The 'Mishmi' languages, Idu, Tawra and Kman: a mismatch between cultural and linguistic relations

ICEHEP

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Our efforts acknowledged

"We are a diverse community that believes we can be the difference. Together, we're solving some of the most significant problems of our time."

Professor John Dewar
Vice-Chancellor

Ethnolinguistic map of NE India

The
Mishmi
peoples

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

This talk

- The first part of the talk will update you on current progress in studies of the Mishmi languages

- And some broader issues in NE India

- The second part will summarise the paper which has been circulated

Updates

- Fieldwork (third tranche) just completed, mainly on Idu and Kman

- Main outputs were Idu dictionary and Kman dictionary

- Major progress on tones and establishing an orthography

- Idu orthography presentation 29th January, Roing,

- Kman orthography presentation 2nd February, Tezu

- Official presentation of draft dictionary at Re Festival, 1st February, 2017

- Official presentation of draft Kman dictionary, Tamladu Festival, 14th February, 2017

Idu orthography presentation, Roing

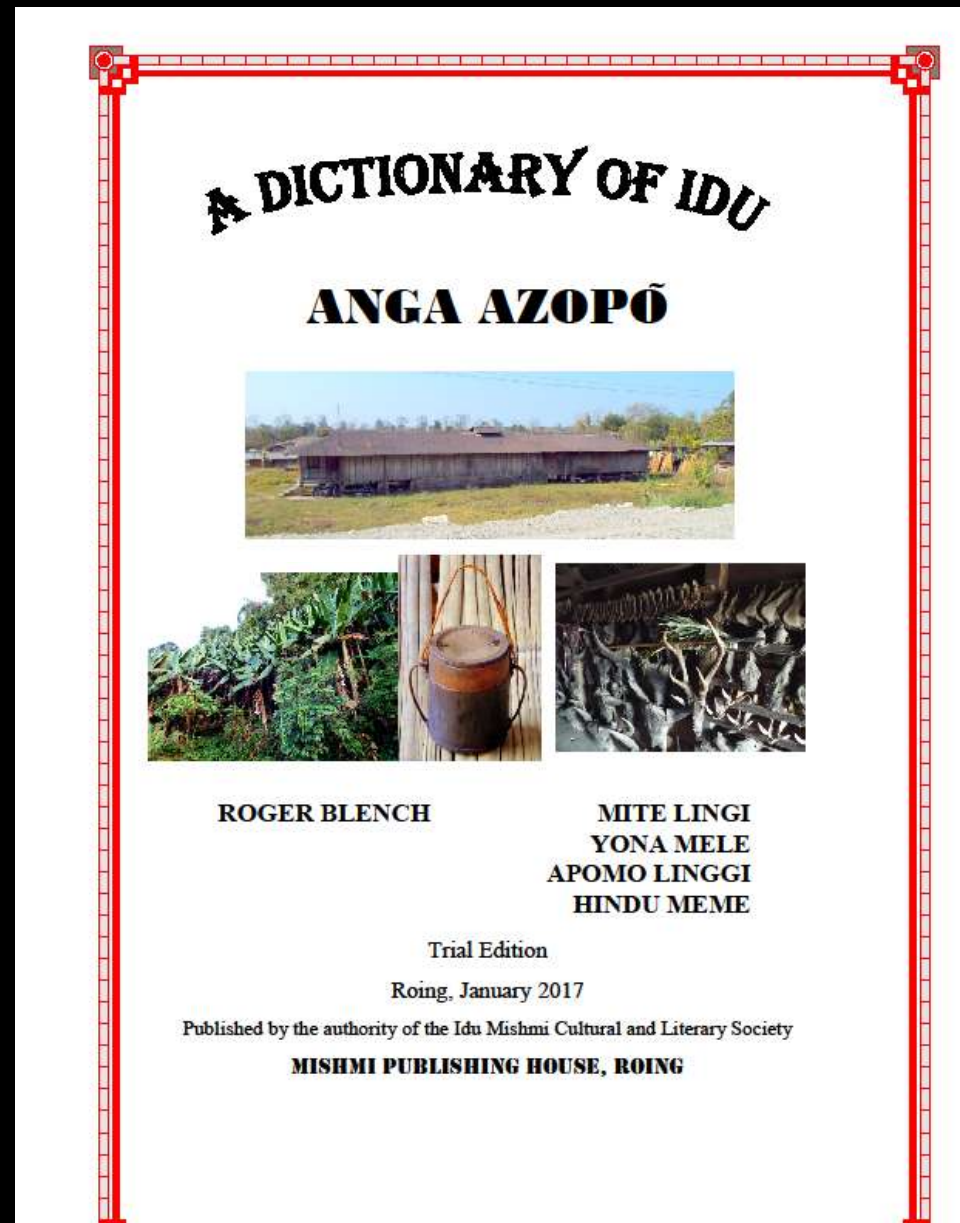# Idu orthography gradually being adopted

