

# **Kman language development and its relation to Mishmi**

**February 2nd, 2017**

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.

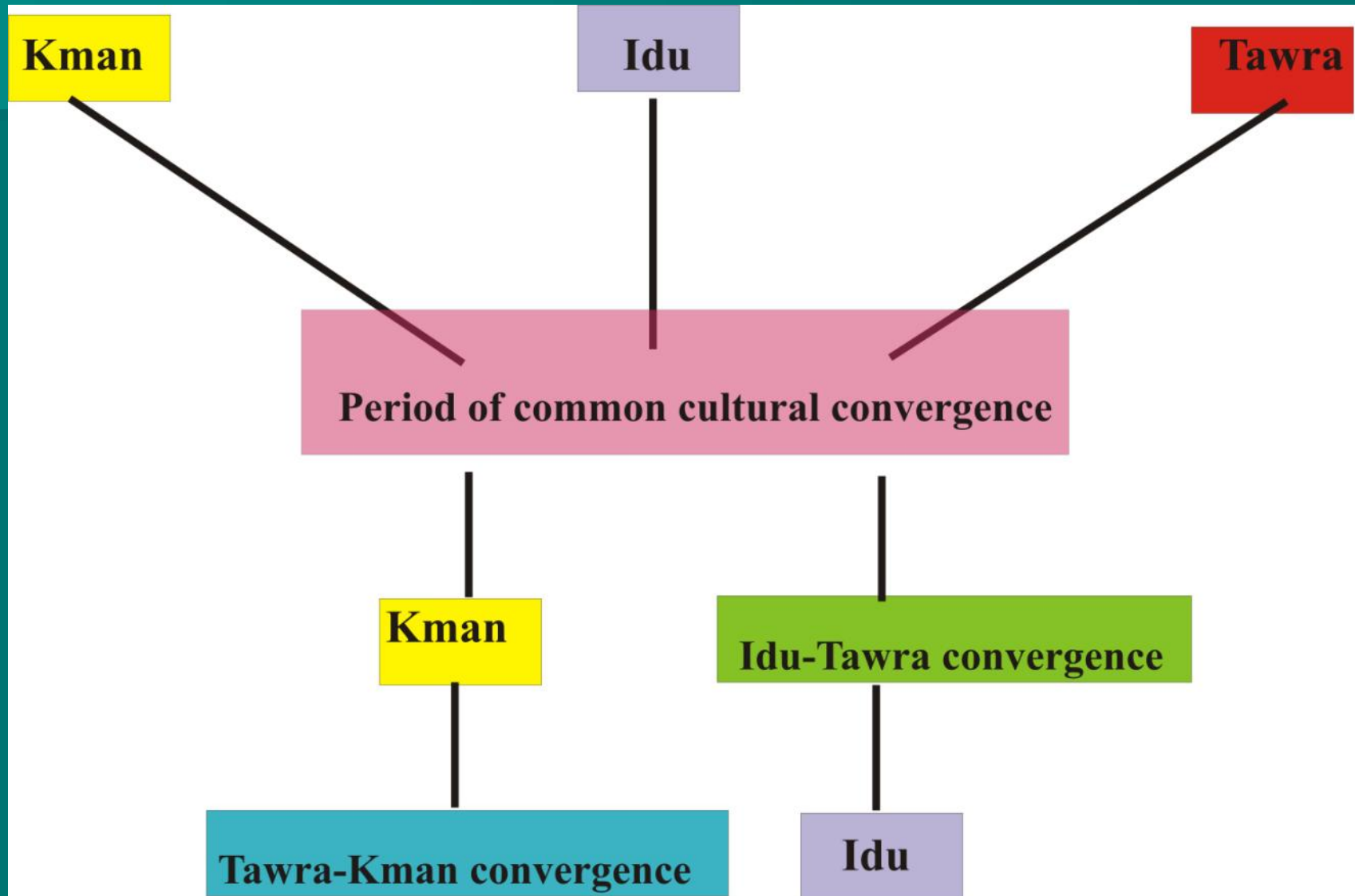
# Mishmi: three peoples, one name

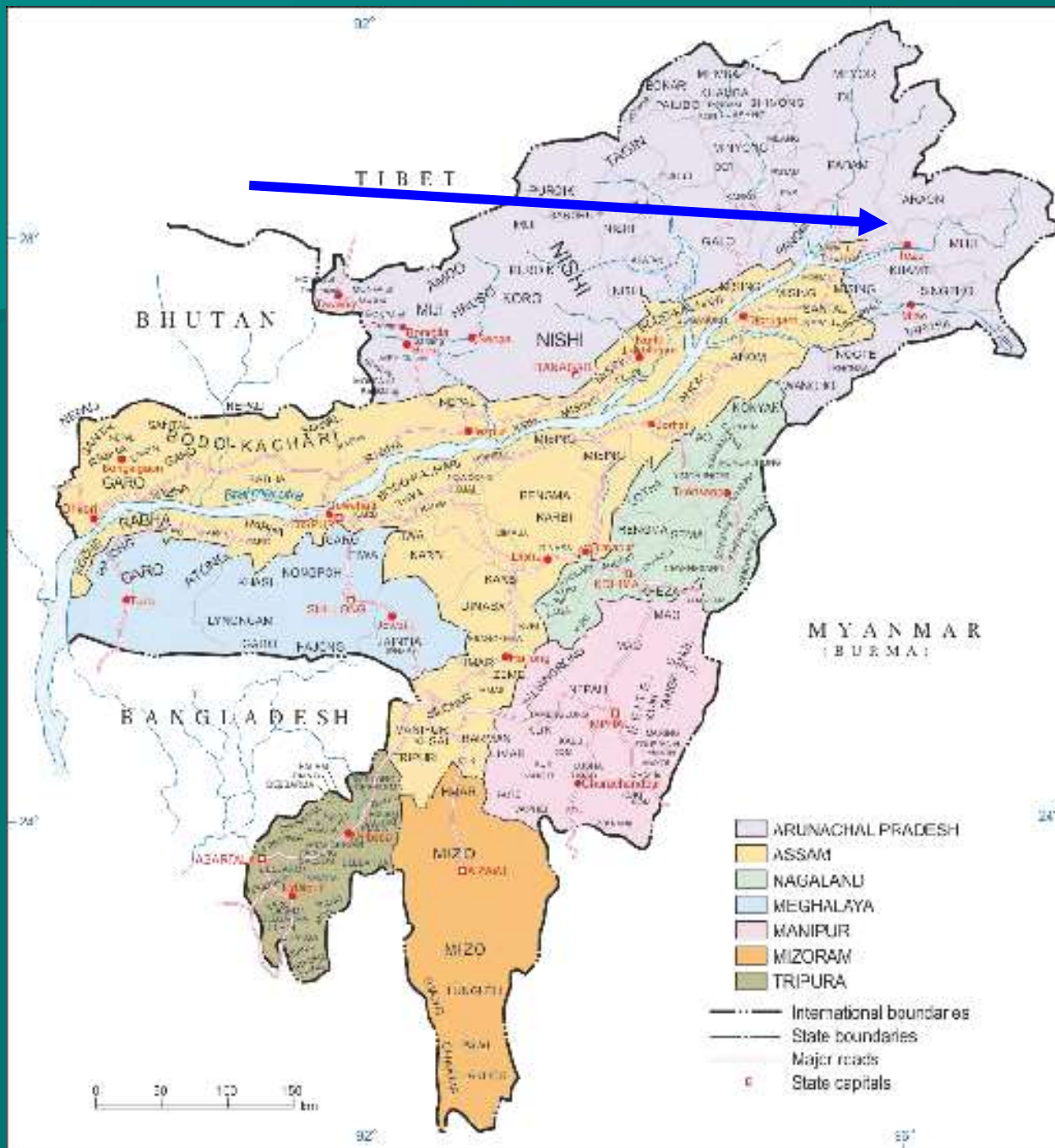
- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh consist of three different groups, speaking three different languages
- These are the Idu [also Kera], the Tawra [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Miju]
- Two of their languages are presumably related, Idu and Tawra, but the third, Kman, is quite different
- These languages 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

