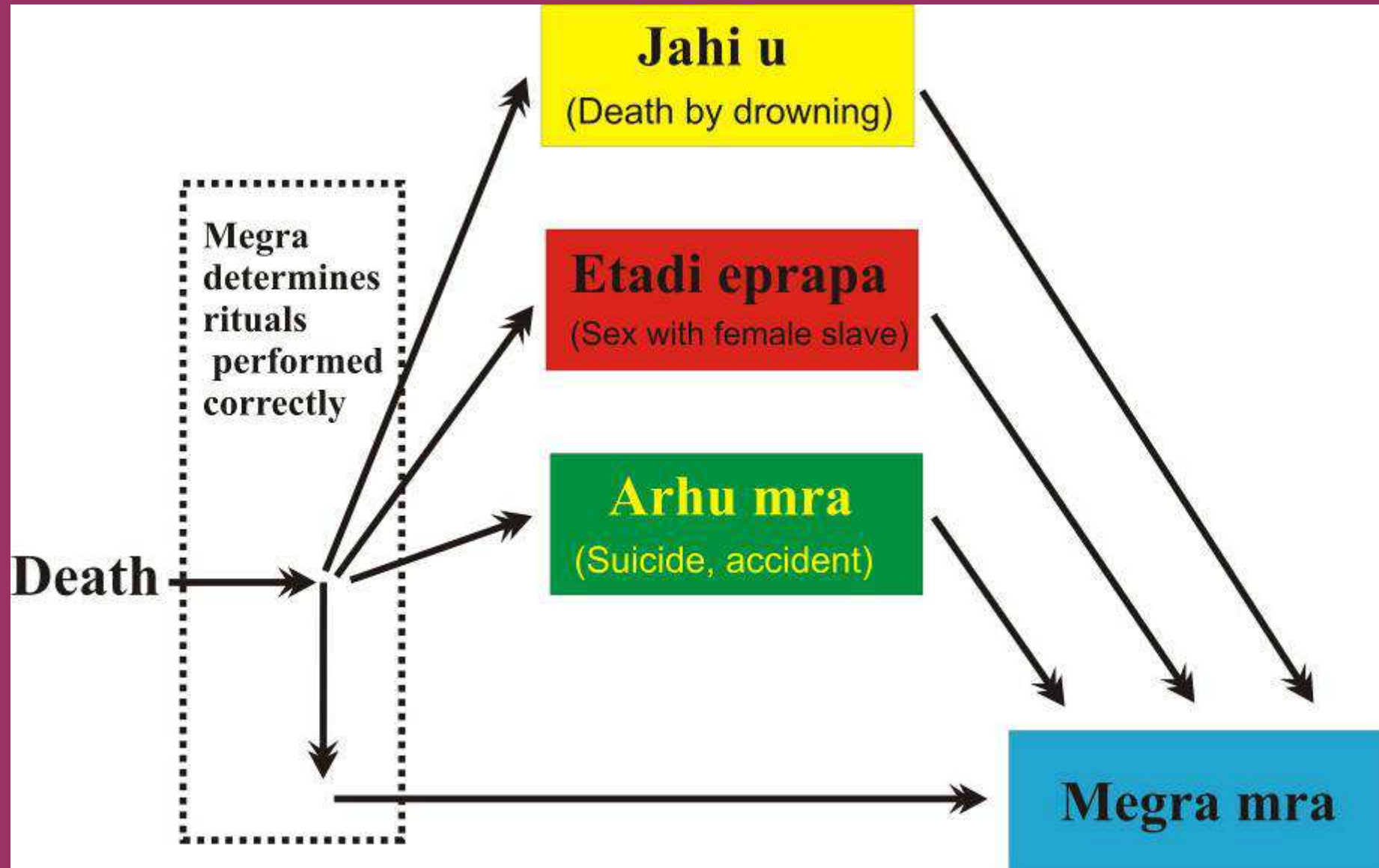
The four underworlds of the Idu I

- ❖ *mēgrá mrá*. lit. ghostly fields. All *mēgrás* eventually reach this place, a sort of Eden where the temperature is good, the fields bountiful and family life tranquil.
- ❖ People who have died in the normal course of events are sent here directly. There is some disagreement about whether this is furnished with modern technology such as cars and mobile phones or remains in a prelapsarian state.
- ❖ Certainly the modern practice of burying the deceased's mobile phone in the *brōphr̥* ritual suggests they will be useful. Hence it is indeed possible that the underworld is equipped with some kind of network coverage.
- ❖ *àṛù mrā*. Those who commit suicide, are murdered or suffer accidental death (*ījī àṛù bā* unnatural death) such as falling from a cliff will be sent here. A very hot place where there is much sand and little vegetation. Crops are poor and people subsist on wild roots and leaves. People have to stay for 3-6 years before passing to *mēgrā mrá*.