Re Festival opens

Idu Dictionary

- We have adopted the expression Anga Azopồ (i.e. 'word book' for 'dictionary'
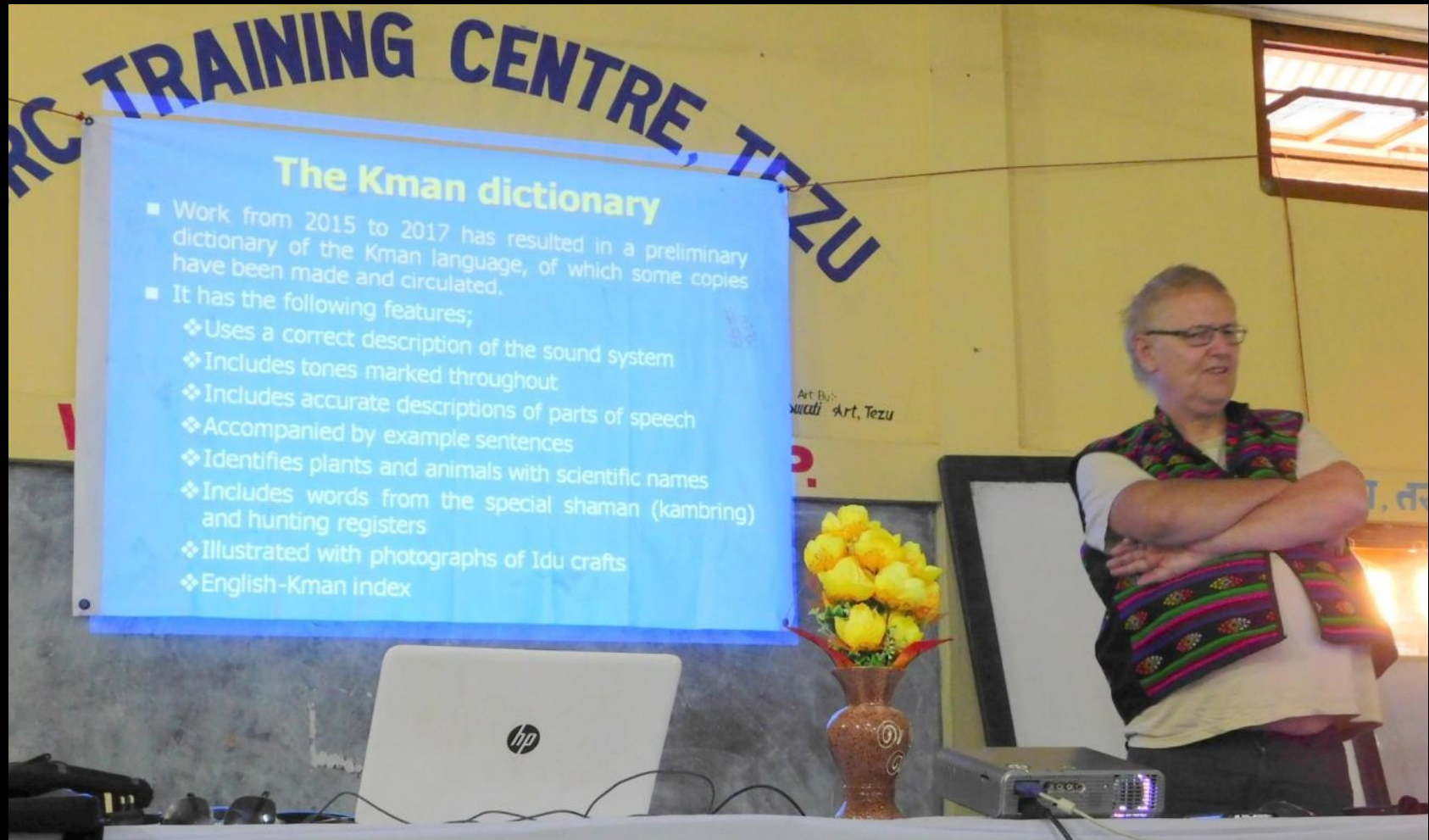- And Anga Acu, 'word rules' for Idu grammar

A DICTIONARY OF IDU

ANGA AZOPő

ROGER BLENCH

MITE LINGI
YONA MELE
APOMO LINGGI
HINDU MEME

Trial Edition

Roing, January 2017

Published by the authority of the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society

MISHMI PUBLISHING HOUSE, ROING

# ILDC hard at work

Dictionary presentation

Kman orthography presentation, Tezu, 2nd Feb 2017

The Kman dictionary

- This is the cover of the first version

- We hope the Kman community will take time to revise and add material to it during 2017, so that by December we can finalise a first printing

