Mishmi language development

December 29th, 2015

TEZU

Roger Blench
Mishmi Language Development Committee (MLDC)

A need to write Mishmi languages

- The Mishmi languages are currently spoken by some thousands of people in Arunachal Pradesh

- However, they are not used as languages in school, and there is a concern that it is not being used by younger people due to the prevalence of Hindi

- A writing system would be valuable both for development as a school language and to record traditions and oral literature

- There have been attempts to write the Mishmi languages previously, but none has taken off

- We believe this is because there was a lack of a coherent reading programme and educational materials

- But also because the underlying analysis of Mishmi language sounds had not been undertaken correctly, or at all.

Mishmi: three peoples, one name

- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh consist of three different groups, speaking three different languages
- These are the Idu [also Kera], the Tawra [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Miju]
- Two of their languages are presumably related, Idu and Tawra, but the third, Kman, is quite different
- These languages are usually classified as Sino-Tibetan, i.e. together with Tani and Chinese, but the evidence for this is very weak
- They may well be language isolates
- A fourth language, Meyor, spoken in Walong and Kibitho, has many common features with Kman, and may be related genetically

Mishmi: three peoples, one name

- 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 very distinctive house type, the longhouse

- In this, each wife had her own space, with associated pig-rearing and the rooms were joined by a long internal corridor

- An important custom was 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

Ethnolinguistic map of NE India

The Mishmi peoples

A bit of history

- The first record of Mishmi languages go back to the 1850s, with the publication of Robinson (1855)

- Since then there have been a variety of attempts to write Mishmi, the important ones being Needham (1886) and the research services publications from the 1970s to 2002

- There is also extensive work on all three languages on the Chinese side of the border, which of course is not much use in India.

- The Chinese work is academic, not aimed at developing a practical script.

- The MLDC project dates only from this year, but we hope will continue in the coming years

Earlier publications I

Notes on the Languages spoken by the Mi-Shmis, by W. ROBINSON, Esq. (Communicated by the Government of Bengal).

The mountain tribes, known to the inhabitants of Assam under the general appellation of Mi-Shmis, occupy those ranges at the north-eastern extremity of the valley, that stretch in the form of a crescent from where the Di-bong debouches into the plains, on the West, to the mountains inhabited by the Singpho tribes, on the East.

Whatever may be the origin of the term *Mi-shmi*, as applied to these mountaineers, it is not recognized by themselves, except in their intercourse with the people of the plains.

Like most other mountain tribes they are divided into a vast number of petty clans, each of which has a nominal head, but these seem so intimately connected with each other, that it is difficult to ascertain in what consists the difference that separates one clan from another. Their lingual peculiarities, however, separate them into three distinct divisions, and, adopting the name of the three great tribes among whom these differences of language prevail, we may class them as the NEDU Mishmis, the TAYING or ME-ME Mi-Shmis, and the MIJHU Mi-Shmis.