The four underworlds of the Idu II

- ❖ *jāhí.ú* is on the bank of a water body and people who die of drowning will be sent here. There is little food here and souls are always hungry. The mustard plant *tú.shì* ~ *tú.ná*, *èkà* [buckwheat] and *ābrā* grow here. A cold wind constantly blows. Souls try to cook food on the shells of eggs but the wind keeps putting out the fire. Souls must subsist on wild roots and tubers. People have to stay for 3-6 years before passing to *mēgrā mrá*.
- ❖ *ètádī èprāpà*. bird + cliff. People who (formerly) had sex with a female slave were sent here. The vegetation consists of exotic plants such as grow in marshy areas; a plant called *àyìntīnā* grows here. Wild places, not frequented by people. When someone whose family was formerly a slave dies they have to drink water from a place called *ēpò àcìkò* [slave + water + place].

The route to the Megra mra



Leading the soul to the afterlife

- ❑ After the soul leaves the body it must be led by the igu to the underworld. The mourning chant, Anjaa, takes in a spiritual journey
- ❑ There are three types of funerary ceremony;

Name	Status	Originator
Brõcā	Least elaborate	Ayõthrorhu
Àmràsè	Median	Awuperhu
Yà	Most elaborate	Sinerhu

Of these, Ya is the most prestigious

Remarkably, two accounts of the journey of the soul after death have appeared at the same time