# Mishmi interaction model





# Ethnolinguistic map of NE India



Kalabhomora Bridge, Assam

# 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

1855.] *Notes on the Languages spoken by the Mi-Shmis.* 307

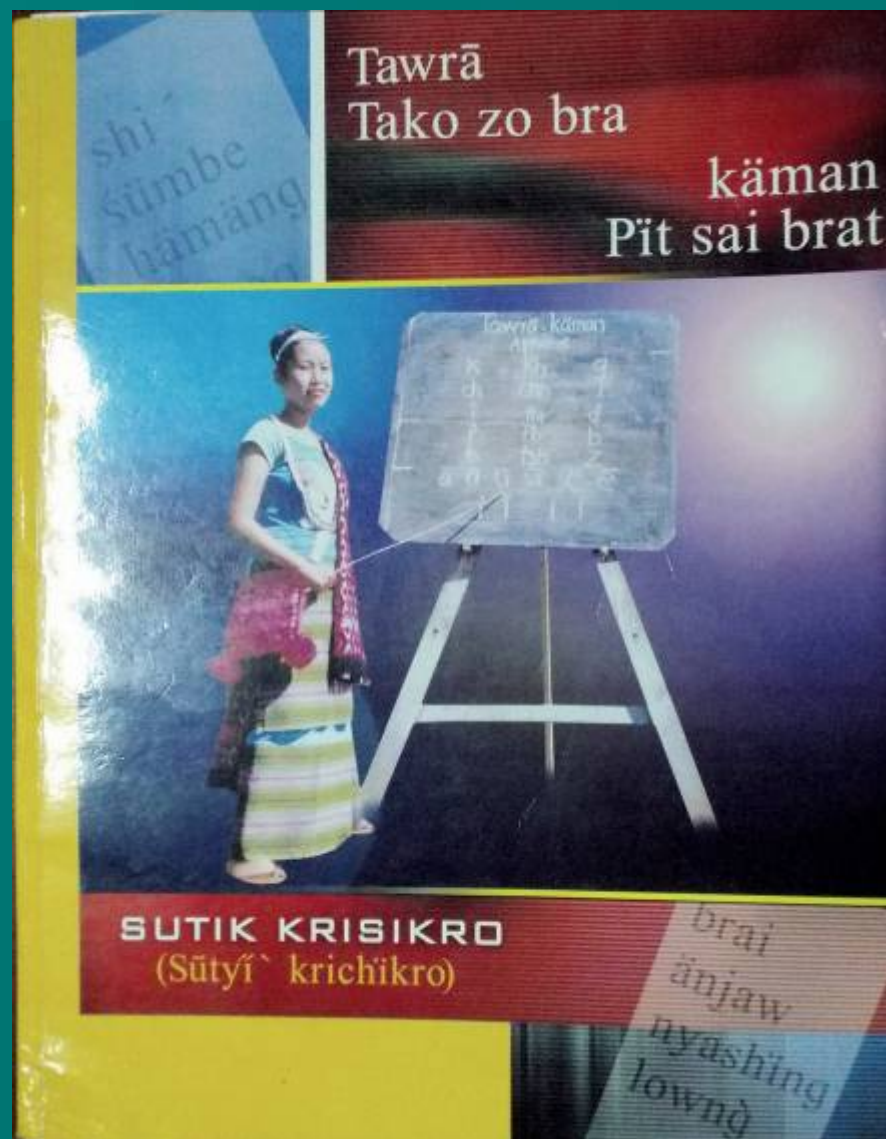
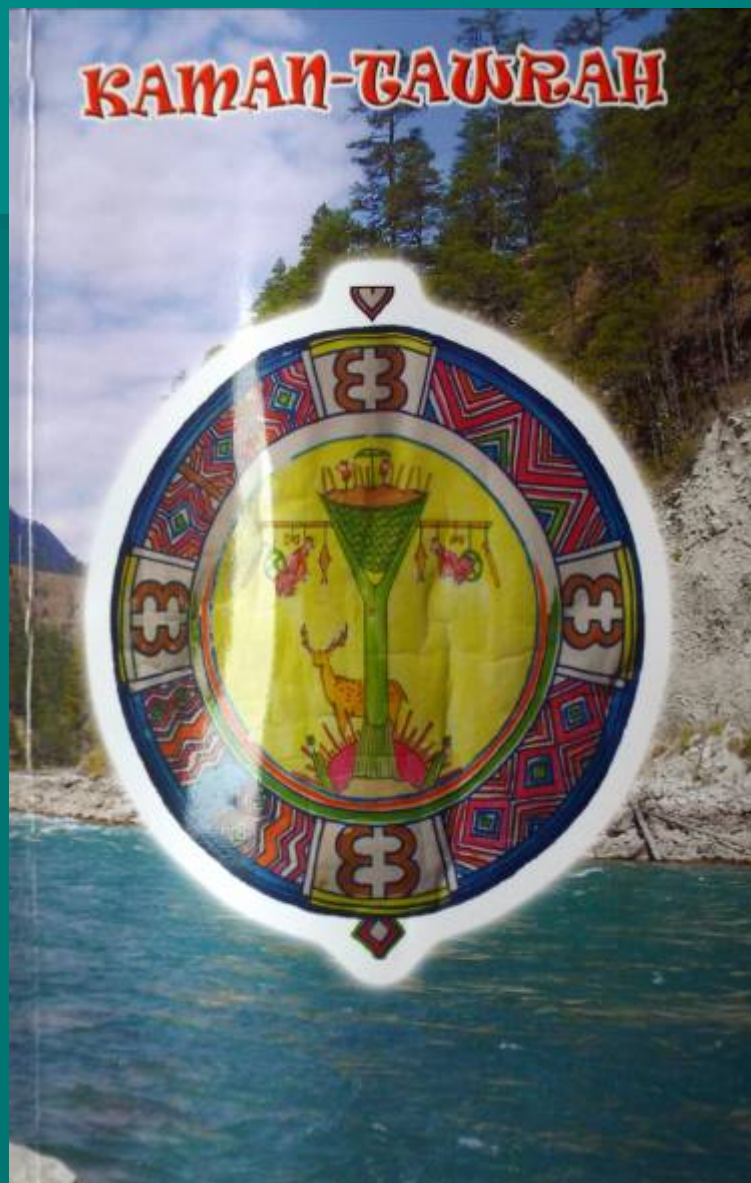
*Notes on the Languages spoken by the Mi-Shmis, by W. ROBINSON,  
Esq. (Communicated by the Government of Bengal).*

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.