Earlier publications II

MIJU DICTIONARY

A. BORO
TEACHER, LOHIT DISTRICT,
ARUNACHAL PRADESH

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
ARUNACHAL PRADESH ADMINISTRATION
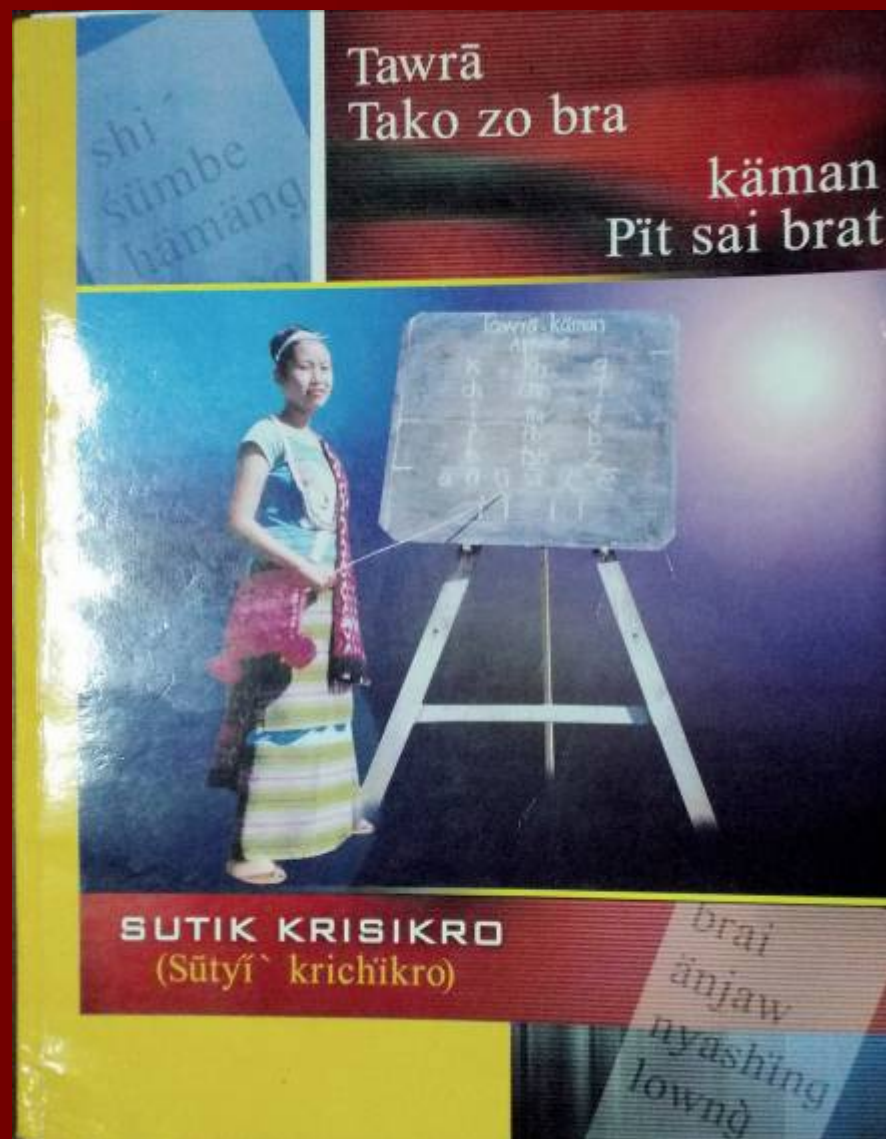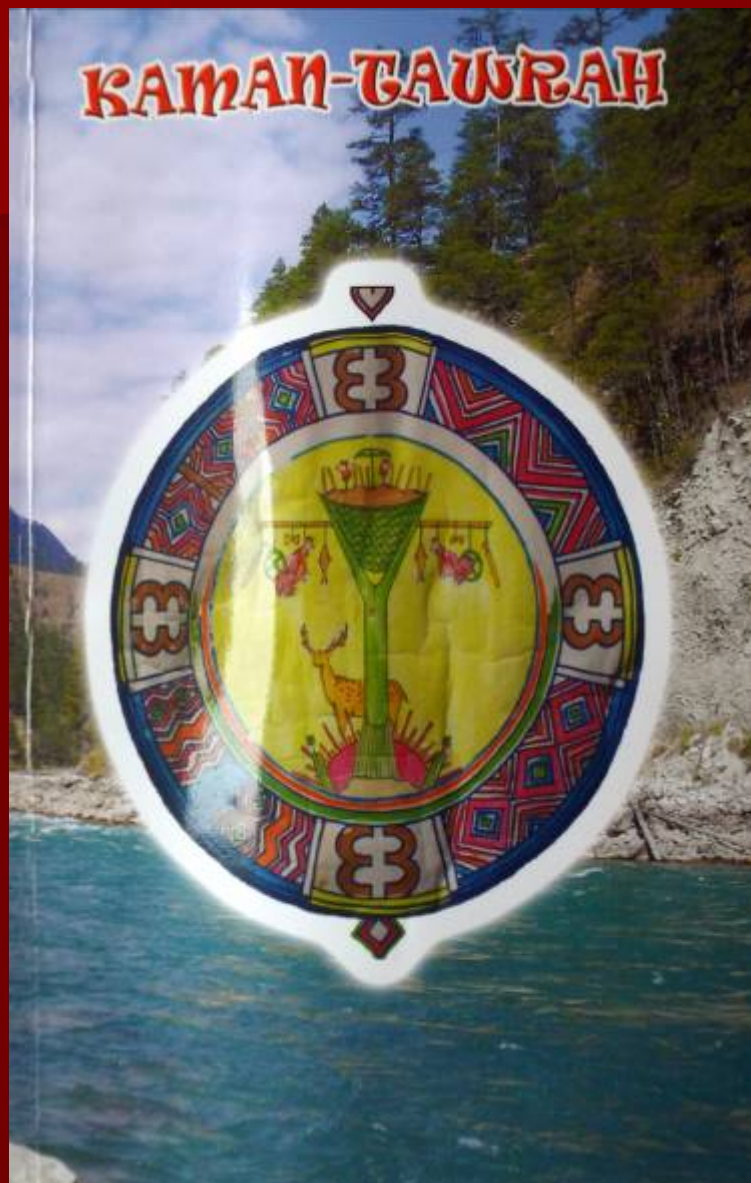SHILLONG, 1978
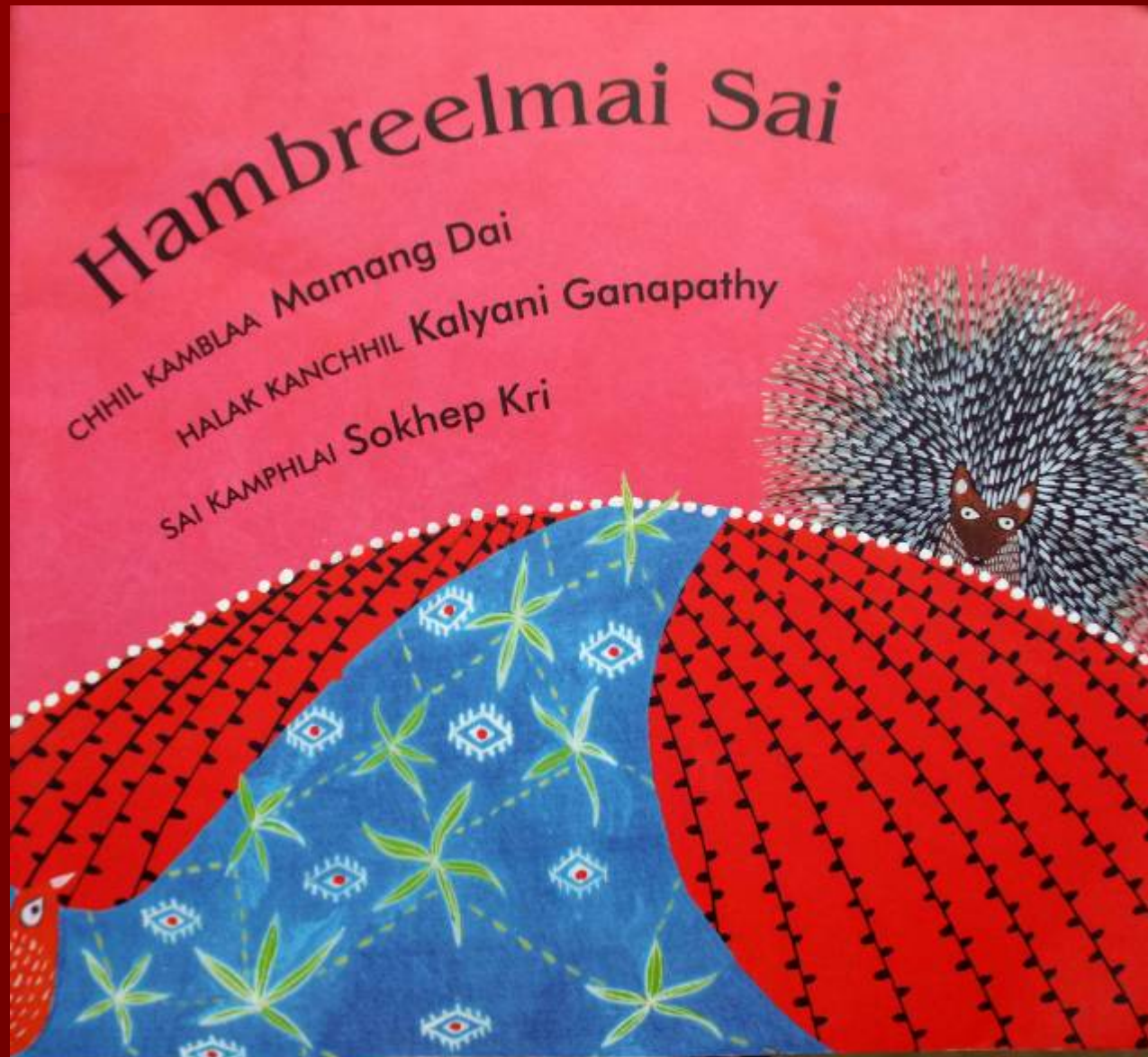
中国新发现语言研究丛书