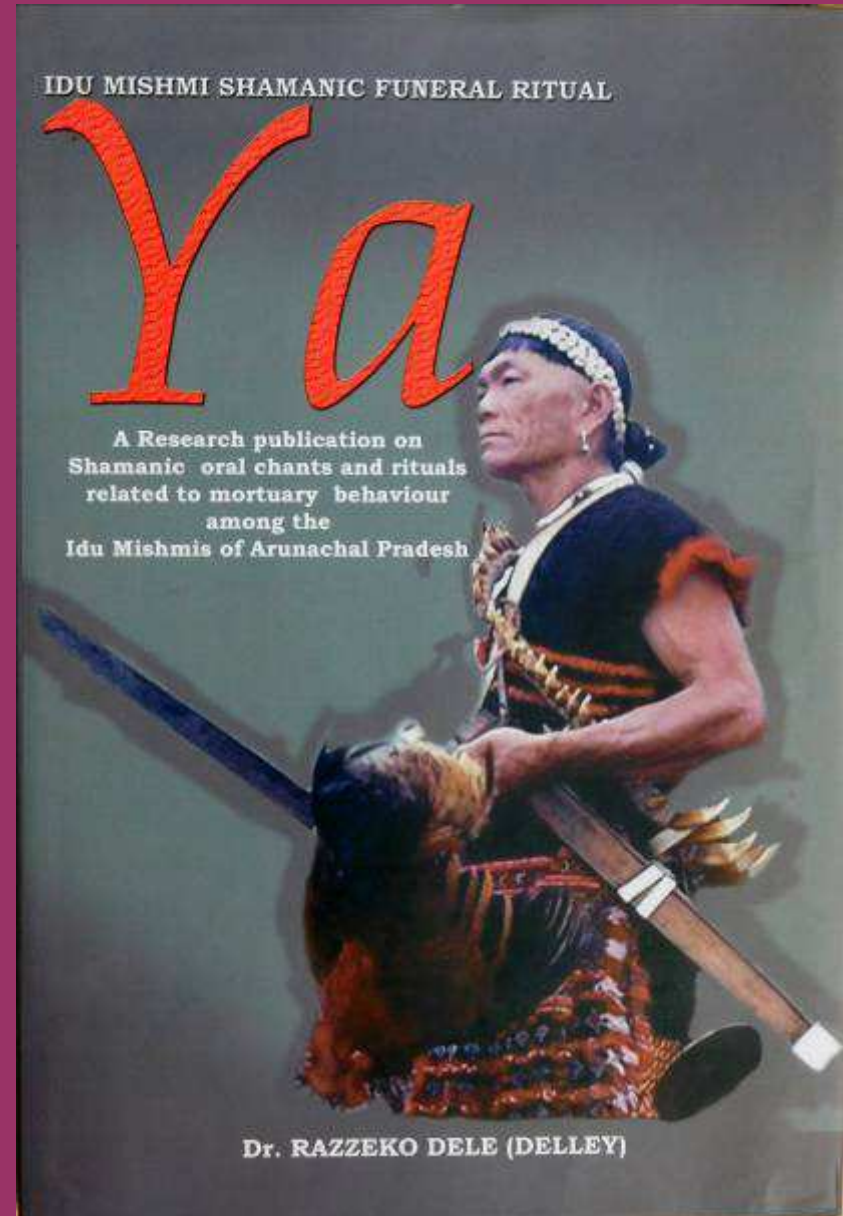
Journey described in Ya

This one by Rezzeko Dele, lists 113 places as rest stops