- We also need decisions on certain aspects of the orthography

A DICTIONARY OF KMAN

KMAN LAY PIT

ROGER BLENCH   SOKHEP KRI

Draft First Edition

Tezu, January 2017
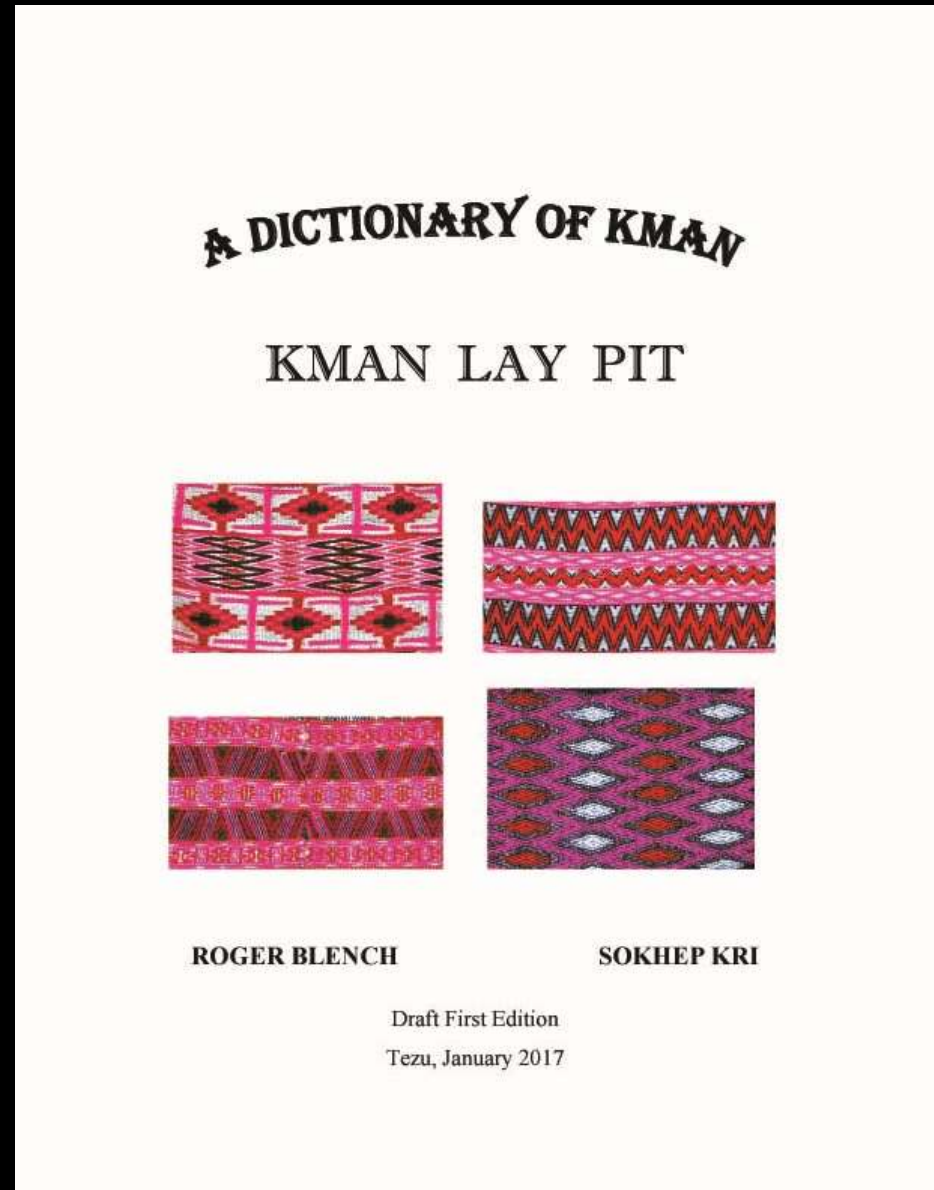
The Kman dictionary

- Work from 2015 to 2017 has resulted in a preliminary dictionary of the Kman language, of which some copies have been made and circulated.

- It has the following features;
  - ❖ Uses a correct description of the sound system
  - ❖ Includes tones marked throughout
  - ❖ Includes accurate descriptions of parts of speech
  - ❖ Accompanied by example sentences
  - ❖ Identifies plants and animals with scientific names
  - ❖ Includes words from the special shaman (kambring) and hunting registers
  - ❖ Illustrated with photographs of Idu crafts
  - ❖ English-Kman index

Idu to appear (linguistics)

- Data collected and preliminary write-up for;

    - Sketch grammar

    - Dialect study ('earthquake linguistics)

    - Numeral classifiers

    - Verbal extension system

    - Ideophones and iconic speech practice

    - Shaman (*igu*) speech

    - Hunters' speech register

    - Mediation register (in relation to justice system)

    - Also cursing etc.