〔格曼语研究〕

李大勤／著

民族出版社

In recent times I

- A visit by CIIL linguists to Idu in 2001 resulted in proposals for orthography which included @ for /ə/ writing nasalisation with symbols beside the letters

- This publication also claimed, somewhat strangely, Idu had five tones, although these are not marked

- A book of songs and stories called *Idu ekob@ al~ozo* was published in 2004 in this writing system

- Sometime in the 2000s, the Baptist Church commissioned a Mizo Bible translator to develop a writing system for Idu

- This did not mark tone, long vowels or most aspirated consonants, while nasalisation was marked with a following 'x'

- This gave the text a strange appearance which has not been accepted by many Idu

Recent publications I

Recent publications II

Hambreelmai Sai

CHHIL KAMBLAA Mamang Dai

HALAK KANCHHIL Kalyani Ganapathy

SAI KAMPHLAI Sokhep Kri

MFPS

MFPS

Linguistics: pre-existing work

MIJU DICTIONARY

A. BORO
TEACHER, LOHIT DISTRICT,
ARUNACHAL PRADESH

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
ARUNACHAL PRADESH ADMINISTRATION
SHILLONG, 1978

A DICTIONARY
OF THE
TARAON LANGUAGE
FOR
THE USE OF OFFICERS
IN
THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER
AGENCY ADMINISTRATION

(TARAON-ENGLISH—ENGLISH-TARAON)

With an Introduction on the People and the Language

The Philology Section, Research Department, N. E. F. Agency,
SHILLONG.

Linguistics: pre-existing work

- There has also been work on the Chinese side, on Idu, Daruang [Tawra] and Geman [Kman]

- There are only a few peripheral villages on the Chinese side, so it is difficult to tell if differences with mainstream speech are dialectal or issues of transcription and elicitation

- Broadly the phonology corresponds

中国新发现语言研究丛书

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李大勤 / 著

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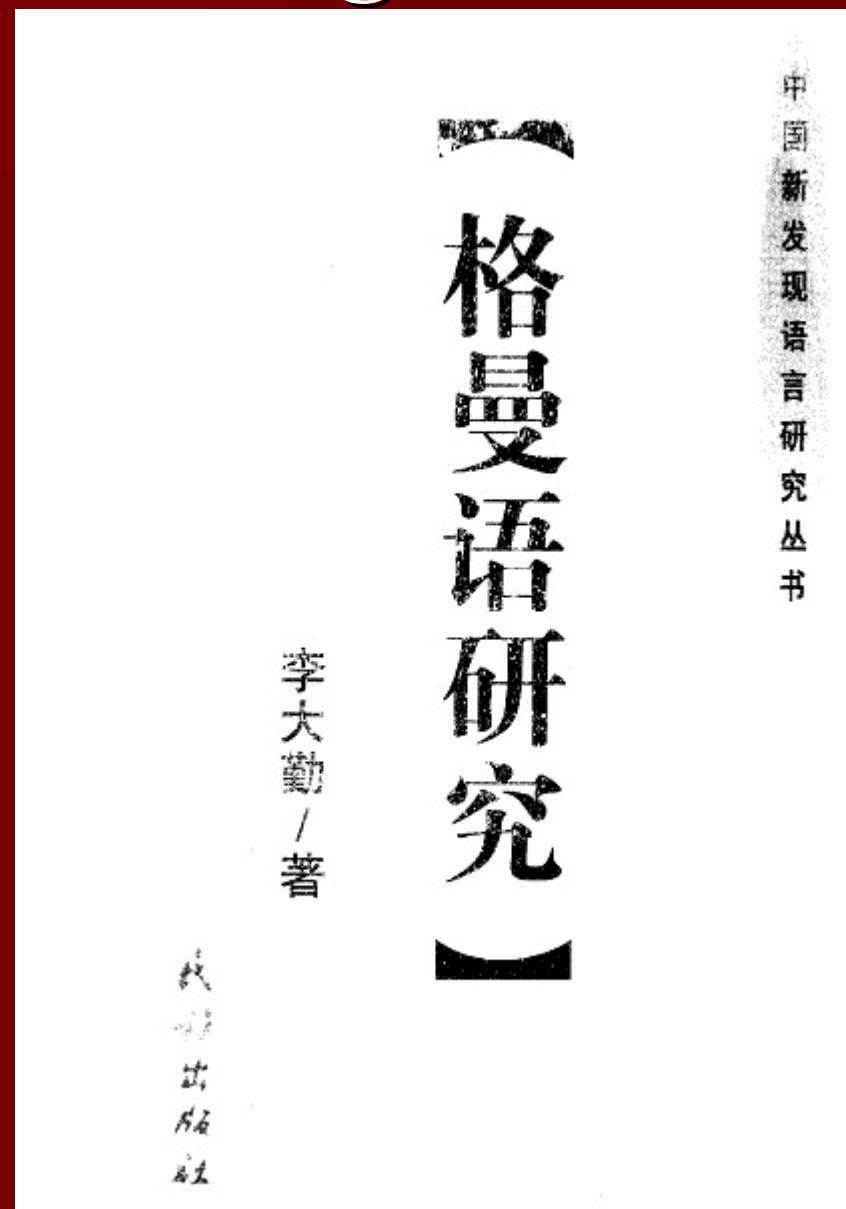
Earlier Idu publications