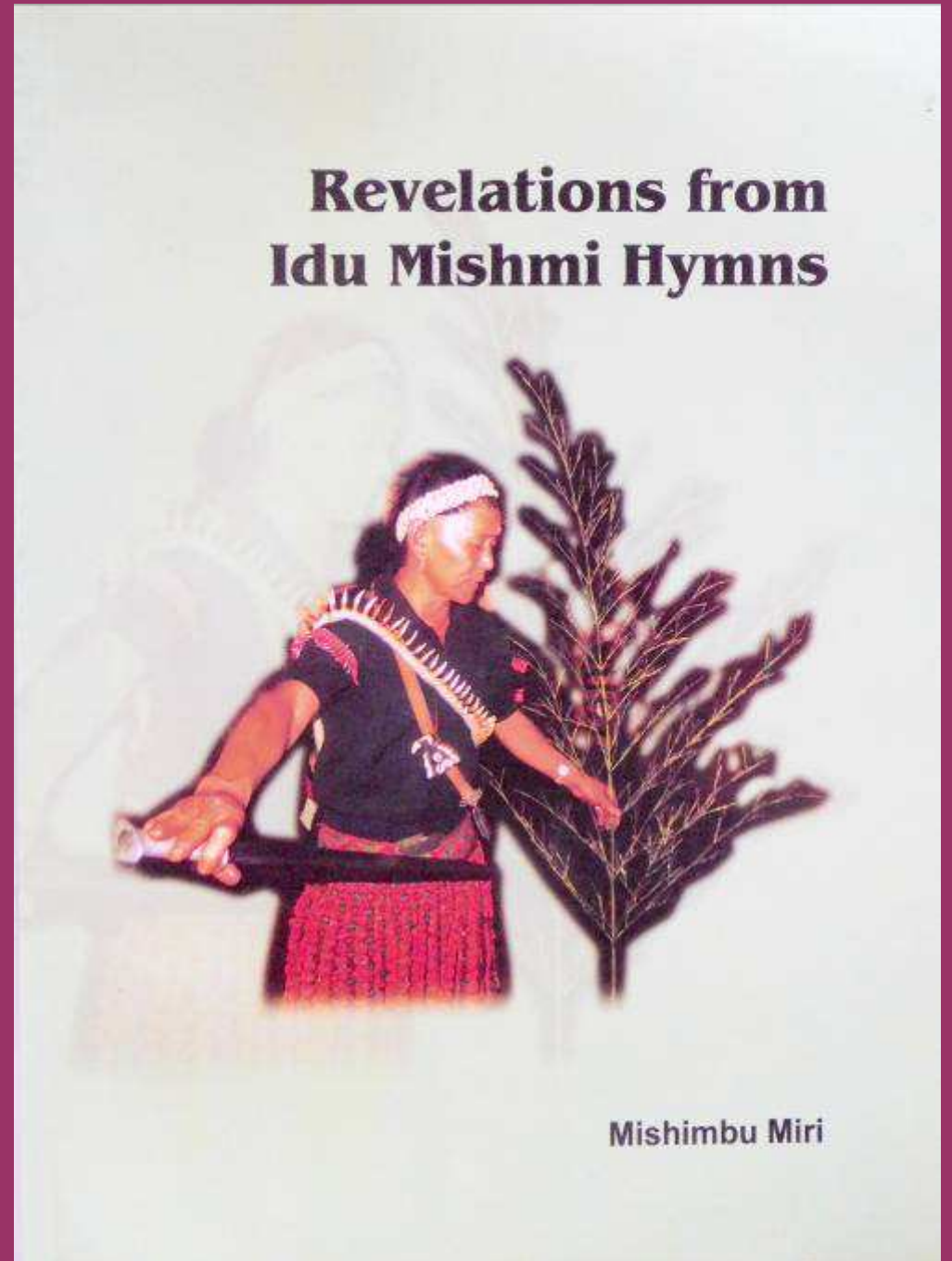
Some of these places can be easily identified, while others remain opaque