Idu to appear (anthropology)

- Data collected and preliminary write-up for;

    - Igu system

    - Psychogeography

    - Terminology of the house

    - The journey of the dead

    - Ecozonal spirits

    - Ethno-ornithology

    - Ethnobotany

Kman to appear (linguistics)

- Data collected and preliminary write-up for;

    - Sketch grammar

    - Numeral classifiers

    - Shaman (*katuwat*) speech

    - Hunters' speech register

    - Poetic register

    - Historical morphology

Kman to appear (anthropology)

- Data collected and preliminary write-up for;

    - Psychogeography

    - Terminology of the house

    - The Kman underworld

    - The history of the death house

    - Ethno-zoology

Intriguing developments in archaeology

Fragments of stone bowls excavated in Assam two weeks ago

Pathways to neolithisation I

- One of the disappointing aspects of the whole region of NE India is the complete lack of stratified sites using modern dating techniques

- And a complete lack of archaeobotany

- We really haven't the slightest idea how old agriculture might be in this region.

- My Idu informants showed me a stone bowl used for cooking in former times.

- Now, all cooking is done in iron cauldrons

- But intriguingly, there is no evidence that these communities made pottery (or indeed smelted iron)

- So what, you may say. But actually this is globally rare to vanishingly uncommon

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.

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.

Sociolinguistics

- Each language has a few thousand speakers; estimates of levels of competence vary widely

- The main competing languages were formerly Tibetan and Assamese

- However, today Hindi is the most important language; schooling is in Hindi as is much of the media

- Hence there is a widespread local perception that these languages are very threatened and that young people are losing their language

- The situation is probably not as bad as is locally feared, but there is a significant loss of specialised vocabulary, for example plant and animal names

- Fortunately, world religions have not made much impact

Dialect: 'earthquake linguistics'

■ Kman seems to have remarkably little dialect variation, with Tawra there is clearly some, but how much is unknown

■ However, it is Idu which presents the most curious situation.

● It is likely that prior to the 1950 earthquake, Idu dialects were more marked, and associated with the twelve river valleys along which the Idu traditionally lived.

● However, the restructuring of the population led to a collapse of traditional dialect boundaries, and now there is a single major distinction recognised, that between the Midu (plains) and the Mithu (mid-level).

● The 'Upper' dialects, i.e. those spoken around Anini, also have a few distinctive lexemes, but otherwise there is little difference with Mithu.

Dialect: 'earthquake linguistics' II

- The differences between Midu and Mithu, however, are not those usually associated with dialectal diversification, sound-shifts and morphology.

- In this respect, the phonology and syntax of the two seems virtually identical. The major difference is the loss of initials in the plains dialects. The table provides some examples of this process.

- There seems to be no underlying logic to which consonants are deleted and it is suggested this is a largely iconic process, symbolising the differentiation of lects in social discourse rather than reflecting an underlying diversification.

Dialect: Midu and Mithu

Gloss	Midu	Mithu
brush-tailed porcupine	ālə́	kālə́
banana	àjì brū	màjì brù
when?	kājīhȭ	káīsȭ
high	ìɽù	hìɽù
no!	ŋā	ŋáwà
now	ēcāhȭ	ētā
bad	ề̀lè	hề̀lè
cold	jìsī	dròsī
jungle	āmbá	kāmbá
tastes good (alcohol)	àkā	màkā
sago palm sp	àlōmbə́	màlōmbə́

Common typological features of Mishmi languages

Feature	Commentary
Three tone-heights	Typical of Naga languages
Voiceless aspirates only	Common throughout the region
SOV syntax (but with considerable flexibility)	Common throughout the region
TAM marking through verbal suffixes	Common throughout the region
No marking of number or gender on nouns	Common throughout the region
Distinctive gender suffixes for domestic animals	
Question markers clause-final	
Interrogatives clause-initial or following the head noun	
9-15 numeral classifiers	Strongly focused on shapes of plants and animals
Adverbs precede verb they qualify	
Four-term comparative adjective paradigm	
Adjectives show free positioning in relation to	

Linguistic features where Idu is highly divergent

Feature	Idu	Kman
Vowel nasalisation	Extremely common	Very rare
Vowel length	Present throughout	Absent
Retracted vowels	Present	Absent
Creaky vowels	Present	Absent
Verbal extensions	Rich system of CV suffixes and allows Bantu-like stacking	Virtually none
Adjectives	Large number of CVCVCV underived adjectives	Almost all adjectives transparently derived