IDU PHRASE-BOOK

BY

JATAN PULU

LANGUAGE OFFICER
RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
GOVERNMENT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

1978
SHILLONG

Earlier Idu publications II

IDU MISHMI PROVERBS AND SAYINGS

JIMI PULU

Recent Idu publications I

IDU AZOBRA

PRESENTED BY

THE CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF INDIAN LANGUAGES, MYSORE
(MINISTRY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT)
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
AND
THE IDU EKOBE KEBANGE, ROING (ARUNACHAL PRADESH)

IDU EKOB@ AL~OZO

Azop~o Aly~oyiga-

Idu Ekob@ K@bang@,
Roying, Lowar Dibang Beli, Distrik (O.P)

Recent Idu publications II

Lukme
Aho Pra Ahola

JON ME AHO PRA AHOLA

&

JEMS ME KAKO PRA THRALA

2013

Recent publications III
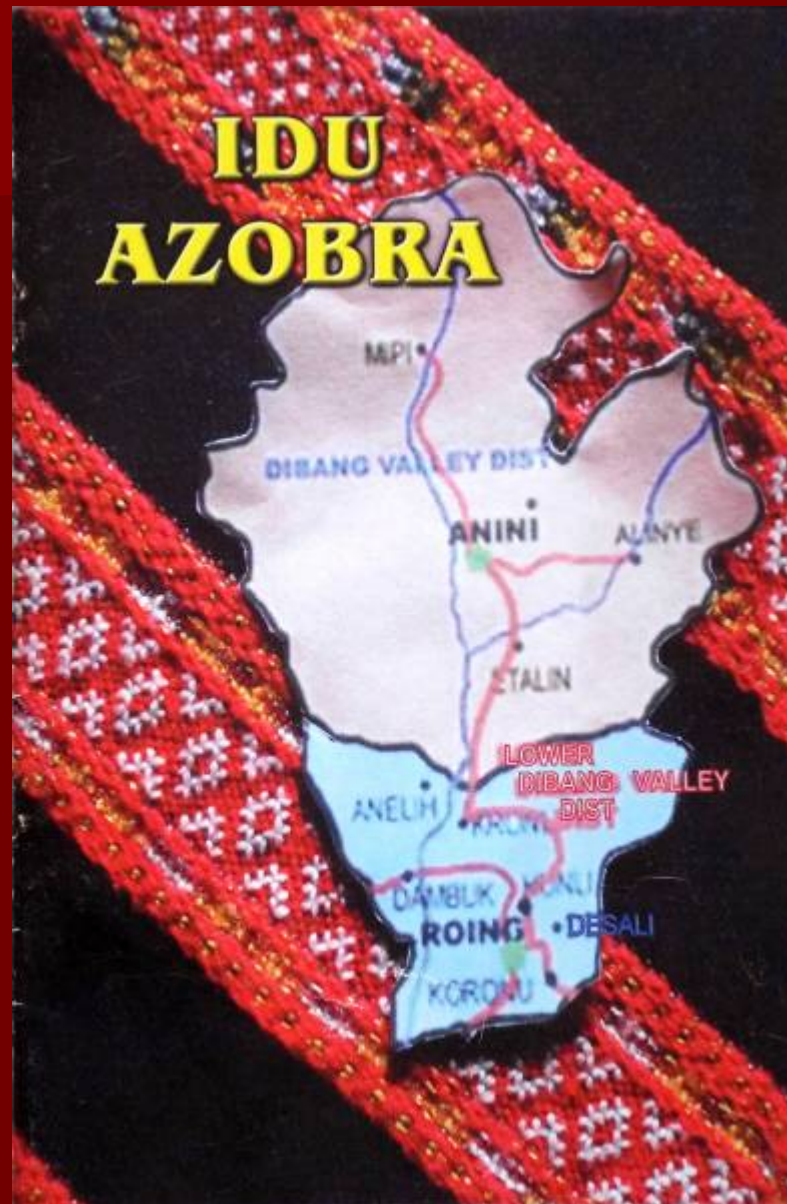
Can such writing systems succeed in Arunachal Pradesh?