It is likely they record some of the migrations of the Idu people, or perhaps individual clans

Since places in Tibet are mentioned



- While Miri's account lists 149 places
- Clearly more work is required to reconcile these accounts



Mishmi 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

Kman Shaman



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



Idu Shamans performing for Rẽ

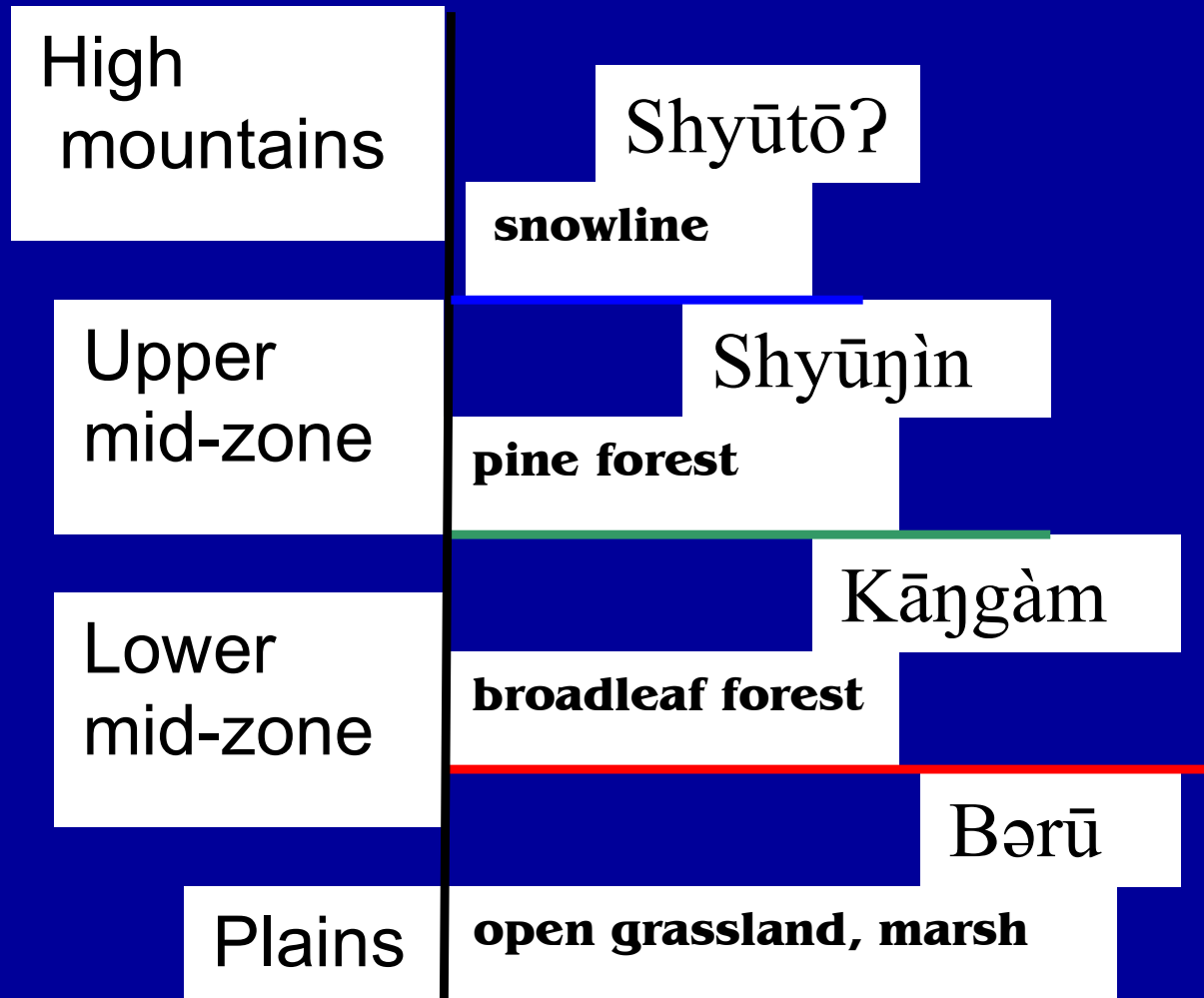


Kman religion

- ❑ Kman religion has many features in common with Idu, but not feature the same elaborate journey of the soul
- ❑ Kman recognise numerous environmental and malevolent spirits, and have a complex ritual process to protect the household and the community from their depredations
- ❑ Despite the major linguistic divided, Kman and Tawra shamanic practice is almost identical, for example the creation of *khram*, death houses, unknown to the Idu
- ❑ More surprisingly, many of the shamanic chants of the Kman are in a form of Tawra

The vertical domains of the Kman deities

The Kman environment is marked by extreme vertical slopes and the fauna, flora and general climate vary sharply in accordance with the climatic zones. As a consequence, these zones are overseen by ecozonal deities. Most of these deities are considered as both male and female, except for Bārū.



Kman: the soul departs

- ❑ Each Kman individual has a soul, *hāṇ*, which accompanies them in life and departs when they die. People who are seen to be mad or in a fugue state are believed to have a wandering *hāṇ*, which can be retrieved by the *kātūwàt*.
- ❑ The usual cause of this is persecution by a *Brò?* which may be dissatisfied with offerings, or disgruntled when it has been ignored. It causes the *hāṇ* to leave the body, and the *kātūwàt* must diagnose which *Brò?* should be propitiated to bring it back.
- ❑ Apart from *hāṇ*, a life-force, *sha?*, is present in both humans and domestic animals suitable for sacrifice. This force can also be transferred to inanimate objects, such as swords, *shabre*, through sacrifices.
