

The IDU MISHMIS



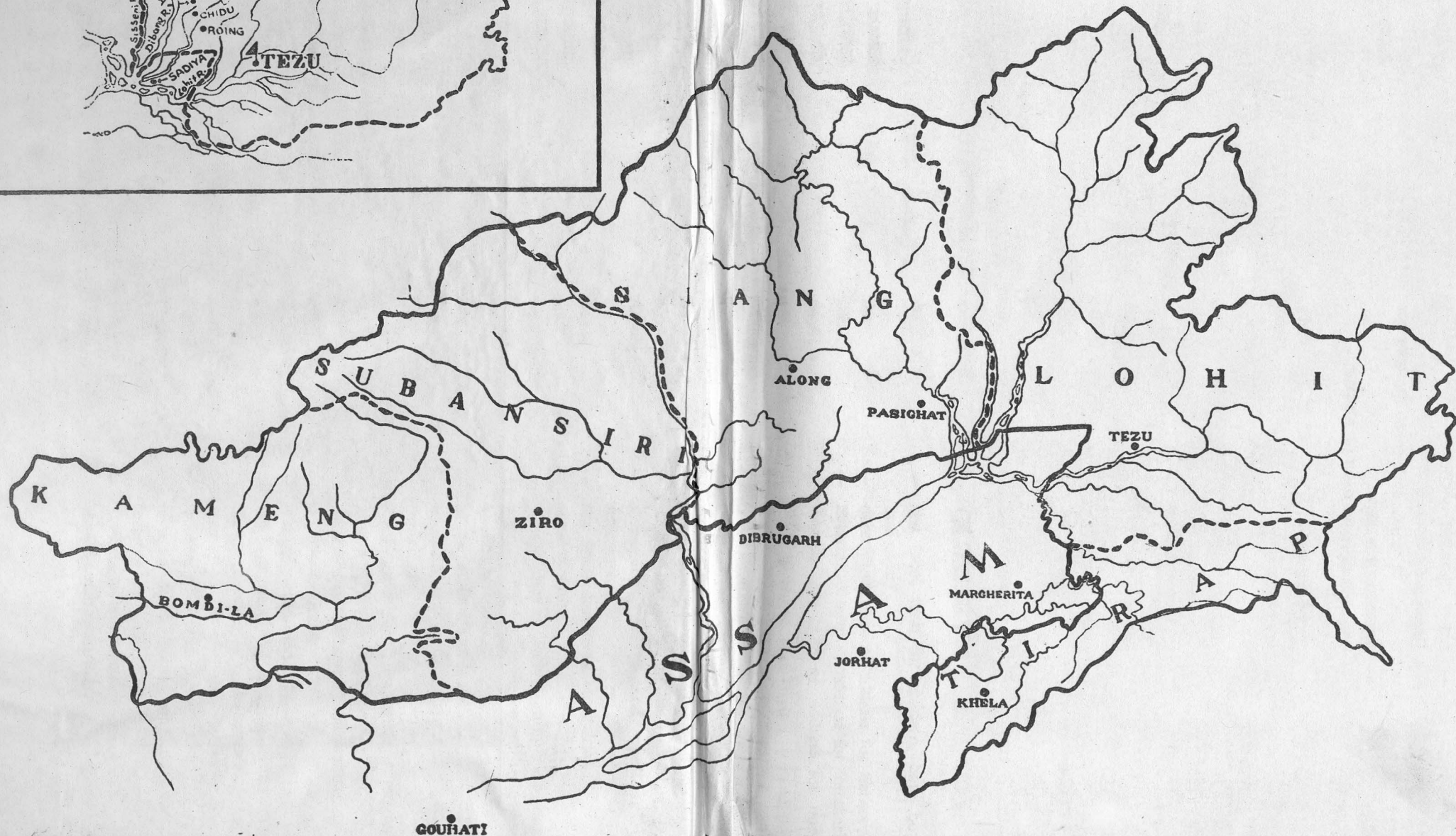
THE IDU MISHMIS

• TAPAN KUMAR M. BARUAH

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The Idu Mishmis constitute one of the main tribes inhabiting the wild and rugged hills of the Lohit Frontier Division of the North-East Frontier Agency of India. Although they have been noticed in such old literature as the Assam Buranjis, and in comparatively recent official documents and one or two books of travel, the Idu Mishmis remain till this day largely unknown. This is, therefore, in every way a pioneering attempt to introduce them, and the author would not claim that his work is more than an introduction, to the outside world. Shri Tapan Kumar M. Baruah, who is the Divisional Research Officer in the Lohit Frontier Division, has known them intimately for some seven years, and has had ample opportunity of studying them at close quarters in the daily round of their existence. This fruit of his patient and affectionate study of these sturdy hill people will be of interest to scholars and public alike.

NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY



THE
IDU MISHMIS

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DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH

GOVERNMENT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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To

DR VERRIER ELWIN

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NEFA, the North-East Frontier Agency, is a wild and mountainous tract of about 30,000 sq. miles in the Assam Himalaya bounded by Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and, valley of the Brahmaputra. It is divided for the purpose of administration into five Frontier Divisions—Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap—with their headquarters at Bomdi La, Ziro, Along, Tezu and Khonsa respectively. It is inhabited by a large number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes, speaking some fifty different dialects. This book describes, Idu Mishmis, an important tribe living in the Dibang Valley in the western part of the Lohit Frontier Division.



A group of Idu dancers



A typical Idu house

CHAPTER ONE

LAND AND PEOPLE

I. THE COUNTRY

The Dibang Valley is a Sub-Division of the Lohit Frontier Division which is made up of the mountainous regions lying between the Siang Frontier Division on the west, and Lohit Valley Sub-Division on



A group of Idu Mishmis. (After Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*)

the east. To the north, the Dibang Valley is bounded by the international frontier and the Himalayan ranges. To the south, it extends right down to the

confluence of the Lohit and Dibang rivers. The vast tract towards the north provides the eye with grandiose sceneries in every direction of open grassy hillsides and lofty peaks covered with snow.

Almost the whole of the area of the Dibang Valley consists of continuous chains of hills, which along the northern boundary are perpetually covered with snow. Towards the south, they are lower, and the outer hills are not more than four to six thousand feet high. The soil of the Dibang Valley is mostly sandy and unstable, as a result of which land-slides are very frequent. The great 1950 Earthquake severely affected the Dibang Valley region, and at places the land-slides completely obliterated the old peaks. The land-slides introduced a vicious cycle of ever-increasing erosion as the slopes were very much disturbed, and therefore, less able to withstand the rain and wind. Further, the hill slopes have become bare due to the removal of whatever thin soil and vegetation had covered them before the earthquake.

The principal river of the valley is the Dibang or the Tallan, as the people call it, which rises far beyond the northern boundary. It first flows towards the west from its source, and then taking a southward course, finally joins the Lohit. The Dri and Ithun are its largest tributaries. In the hills, the Dibang flows down at a tremendous speed through deep gorges, but when it enters the plains, it stretches out in reaches of still green water. The Idus, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Dibang Valley, have names for their rivers, which are different from those which were given them by the inhabitants of the foot-hills region. Thus the

local name for the Dibang is Tallan, for the Lohit, it is Ilyu, for the Deo-pani, Ejjen, and the confluence of the Lohit and the Dibang is called Ilyuthobruru. As a rule, the inhabitants take the name of the river near which they dwell; thus there are the Midri (the people of the Dri) and the Mithun (the people of the Ithun). The Dibang changes its course every now and then in the foot-hills region and thus erodes its banks whenever it is in spate.

In the Dibang Valley, wild animals such as the sambhar, wart-hog, tiger, and black panther were plentiful in the past, and you could see many peacocks and wild ducks during the cold season. Today, wild life is a rarity, except in the most inaccessible regions of the upper Dri and Ithun Valleys. The Idus have no idea of the value of protecting their wild life. The liberal issue of licences for shot-guns in the last decade has brought a new standard of sportmanship to them. The musk-deer is being wiped out, since trade in musk is a lucrative business. The only animal that is generally found in all the areas is the black bear.

The foot-hills of the Dibang Valley are clad by evergreen forest which has a bewildering number of trees such as the *bola* (*Morus laevigata*), *khokan* (*Duabanga sonnerioides*), *mekahi* (*Phobele-cooperiana*), and *simul* (*Bombex malabaricum*). In the higher altitudes, there are pines (*Coniferous-species*), *hingori* (*Castanopsis species*), and *makari sal* (*Schima wallichii*). Bamboos of the varieties *Deudrocalamus hamiltonii*, *Pseudostachyum polymorphum* and *Teinostachyum dullooa*, and cane (*Calamus species*) grow in abun-

dance throughout the valley. People living in the higher altitudes use the leaves of the *jhengu* (*Calamus species*), and *tako* (*Livistonia jenkinsiansiana*) for roofing. Rhododendrons, primulas, willows, honeysuckle, and a species of *Viburnum* are the common flowers.