- It might be easy to conclude that such writing systems can never be successful in Arunachal Pradesh

- However, we can look at the Tani languages for a good example of how this can work

- Adi, Nyishi and other languages are now regularly used for both publications and all sorts of notices and informal communication

- The writing systems are not perfect, but they are good enough to communicate

- And they get people excited about their language so that it can develop for modern communications, texting, Facebook and so on

Could Mishmi languages be written in Devanagri?

- It has been suggested that the Mishmi languages could be written in Devanagri

- However, Devanagri is poorly adapted to Kman, as it has no tone-marks, no conventions for nasalisation, no marks for retracted vowels and no long vowels

- If an entirely new Devanagri alphabet were developed to include all the possibilities then things would be different

- But this presently seems highly unlikely

- Roman script is the best option for the future

Developing a writing system ('script')

- We need to analyse all the sounds of Mishmi languages and write them first in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)
- Then we need to see how these can be written in a practical system
- This needs to be discussed thoroughly with the community
- **This is not something a linguist can do**; this is social and political as much as purely linguistic
- The following slides show how to write Mishmi languages , with examples of individual words

Mishmi languages are tone languages

- All three Mishmi languages are tonal like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- All three Mishmi languages have three level tones
- However, Kman and Tawra also have glides tones, i.e. tones which slide between one level and another
- They also have what linguists call 'floating' tones, that is tones which are no longer attachjed
- These can be seen from the following sets of words

Kman is a tone language

- Kman is a tone language like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- Kman has three level tones
- These can be seen from the following sets of words

High   wá   to plait flattened bamboo

Mid   wā   bamboo

Low   wà   bird

Kman is a tone language II

sister   sāmāy

daughter   sāmā ` y

Kman consonants

/p/

pang	paŋ	first
pit	pit	book
pitang	pīᵗāŋ	seer
peng	pēŋ	to smear, paint
popra	pōprà	pumpkin

popra pumpkin

Kman consonants

b=ब

bang	baŋ	large cloth
bawng	bawŋ	wind
bay	bay	big spoon
bichi	bīʧí	chili
bl	bl	feather

Kman consonants

p^h = फ

phok	p^hok	nest
phephe	$p^h\bar{e}p^h$e	quickly
phun	p^hun	door
tapha	$t\bar{a}p^h$à	wall
chawpha	ʧ$\bar{a}$wp^{h}a	king, ruler
t.phal	t ˉ.p^{h}àl	landslide

Kman consonants

pr

k.pra	k ‾ .pra	wealthy, rich
pra'	prāʔ	to share out
pram	prām	to soak
pray	prāy	to discuss
pring	prīŋ	to restrict
pronk nay	proŋk nāy	to thank

Kman consonants

ɻ =rh

t.rhuw	t ˉ.ɻùw	sister-in-law, sister's husband
rhl	ɻo · l	snake
dowrhi	dōwɻì	muddy

Kman consonants

$tʃʰ$=chh=ছ̄

chhəl	$tʃʰəl$	to toss a baby
chhəm	$tʃʰəm$	to make a baby sleep
chhan	$tʃʰan$	bangle
chhong	$tʃʰoŋ$	pea, bean
chhu	$tʃʰu$	mouth

Kman consonants

ts^h

tshan	ts^{h}an	to tremble
tshaw	ts^{h}aw	lake
tshun	ts^{h}un	firearm, weapon
tshm	ts^h^m	to think

Kman consonants

dz

dza'	dzaʔ	claw
dzal	dzāl	corpse
dzam	dzām	to hide
dzap	dzāp	water coming off roof
dzawpa	dzāwpā	tree sp., mountain in poetic language

Kman consonants

ʔ

də'ow	də̄ʔow	squirrel
di'ing	dī ʔìŋ	ginger
la'u'	lā̄ʔù̀ʔ	swan
mu'ul	mū̄ʔul	burp
ra'ak	rā̄ʔak	hiccough
so'	soʔ	uncooked arum
t.may	t ¯ .may	September

Kman vowels

ə

əmik	ə̄mìk	sun
əla	ə̄la	leaf
əyay	ə̄yày	tree species
əsn	ə̄sn	to cover up s.t. small esp. with cloth
ət.st	ə̄t.st	study, count, calculate, enterprise

Some questions about Kman writing

Writing final -w and -y

A particular issue in Arunachal Pradesh writing systems is how to write words that end -y and -w. It is very common for these to be written -i and -o. So;

gay	jaw	is presently written	gai
naw	mother	is presently written	nao

However, one of the principles of writing tone languages such as Kman is that every tone is attached to a vowel. However, the sounds at the end of these words have no tone and should therefore not be written as vowels. Using -i and -o gives the impression of a double vowel, which is not the case. However, words such as;

kāmbūì   traveller

t ˉ.lùì   buffalo

So the use of -w and -y is recommended

Tawra is a tone language

- Tawra is also a tone language
- Tawra has three level tones and numerous gliding tones
- These are marked in the following examples

Tawra consonants

- Samples of words illustrating different sounds in Tawra

$/p^h/$

phan	phã̄	to mediate
phabom	phábòm	knee
phlam	phlam	tea
phərey	phə̄rèy	to scatter
phon	phõ̀	clan
phondu	phóndù	eggplant

Tawra consonants

/pʰl/

phla	phlá	to keep s.t. underneath s.t.
phlan	phlá̌	to bake
phlàn	phlà̌	stone
phlen	phlè̌	bag
phlu	phlù	kettle