Anthropology of the Idu

The IDU MISHMIS — TAPAN KUMAR M. BARUAH

THE IDUS OF MATHUN AND DRI VALLEY — TARUN KUMAR BHATTACHARJEE
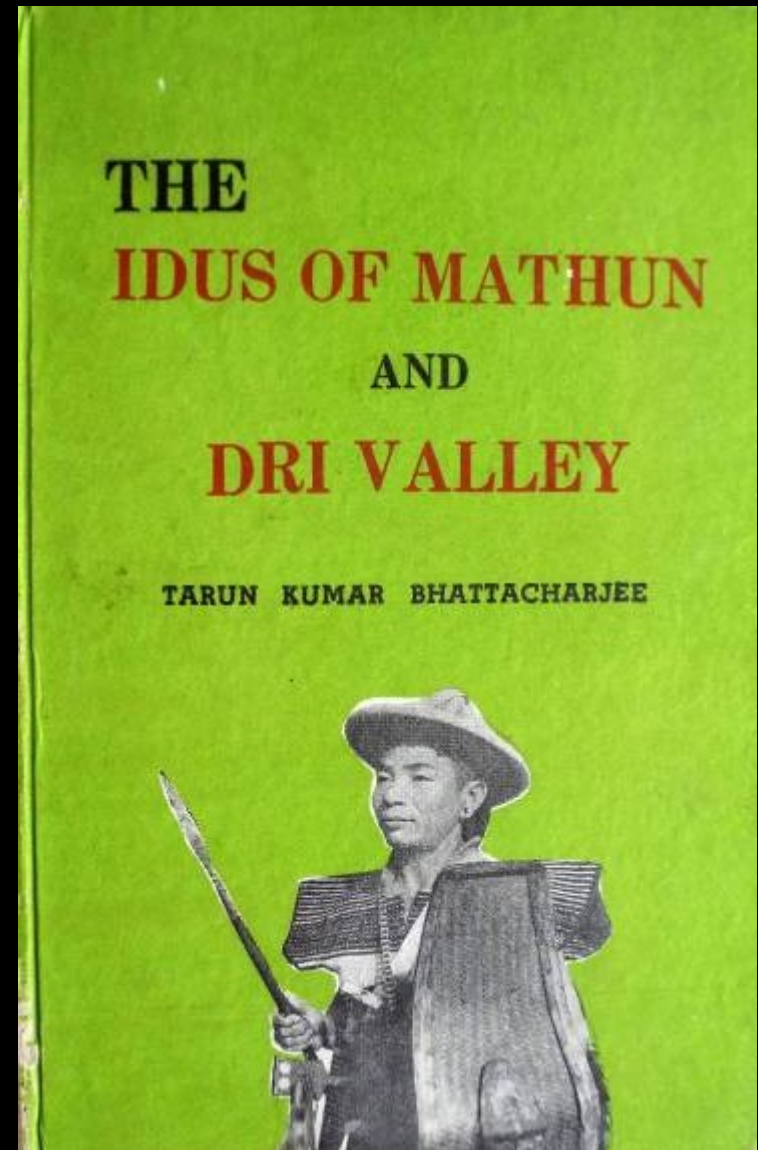
Common cultural features of the three Mishmi peoples I

Feature	Commentary
Longhouses	All groups build extensive longhouses, traditionally housing multiple wives each with individual hearths. The internal architecture of these houses is very similar, with a long internal corridor lined with the skulls of hunted or sacrificed animals.
Language registers	All groups have a complex system of multiple language registers
Shaman	The shamans chant in a language generally inaccessible to ordinary speakers, which contains innovative lexical items, periphrases and idiosyncratic grammar. Common through much of Arunachal Pradesh
Hunting	Hunters use a lexical substitution language, whereby ordinary lexical items and animal names are replaced by unrelated lexemes, some of which can be etymologised, others of which are of unknown origin. Also in use by the Meyor.
Others	Additional registers include mediation, babytalk, cursing and poetic.

Common cultural features of the three Mishmi peoples II

Feature	Commentary
Ecozonal deities	All three groups share a common system of ecozonal deities which are responsible for different ecological zones from the snowline to the plains. In each the rivers and lakes are looked after by a deity with a name which is a variant of Bruu. The snowline is deemed to be the most sacred area, where shamans must travel to acquire their powers
Complex afterlife	When the soul leaves the body it becomes a ghost and must travel through a complex series of underworlds, partly reflecting the type of death an individual has undergone. To reach the final abode of ghosts, the spirit must cross a river. Similar elements are also recorded among some Tani
Rẽ Festival	A festival held on or around early February. [Idu name Rẽ, Tawra, Kman Tamaladu]
Ethnometrology	A complex system of weights and measures, involving finger measurements, bamboo tubes, baskets, distance a pig can be carried and numerous other common features. Some aspects also recorded among Tani