The climate of the Dibang Valley, by virtue of its constant high humidity, is not extreme in temperature during the summer. The general climate ranges from tropical heat to arctic cold. The climate of the foot-hills of the Dibang Valley is the same as in the plains areas of Assam, and the rainfall ranges from 120" to 200" per year. In the higher altitudes snow usually begins to fall from November, and lasts up to April.

II. THE IDUS

The Idus have a Mongolian type of countenance. Those of the northern and north-eastern regions near the frontier are fairer and taller, and more energetic physically and mentally than those living in the lower regions. E. T. Dalton described the Idus in 1872 as follows—'The colour of the Midhi [Idu] varies from dark brown to the fairness equalling that of a European brunette. Some amongst them have rich red lips and ruddy complexions, and I have seen Midhi girls that were decidedly good-looking, but their beauty is terribly marred by their peculiar method of cropping the hair.'¹ He stated further—'Their features are in fact of a coarse Mongolian type.

1. Verrier Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier in the 19th Century* (Bombay, 1959), p. 336.



An Idu Mishmi Chief in full dress.
(After E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*)

The faces flat and broad, the nostrils wide and round, and the eyes small and oblique, but these characteristics, though stronger in the Midhi than the Tain Mishmi [Taraon] are less marked in the former than they are in the faces of their neighbours—the Abors [Adis]. It has always struck me that the Midhi women are comparatively taller and finer creatures than the men.¹ Living in the midst of the picturesque serenity of the high hills and nature's primeval forests, the Idus have preserved their peculiar characteristics—an in-born simplicity and a sense of beauty and their own cultural heritage, unaffected by the touch of civilization.

The Idus are distinguished from their neighbours, the Adis and the Taraon Mishmis, by a peculiar way of dressing the hair. Both men and women shave the hair at the sides of the head, and wear it long at the back, tying it up in a knot at the back. The hair in the front is cut short and hangs over the forehead.

The Idus tell the following story to explain their style of hair-cut :

'The Supreme God Inni, desired that there should be human beings on the earth, and created four men Mesa, Ami, Mosa and Idu. When they arrived on the earth they felt hungry, and asked Inni what they should eat.' He replied, "Hunt whatever animal you get in the forest, and depend on its meat."

Accordingly, they all went to the forest and finding a python, killed it, and with great rejoicing cooked it together. When it was ready, they sat in a row, and

Mesa being the eldest, served them the cooked meat on their plates, giving to each as much as he could eat. But, as Idu sat at the end of the row, and was shy of his elders, he did not ask for sufficient amount and hence his portion was smaller than those of his brothers.

When Mesa came to know of this, he felt sorry for Idu, and calling him, said, "You sat in the corner and ate your meat with your eyes lowered, and I could not recognize you. Henceforth you must put a mark on your head, so that I can recognize you even from a distance."

After this the Idus began to cut the hair in their characteristic manner.

III. ORIGIN OF THE IDUS

According to Idu tradition, gods and women appeared first on the earth ; men came afterwards. The gods sowed the seed of mankind in the womb of the first woman.

'In the beginning, there was no man on the earth. There was a woman, and the gods of the sun, the moon, the wind and the fire. The gods had no knowledge of sex, and were busy with their own affairs. The woman and the gods lived completely naked, for they did not know the use of clothes.

In the course of her wanderings, one day the woman felt desire. Not knowing what to do, she sat with legs apart on the hill where the wind-god Amaya Khinyu lived. The wind-god, out of curiosity, went into her womb. Her belly gradually became large, and after some time, she bore a male child.

1. *ibid.*, p. 336.

Societies at economical rates. This has given an impetus to the craft of weaving.

The NEFA administration in this way is administering to the needs of the people and with caution, imagination and sympathy is helping them to develop along the path of their own genius. And there is every reason to believe that it will succeed in this noble undertaking, here as in other parts of the North-East Frontier.