Tawra consonants

/pʰr/

phrap	phràp	broken into many pieces
phren	phrè̌	to pick, pluck fruits
phri	phrì	sandstone for sharpening dao
phring	phrìŋ	to tear apart rope
phro	phró	to cut through a knot with a blade

Tawra consonants

/tʰ/

tha	thâ	to eat
thank	thank	hair
theen	thẽ̄ề	cold
thiya	thìyà	hill
tho	thò	muscle
thoo	thòò	hornbill
mathu	māthù	to boil

Idu is a tone language

- Idu is a tone language like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- Idu has three level tones
- These can be seen from the following sets of words

		snow	pő
grave	mbró		
become tasteless	mbrō	stack	pȭ
flow	mbrò		
		empty	põ̀

Idu is a tone language II

end point   tá̰

carry on a stretcher   tā̰

piece of meat   tà̰

buy   ló

white   lō

drill, make hole   lò

smoke s.t. on a tray   kù
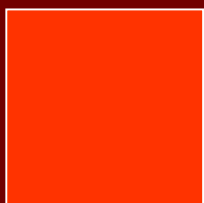
grains   kū

go on journey   kú

Idu consonants

ʥ=j=ज

ja	ʥà	come
je	ʥē	nahar tree
ji	ʥī	sit
jə	ʥə̀	broad
njo	nʥó	body
ju	ʥú	to pick up with a pointed instrument

Idu consonants

∫=sh

sha	sha̅	mithun
shee	she̅e̅	quick
shobru	sho'bru̅	to trip s.o.
shu	shù	red colour

Idu resonants

l̥= lh

lhe	l̥à	wear loincloth
lhə	l̥ə̀	migrate
lhi	l̥ī	fly
lho	l̥ò	excavate

Idu resonants

ɽ = rh

rhi	ɽí	boil esp. rice
rho	ɽò	arrest
rhun	ɽũ̄	sound of dog

Idu vowels

ə̱

ngə̱	ŋə̱̄	sickness
gə̱	gə̱̄	to carry

A bit of comparative anthropology

➢ The Mishmi peoples, despite their linguistic diversity share much in common, which is why they try to work together
➢ The Meyor are not generally included under Mishmi, but in fact share much in common, including the shaman system and the use of special languages
➢ Meyor houses are however, Tibetan-style which makes them look different.

Architecture

- 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
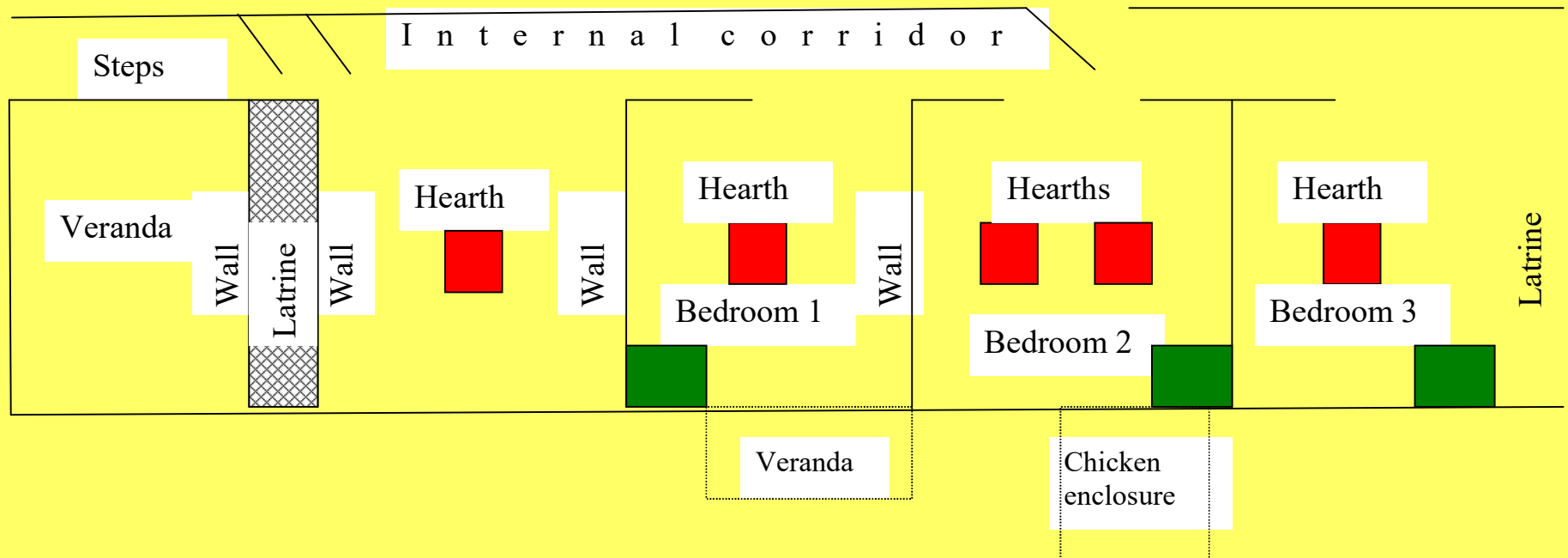
Idu longhouse