Common cultural features of the three Mishmi peoples III

Feature	Commentary
Negative imagery of flowers	Unusually, all three Mishmi peoples consider flowers to be ill-omened and will not plant them around the house. This is particularly striking on the borders of Tibet, where flowers in pots are considered one sign of a well-kept house
Slavery	Rather unusually, for societies with segmentary lineage structures and little social hierarchy, the Mishmi peoples practised slavery, most commonly of their own people. Slavery was legally abolished during the late 1970s, but discrimination against slave ancestry persists. Sex with slaves was considered so unacceptable that a layer of the underworld was reserved for those who committed this offence.

Architecture

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

Idu longhouse

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

Hunters' trophies: Idu

Hunters' trophies: Kman

Classifiers

- Number is marked with a uniform suffix in all languages and is not marked if plurality can be identified by other indicators such as a numeral

- All three languages have classifiers, between nine and sixteen, as well as collectives

- This is significantly less than the neighbouring Tani languages

- Many nouns don't take classifiers. Is the system building or collapsing?

- Bamboo appears to play a dominant role in the conceptual world they illuminate

- Only Kman applies a classifier to humans

Classifiers: Idu

Form	Semantic cluster	Shape or class
āɭà	cloth, paper, planks	flat rectangular objects
(-m)bồ	trees, plants, main trunk of anything	trunk (trees, body)
brā	potatoes, beads, oranges, stones	small spherical objects
brū	maize, bananas, small branch of a tree, usually cylindrical	long, cylindrical objects
(-n)do	bamboo clusters, houses, hunted deer, pig carcasses	?
(-ŋ)gō	fish, rats	
(-ŋ)gò	fish, rats	
ná	specific leaves, some types of paper	
ph(r)á	small packets (such as cigarettes)	small solid rectangular objects
pò	packets, *léképò* necklace	medium solid rectangular objects
pồ	bundles (firewood, hay), playing cards	large solid rectangular objects
prā	leaves, paper, flat things	flat objects
pū	elephants, chickens, wild birds, cucumber, papayas, pumpkins	large and medium round and oval things
-to ~	single bamboo plant, reeds with cylindrical	giant grasses
tõ	stem, sugar-cane	

Classifiers: Tawra

Tawra	Semantic cluster	Shape or class
brá	pebbles, potatoes	small spherical objects
brɨ́l	thin trees, posts snakes	long cylindrical objects
bru	tree, banana, pen, spear	long thin objects
dố	buildings	large man-made structures
hàd⁽ˀ⁾ùm	large trees, bushes, clusters of bamboo	large, ? spherical plants
ná	cloth, paper, leaf	thin flat objects
plá	banknotes, planks, knives	circular flat objects, long sharp objects,
pùm	boxes, elephant, birds, pumpkins	large round/square ? hollow objects
tí	openings, doorways	
táŋ	animals	except elephants, fish, insects or birds

Classifiers: Kman

Kman	Semantic cluster	Shape or class Comment
boʔŋ	bamboo, generic, wood	
braʔt	oranges, grains, pebbles	spherical things
brūl	small trees, twigs, bamboo splinters	long thin wooden objects
byoʔŋ	long pieces of wood, bamboo, cane	long broad wooden objects
duʔm	short pieces of wood, bamboo, cane	short broad wooden objects
gaʔw	bamboo split lengthways	half tubular shapes
glaʔ	human beings	
klōŋ	leaves	flat round things
kuʔw	human beings (used in the context of headhunting and criminality)	
kroʔŋ	longhouses	
nāw	individualised living animals	not plants
phaʔl	paper, banknotes, planks	flat long rectangular things
phoʔŋ	bamboo, grass, leaves	anything growing in clusters
tēŋ	cloth, mats, bags	? fibre household objects
thūŋ	pieces of wood, bamboo, cane	medium size wooden objects
tūl	standing trees, bushes	

Lexical resemblances across Mishmi

Gloss	Idu	Tawra	Kman
sword	shàbrē	shabrẽ	shàbrē
beer	yū	iyu	yūī (get drunk)
fish	àŋā	tã	ə̄ŋaɁ
deafness	kàpà	kàpà	kāwà
road	ālő	alyɨm	b.lòŋ
stone	ā̃lāphrá̃	phlã	phlā̀ŋ (lower grindstone)
bedbug	àbā	àbà	mə̄klàp
ginger	ànjítà	àdzìŋ	də́Ɂìŋ
granary	àkā	aka	kə̄tə̀m
name	āmū	amaŋ	ə̄mə̀ŋ