GLOSSARY

<i>Abbala</i>	— A tribal council.
<i>Abors</i>	— The Adis.
<i>Adde</i>	— A place which is believed to be situated on the way to the underworld.
<i>Agu</i>	— A box made of cane and bamboo.
<i>Aja</i>	— Aja was the son of Nyu-anjuru and his wife Uini-arru, and it is believed that from him the Sahibs originated. It is also a term used for addressing high dignitaries.
<i>Akamba</i>	— A wooden slab which is used as a support for the head while reclining.
<i>Akakhre</i>	— Ear-rings made of thin silver plate.
<i>Amaya khinyu</i>	— The wind-god.
<i>Ami</i>	— The God Anya created Ami (also called Amri) with a view to increase human beings on the earth. His successors were the Tibetans.
<i>Amriti</i>	— The name of a place believed to be situated in Tibet.
<i>Amroho</i>	— Spirit of fire.
<i>Amu</i>	— A kind of tree with thick bark on its trunk.
<i>Anna</i>	— The demon of wound and sores.
<i>Apeisa</i>	— A mythical place whence various seeds and metals like brass and silver came.
<i>Apatala</i>	— A hat made of cane. This hat is said to be sword-proof.
<i>Arramo</i>	— The evil spirit who lives in the wind and hurls thunderbolts to the earth.
<i>Arru maseng</i>	— First wife of the God Nyu-anjuru.
<i>Arrumra</i>	— A place in the underworld.

- Arruralla* — The evil spirit who is believed to give fever to young children.
- Arulya* — A common type of necklace used by the Idus which consists of forty to sixty beads strung together.
- Asila-amide* — A household god who watches over the young children.
- Athu* — The evil spirit who kills young children.
- Bebejiyas* — The inhabitants of the Ithum Valley.
- Buili* — An Idu clan.
- Catam* — An Idu clan.
- Drawn* — A tutelary spirit.
- Egamba* — A tree.
- Ejjen* — The local name for the river Deo-pani.
- Ekamo* — The common ancestor of men and tigers.
- Ela* — The moon-god and the younger brother of Inni.
- Ela-amide* — Wife of the god Inni-macelan.
- Emba* — A relationship term used for addressing one's father's elder brother.
- Emmo* — A spirit who makes human beings fools and blockheads.
- Erraye* — Wife of the god Ekamo.
- Etadi-epaapa* — A place in the underworld. The soul of a person who commits adultery with a slave girl is believed to go to this place.
- Gallan* — A spirit who kills people by giving serious diseases.
- Ijjinga* — A place in the underworld. The soul of a person who dies of an accident goes there.
- Ilyu* — The local name for the Lohit river.
- Ilyuthobruru* — The local name for the confluence of the Dibang and the Lohit.

- Ini asige* — Nyu Anjuru's second wife.
- Ini Anjemo* — The spirit of the whirlwind.
- Inni* — The Supreme God of the Idus.
- Inni-la-pon* — A place believed to be situated in Tibet.
- Inni-o-mago* — Nyu Anjuru's fourth wife.
- Innu mra* — A mythical place which is believed to be the store house of food stuff for the spirits.
- Iu-amba* — A tree.
- Iyu* — Rice-beer.
- Jahirru* — A spirit who shows the path to a soul coming to the underworld.
- Jahi-u* — The soul of a person who dies of drowning goes to this place. Jahi-u is believed to be situated in the underworld.
- Jahiwi* — The name of a place which means—'where the water-snakes live.'
- Jengu* — A kind of leaf used for roofing.
- Kabbuibyru Anda* — The name of a place which means 'where the river flows backward.'
- Kado* — Millet.
- Kalidoi* — An Idu chief who made a profession of alliance with the British in 1879-80.
- Kaman* — A group of Mishmis who inhabit in the Kamlang, Dav and Upper Lohit Valleys.
- Ke-emra* — A variety of paddy.
- Kepu* — A variety of paddy.
- Kesen* — An Idu clan.
- Khepa* — An evil spirit who kills young children.
- Khinyu* — An evil spirit.
- Lekapon* — A bead necklace.
- Ludu* — A girl from the plains whom the god Nyu Anjuru married.

<i>Malan</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Mega</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Megra</i>	— The human soul.
<i>Megra Mra</i>	— The land of the dead where the soul goes after it leaves the human body.
<i>Mesa</i>	— According to the Idu legend, the forefather of the Assamese was Mesa.
<i>Mili</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Momba</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Muipo</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Nyu Anjuru</i>	— The god from whom the spirits and human beings originated.
<i>Ompo</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Panga</i>	— The name of a village in the Lohit Valley.
<i>Polo</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Praerru</i>	— A small bird.
<i>Puijiko</i>	— A small bird.
<i>Pulu</i>	— An Idu clan.
<i>Rren</i>	— An important ceremony of the Idus.
<i>Siddi</i>	— A demon whose very appearance strikes terror into the human mind and brings about death.
<i>Trummi</i>	— Son of Nyu Anjuru and his wife Uini Arru.
<i>Uini Arru</i>	— Nyu Anjuru's third wife.
<i>Yu</i>	— Beer made of rice or millet.
<i>Yakubri</i>	— Bride-price.

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