Kman longhouse

Schematic diagram of Kman longhouse from above

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

The vertical domains of the Kman deities

High mountains	Shyūtō?
	snowline

Upper mid-zone	Shyūŋìn
	pine forest

Lower mid-zone	Kāŋgàm
	broadleaf forest

	B.rūū
Plains	open grassland, marsh

The Kman universe and the journey of the soul

Mūŋ màn

Ə.sàʔ Thāŋgī

Sky

Ə.pàw Thāŋgì

Nyay mūŋ

Earth

Domain of Hūtūŋ

Rùŋdòŋ thòtsòʔ Dɔ̀ŋ

Tīsūŋ

Dark underworld

Ruŋ ŋal

Kāmàw glàt

Village of souls
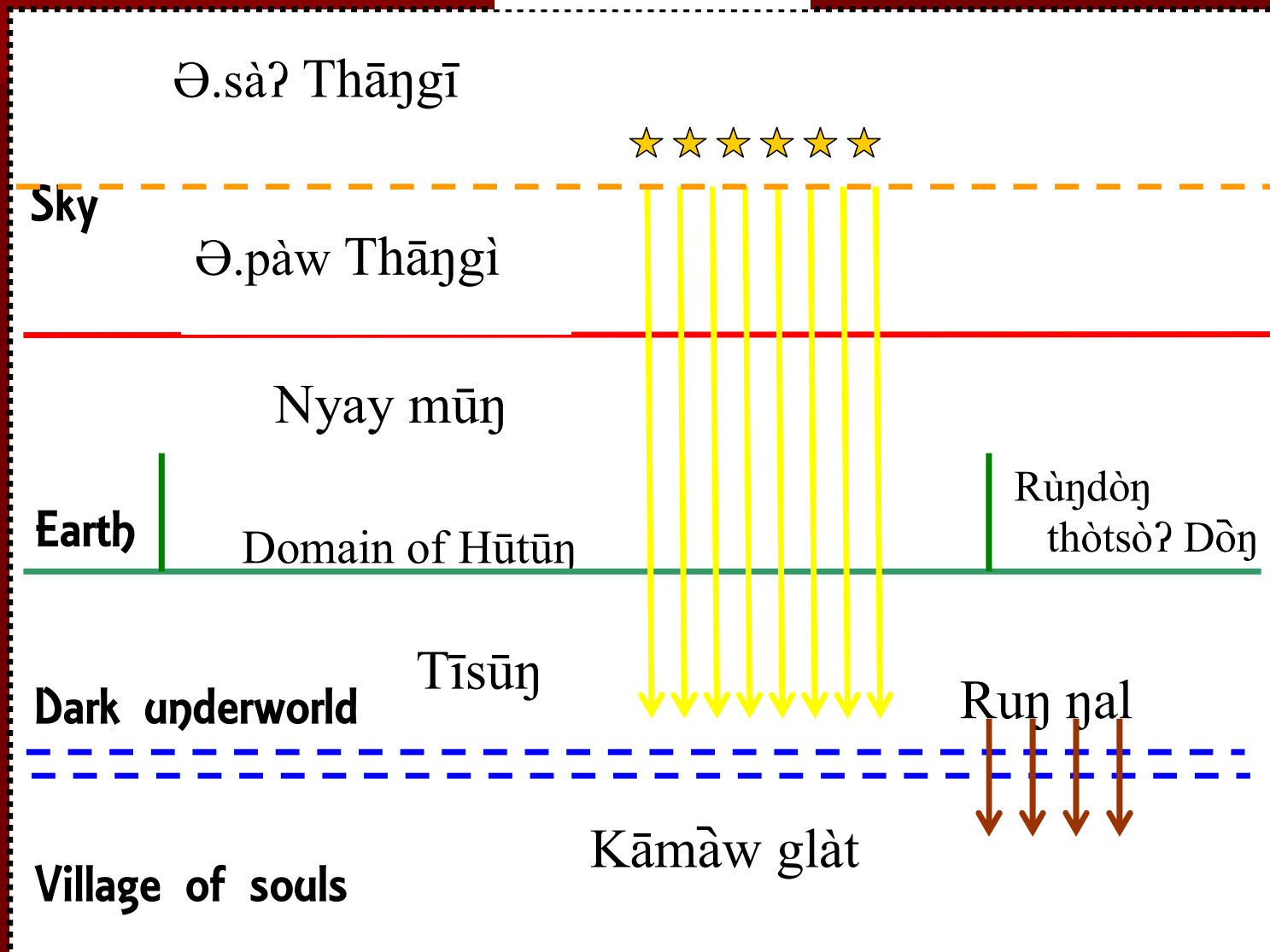
Shared culture

- 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

Multiple language systems

- Idu, Tawra, Kman and Meyor 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 (? not in Idu)
    - e) mediation register (only in Idu?)
    - f) babytalk register

Multiple language systems

- 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 in Kman is mainly about the substitution of poetic lexicon for ordinary words. The words often come in pairs, such as nomay/bromay. The surprising thing is that we know nothing of the origin of these words.

- The Mishmi peoples seem to be unique in the development of so many speech registers. Something to be celebrated.

Where next?

➢ The next step is to create dictionaries, which will be a reliable reference for Mishmi speakers

➢ Work is underway to prepare and check this

➢ It will ideally be a community project, with contributions on plants and animals and other aspects of Idu culture from specialists

➢ At the same time we need to create readers and writers who have learnt how to write

➢ For this we will need a reading and writing book with examples. *A draft is available for Idu and Kman*

Harmony with other Mishmi languages

➢Something to be considered is whether there should be a common system of writing all Mishmi languages, Idu, Kman and Tawra

➢This is definitely the agenda for Tawra and Kman

➢Idu has certain characters not present in the other two languages and in particular has much more nasalisation

➢ Nonetheless, simple conventions such as 'ng' for /ŋ/ or 'rh' for /ɽ/ can be across all languages

Bringing in all soeakers

➢As we have seen, there have been several attempts to write Mishmi languages and religious publications in Idu use a script which is not very satisfactory

➢Although we urge all speakers of the three Mishmi languages to agree on a single script, you can't force people

➢They have to agree because of persuasion and good arguments

➢Script wars are to no-one's benefit

Further ahead

➤There is a great need to document oral traditions, its stories and songs, the lengthy chants of the priests, the language of hunters.