Mishmi lower numerals

Gloss	Idu	Tawra	Kman
One	khə̀gə̀	khin	kōmū̀
Two	kà.nyì	kayiŋ	kōnìn, kōyìn
Three	kà.sō̃	kasaŋ	kōsə̀m
Four	kà.prì	kaprayk	kāmbrʌ̀n
Five	màŋá	maŋa	kōlèn
Six	tāhrō	tahro	kōtàm
Seven	íɨ̀	wẽ	nʌ̀n
Eight	ìɭú	lɨm	grʌ̀n
Nine	khrìnī	kɨɲaŋ	nōtmù
Ten	hṹ̃ṹ̃	hálaŋ	kyēpmū̀

Mishmi colour terms

Gloss	Idu	Tawra	Kman
black	mà, tĩ̄	ma	kā?yǜm
red	shù	sʰi?	kā?sàl
yellow	mì	miŋ	—
green/blue	prù	prue	—
white	lo	lyo	kāmphlūŋ

Mishmi body parta

Gloss	Idu	Tawra	Kman
back	ìpìndò	phlíŋ	gla?wk
body	jóntà	kyàŋ	shə?y
breast	nōbrā	ɲèè	cīn
eye	ēlōbrā	blm	mīk
hand	ākhó	hàprə̀	râwk
leg	āŋgēsà	gròn	pla?
lip	īnūbrū	thánù	chūw dàl
mouth	ēkóbə̰̀	phùùkɛ̰̀	chûw
nail	āhū̃kò	áphlìŋ	zū̃k
neck	sēmbrá	pà hŋ	hūŋ
nose	ēnāmbó	àɲàdùn	mī?nyùŋ
palm	lāpū	àtyòpà	rāwk tə̀pà
skin	kòprà	pô	u?ŋ
thigh	hàpū	sàhà	kə̄tsa?wk
toe	ātāmbó	gròn bràn	plā bàn
tongue	īlìná	hèlèŋnà	blây
tooth	tāmbrō	là	síí

And so?

Idu and Tawra have been classified together because a rapid examination of the numerals suggests they are not only related, but very close to one another.

The closeness of the numerals and the remoteness of many other areas of the lexicon, suggests intensive but highly selective borrowing or else a mysterious process of vocabulary replacement along the same lines.

In other words, either Idu and Tawra *are* closely related but some now non-operative process has led to replacement, say of body parts, or else they are *not* related but some vanished interaction allowed intensive borrowing in the apparently related areas. Either case would surely be typologically very unusual.

On balance, the fact that most morphosyntactic markers we understand are different, although typologically similar suggests that Idu and Tawra are unrelated.

It is unlikely more data will resolve this issue; the existing vocabulary is large enough that it is unlikely unsuspected sound correspondences will appear in more obscure items.

Multiple register systems

- Idu, Tawra and Kman all share a system of multiple language registers
- These are;
  - a) ordinary speech
  - b) speech of hunters
  - c) speech of priests/shamans
  - d) poetic/lyrical register
  - e) Mediation register
  - f) Cursing register
  - g) Babytalk register

How they work

- The speech of hunters involves lexical substitution, the replacement of animal names and others by special forms, sometimes short poems

- Priests' speech is more complex, involving much language which is difficult to understand as well as lengthy descriptions of sacrificial animals

- The poetic/lyrical register is mainly about the substitution of poetic lexicon for ordinary words. The surprising thing is that we know nothing of the origin of these words.

- But most importantly, in everyday speech, people 'register-flip' using both lexemes and morphosyntax from other registers (often without realising it)

What we might conclude

- All of which has interesting theoretical consequences for the unified notion of 'a language'

- Obviously linguists are highly invested writing grammars of some purportedly unified language; a minor industry

- But these don't describe actual language, merely a suitable version for universities

Cultural convergence

➢The pictures show a khram or death house photographed among the Tawra and Kman 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 shewn in the photo.

West of Tani – a parallel case of convergence?

- There is an almost exact parallel west of the Tani languages among the Miji, Hruso and Koro peoples. Despite a striking absence of common lexicon and morphosyntax (as far as this is known) their cultures map strongly against one another.

- This relationship has been obscured by some extremely foolish publicity concerning the 'hidden' Koro language, fuelled by the American television and media enterprise, National Geographic.

- Koro has hardly been hidden; indeed, as the photo shows, the Koro people have done their best to publicise their culture and language through music videos.

The hidden people ? leprechauns

West of Tani – a parallel case of convergence?

- The Koro appear in earlier publications as the 'Miri-Aka' which may have been responsible for some of the confusion or misleading statements in media reports.

- This has led to the mistaken label 'Hrusish' being perpetuated by scholars who should know better; there is no evidence for a group of languages which include Hruso.