- ❑ A sword which has strong *sha?* will be most effective in warfare. Humans who lose *sha?*, through attack by spirits (usually manifested as sickness), gradually grow weaker and require the ministrations of the *kātūwàt* to regain their *shā?* and thus their health.

Kman: from soul to ghost

After an individual dies, their soul becomes a ghost, *kāma · w*, which stays near the house until the *tālu ·* ceremony sends it on to *kāma · w glàt*, the underworld.

Unlike their neighbours, the Idu, who populate the destination of ghosts with multiple alternative underworlds, the Kman universe is broadly vertical.

All ghosts eventually reach *kāma · w glàt*, the village (or world) of ghosts, but some must pass through the two levels of *Thāngī*, which is situated in the sky.

The journey of a *kāma · w* is determined by the manner of a person's death. Anyone who has died by accident, whether drowning, landslide, or from another environmental problem, as well as those who die by suicide or murder, are sent to *Thāngī*.

Thāngī has two levels, with the upper one controlled by a female deity called *Ə.saʔ Thāngī*. The people who die by accident go to the upper *Thāngī*. Only a few people live up there but they are young, handsome, joyful people.

The lower one is controlled by *əpāwʔ Thàngì*, a snake no gender. No one goes there, but it is benevolent and friendly to humans when propitiated.

Kman: from soul to ghost II

- Curiously, *Thāṅgī* is said to be a joyful place with all day spent in dancing and merrymaking, perhaps to compensate for the negative aspects of the death itself.
- Indeed *Thāṅgī* is so entertaining, the *kāma ·w* there are said to encourage further accidents and suicides to bring in more people.
- This presumably reflects the widespread folk-belief that deaths come in clusters.
- To prevent further mortality and release the ghosts from *Thāṅgī*, a *kāmbriṅ* is commissioned to perform a *təlu* to allow them to go onwards to *kāma ·w glaăt*.
- During the *təlu* ceremony, the *kāma ·w* already in the village of the dead attempt to persuade their relatives to join them.
- Some of those present may become possessed and begin speaking in the voices of the dead, showing that their *hāṅ* has temporarily left their body. The *kāmbriṅ* must prevent this or the possessed may also die.