➤These can be published as print books, but also made available on the internet

➤The future of the Mishmi languages is in the hands of the next generation

➤Teach them well!

What about the Meyor?

❖ Meyor, spoken in a few villages in northeast Arunachal Pradesh, is a highly endangered language of possible Tibeto-Burman affiliation.

❖A closely related language, Zha, is spoken across the border in Tibet in three villages.

❖Meyor shares much lexicon with Kman, but the similarities suggest this is possibly borrowing.

❖Meyor also has borrowings from spoken Tibetan and some Naga-type languages.

❖Nonetheless it retains a core of lexicon of no clear origin.

❖Only further more detailed work may help establish whether it is a language isolate or a previously unknown branch of Tibeto-Burman.
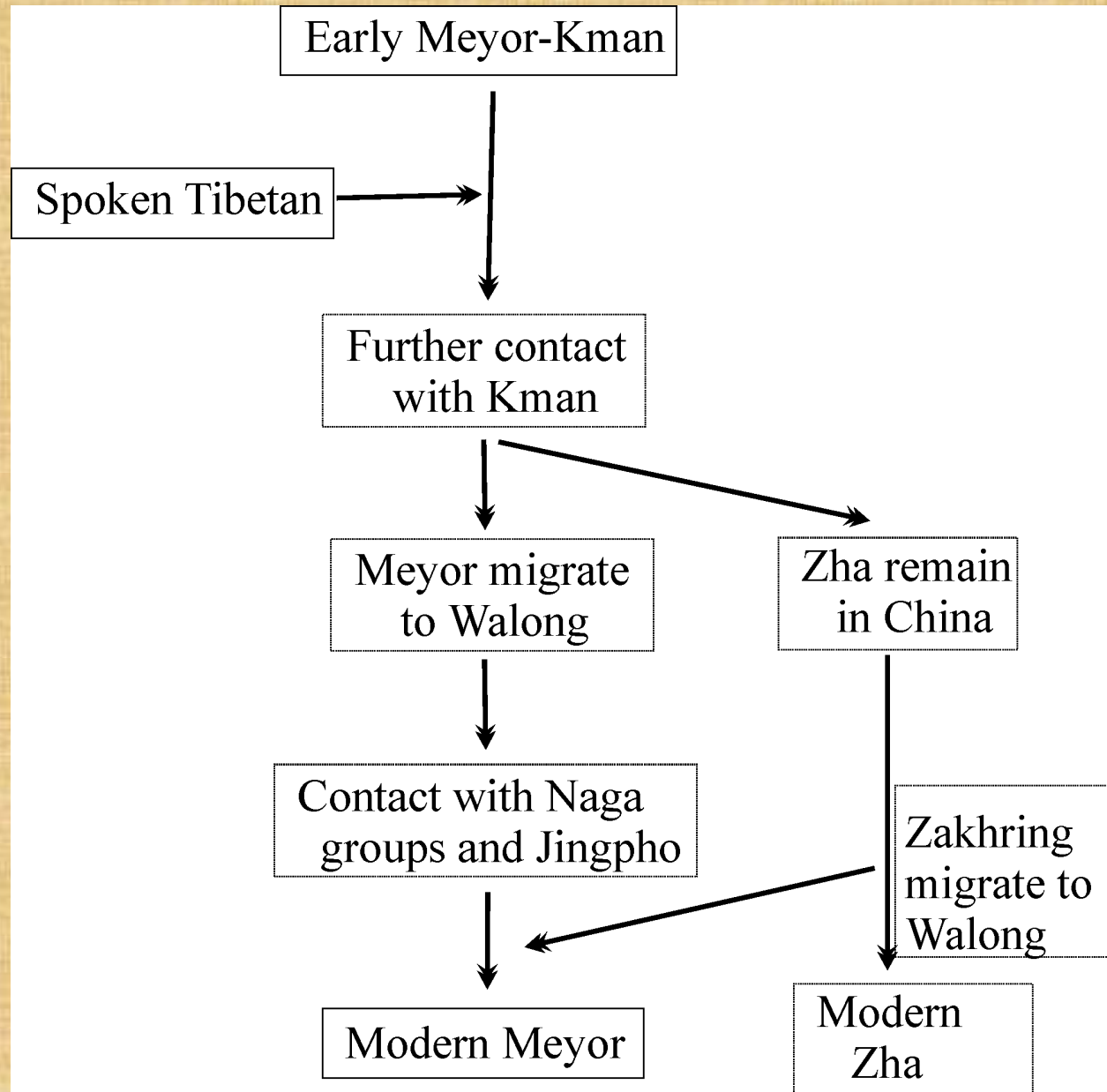
The only study of Meyor

THE MEYORS
AND
THEIR LANGUAGE

VICTOR LANDI
LANGAUGE OFFICER
DISTRICT RESEARCH OFFICE
LOHIT DIST. TEZU

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AFFAIRS
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH
GOVERNMENT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH
ITANAGAR

Meyor language history

Early Meyor-Kman

Spoken Tibetan →

Further contact with Kman

Meyor migrate to Walong

Zha remain in China

Contact with Naga groups and Jingpho

Zakhring migrate to Walong

Modern Meyor

Modern Zha

What about the Meyor?

❖ It is not possible for outsiders to stay in the Meyor area

❖If Meyor people would like to develop their language further then it will depend on working in non-restricted areas such as Tezu

❖But we believe it is time for the Meyor to join with the Mishmi in langusage development.

THANKS

THANKS

THANKS

❖ To the many individuals who helped us in the field
❖ ILDC/KLDC/TLDC