- The two cultures are a mirror of one another, despite the fact that the languages have virtually nothing in common.

- The same is almost true for the Mijiic languages, west of the Hruso, although the Miji are more culturally distinct.

How can this be modelled?

- The Mishmi languages present a striking mismatch between local perceptions of cultural relationships and the linguistic facts, as far as they are known.

- Historically, all three languages are most likely of distinct origin, but living in a common environment, in close physical contact and in constant interchange set in motion powerful cultural levelling.

- There must have been a period when all three groups shared a common culture, in order to account for the basic similarities still observable.

- The puzzle of why there has been so little lexical interchange between the three groups and why, when it occurs, it is so selective, remains to be solved. It is suggested that in global terms this situation is highly unusual and challenges many common generalisations in sociolinguistics.

A speculative model of Mishmi historical interaction
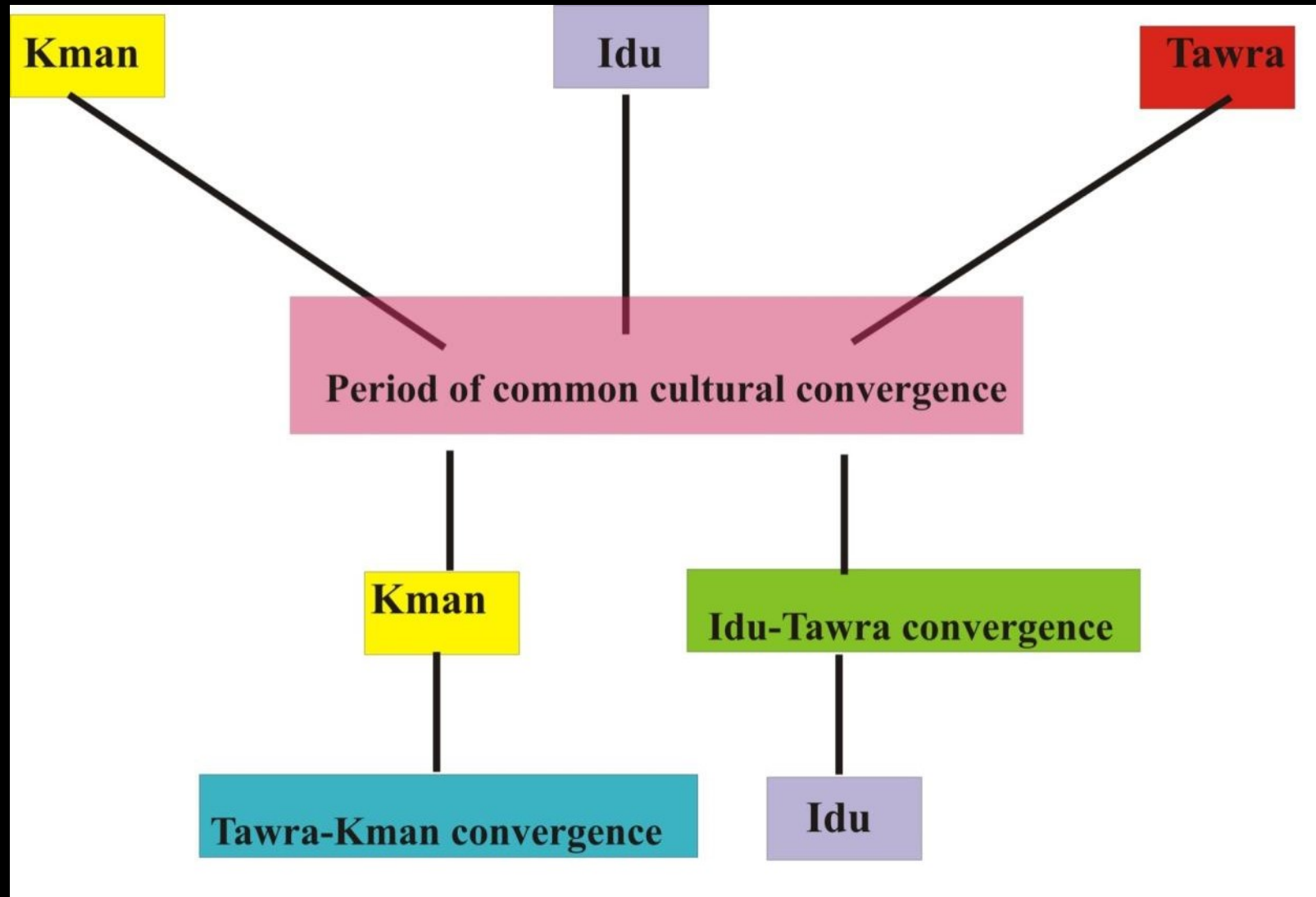
THANKS

- 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