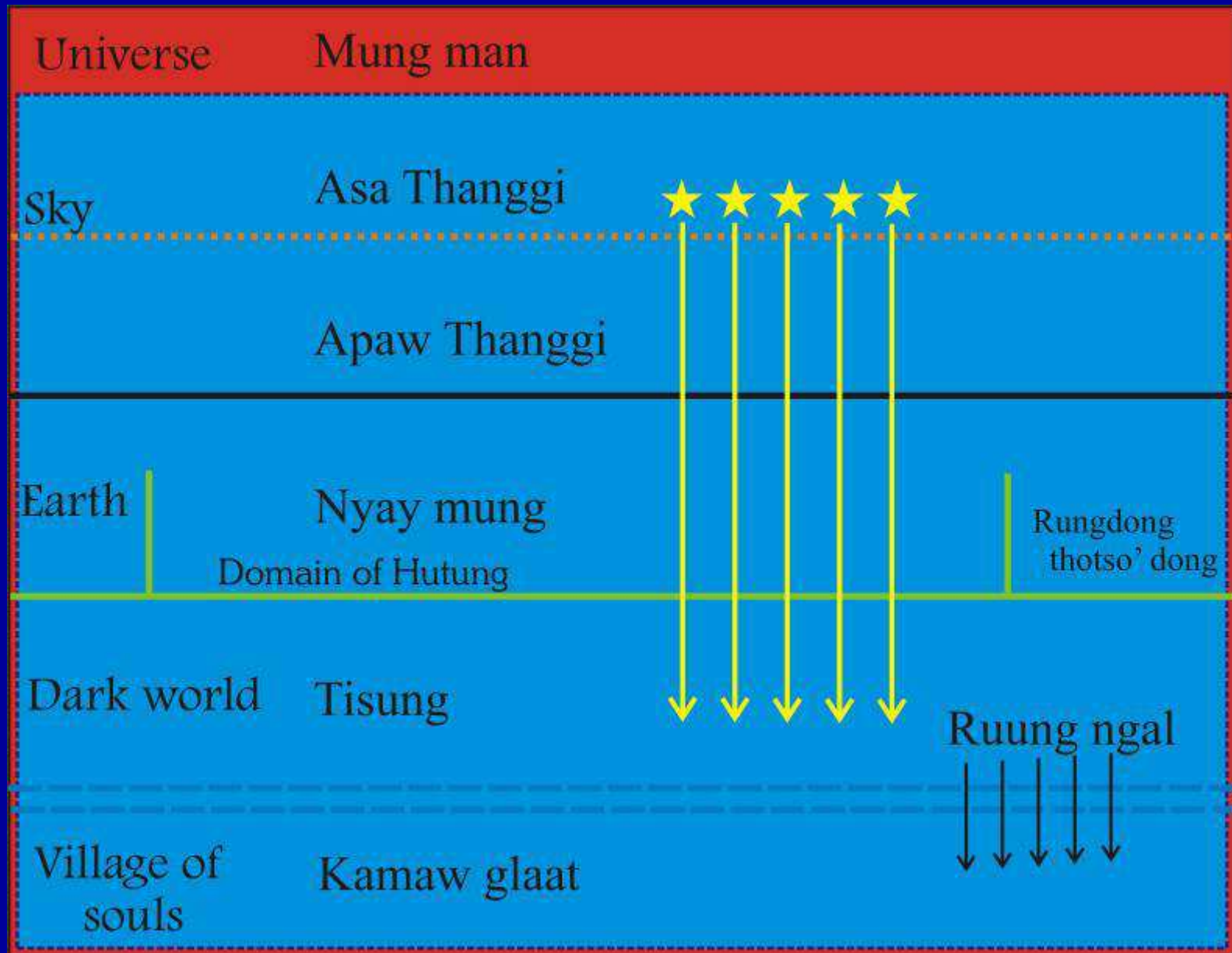
Kman: from soul to ghost III

- For those who die in an expected manner, they pass down through the earth to the village of ghosts in an orderly fashion.
- On the way, they must pass through *Tīsūŋ*, a zone beneath the earth which is entirely dark and featureless. Some call this *Nyayrun*, the tunnel.
- However, to light their way, the *kāmbriŋ* brings down the stars (*ŋācī ŋātūŋ*) through the performance of *təlu*.
- When the ghosts emerge from *Tīsūŋ* they find themselves on the bank of a broad river or water body in sight of a harbour, *Rūŋ ŋāl*. The opposite bank, which is visible, is the *kāmaw glaāt*, and the numerous ghosts call out to them.
- There are many boats tied up, but the river can also be crossed by rope and wire bridges, *klo?* and *təwəy*. The priest puts the ghost into a boat, he or she crosses to *kāmaw glaāt*, and the priest returns to the upper world.

Kman: from soul to ghost IV

- *Kāmaw glaàt* is described as very similar to the present world, with villages and agriculture, but where the food is plentiful and the dangers that lead souls to *Thāṅgī* are absent.
- The sunrise comes there first, and all the seasons are ahead of the world of the living.
- The *kāmaw* encounters relatives who have died and takes up residence with them. *Kāmaw glaàt* is more densely populated than the present world, since there are many more dead than living.
- An idiosyncratic feature of *kāmaw glaàt* is that cotton is grown in abundance, and the word for ‘cotton’ is *kāmbāt*, which can seem like a compressed form of *kāmaw glaàt*.
- The dead dressed only in cotton, at least in the past. If someone dreams of growing cotton, this can be a sign that they may soon die.

The Kman universe and the journey of the soul



The khram death house

- The key mortuary rite for the dead is *təlu*, conducted for a dead person after some weeks.
- A striking aspect of this is the creation of a highly distinctive memorial for the dead, a small model house where the possessions of the dead are placed, potentially for their use in the afterlife.
- Among the Kman this is known as a *khrãm*. The *khrãm* must be constructed within five days, but there is then an interval of up to three months before the *təlu* ceremony, which depends on the wealth of the family, who must gather sacrificial animals.
- If the *təlu* is pending for over three months, the *kāmàw* of the dead person may become angry and express its malevolence.
- The *khram* memorial house at Yatong was surrounded by white flags; tradition says there should be white and black flags, but only white were used here. Similar houses are built for those who died of accident or murder, but a red flag is included among them.
- The *khram* includes the possessions of the deceased, including cloths and kitchen utensils.

The khram

➤ The pictures show a khram or death house a century apart



4: Mishmi tomb at Dening. The body is buried below. On the upper platform under the thatched roof are exposed the dress, arms, pipes and other belongings of the deceased, mostly contained in the big basket shown in the photo.



New developments in Kman religion

- The Mishmi Faith Promotion Society has been operative since 2012, developing a liturgy from existing shamanic chants. Its base is in a village named Tafragam, near Tezu.
- It was founded by a group of *kambring*. A book of liturgical prayers has been published in a problematic orthography, which probably cannot be read by its adherents.
- The group meets for services on Sundays, in a church-like edifice, making plain the parallels with Christianity.
- Unlike the rapid, near monotone chant of actual shamanic practice, the texts are sung in unison, making them closer to hymns.

MFPS

AMIK MATAI RINGYA JAWMALU

TANCHOW KLUMYAA (PLACE OF WORSHIP)

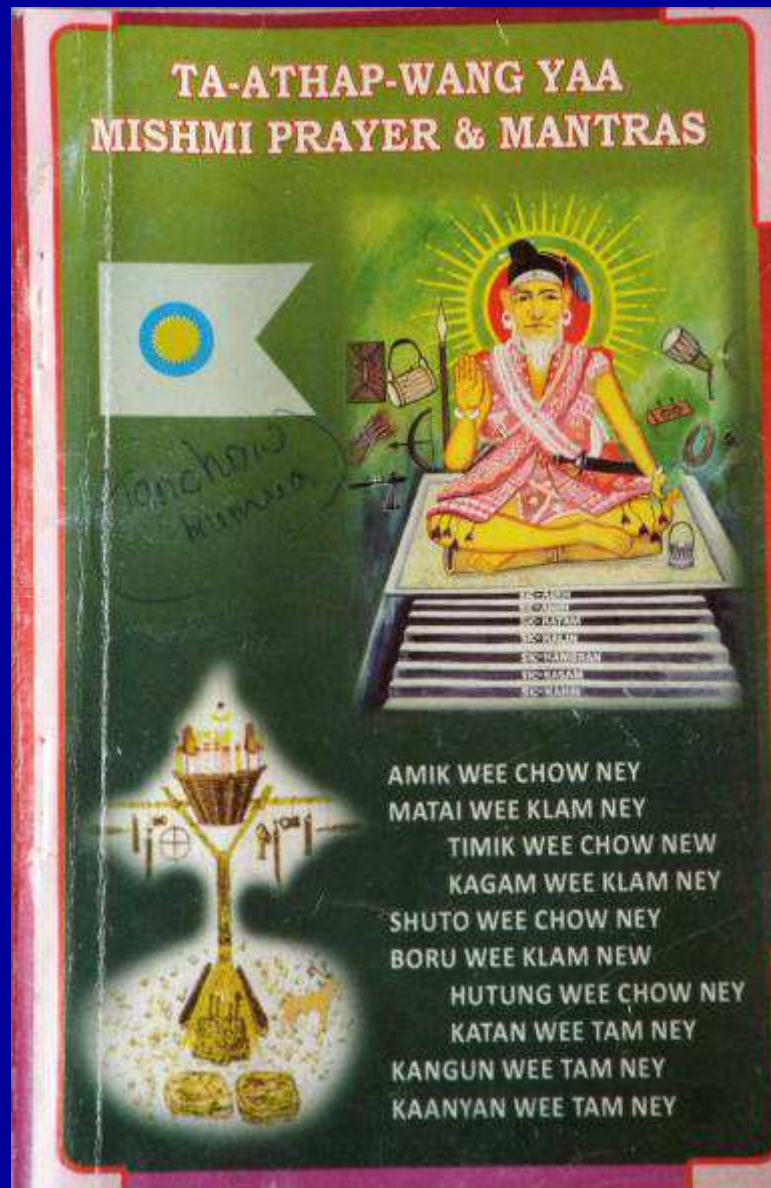
VILL:- TAFRAGAM

LOHIT-DIST., (A.P)

Estd. ON 2ND MAY, 2015

**BY:- MISHMI FAITH PROMOTION
SOCIETY (MFPS)**

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Adapting to the twenty-first century: why shamanism persists

- The rich theology of the Kman is consistent with the world in which they lived until the early twentieth century. Isolation in the mountains, marginal contact with world religions and a complex and risky environment came together with regional traditions to produce their worldview.
- But with the colonial era, the move to the plains, enhanced contact with other groups, maintaining these beliefs requires explanation. More recently, with mobile phones and somewhat sporadic access to the internet and satellite television, few Kman are not aware that the world is not only round, but that it is a complex mosaic of nations and peoples and environments quite unlike their own.
- J.D. Bernal once observed that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. There is undoubted evidence that indeed this can be true in the very earliest stages of contact with devices such as cameras.

Adapting to the twenty-first century: why shamanism persists II

- However, there is little evidence that the Kman regard technology in this way. Mobile phones may be in one way highly advanced technology compared with plaiting bamboo, but then they have long traded goods they were unable to make, such as silver from Tibet, and they seem to have become enthusiastic adopters of all types of consumer electronics, and to make use of them to facilitate the maintenance of their complex belief structures.
- The *khānyū* are social spirits, who guarantee the nexus of *īgū/kambring* and society. Mishmi society, fragmented geographically and socially, is underwritten by the shared complexity of the ritual system. What counts is that these rituals are seen to be performed, not whether the narrative that necessitates them is 'true'. The malicious spirits the environmental risk they experience.
- None of these have disappeared with selective adoption of modern technologies, hence their persistence in a world where globalised religion is spreading rapidly, even among their immediate neighbours.

Those parallels with Greek religion

- Study the journey of the soul in Arunachal Pradesh, it is hard not to be struck by the parallels with Greek religion
- The should has to cross a river to the land of the dead, which is not a paradise
- Other types of punishment or fate await individuals dying in abnormal ways
- The river seems to correspond to the Styx, and the *kamaw glaata* to the Asphodel Fields
- Quite different from the heavens and hells of Judaeo-Christian religion
- Does the journey of the dead in Arunachal Pradesh reflect a very ancient Eurasian belief system, now vanquished in many places by global religion?
- It seems at least possible, though hard to prove

THANKS

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