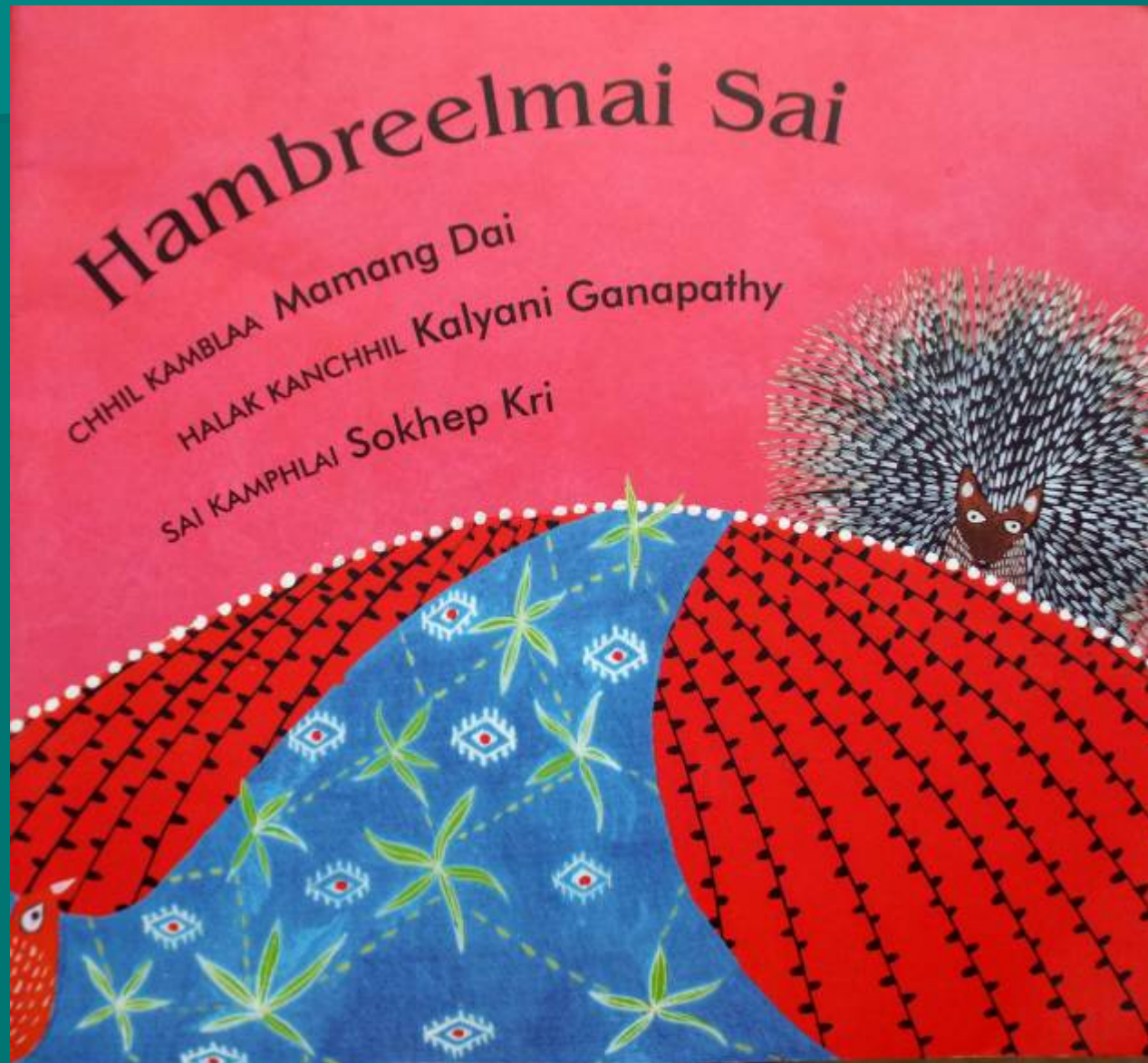
Like most other mountain tribes they are divided into a vast number of petty clans, each of which has a nominal head, but these seem so intimately connected with each other, that it is difficult to ascertain in what consists the difference that separates one clan from another. Their lingual peculiarities, 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 NĒDU Mishmis, the TAYING or ME-ME Mi-Shmis, and the MIJHU Mi-Shmis.

# Recent publications I





# Recent publications II





# MFPS

## TA-ATHAP-WANG YAA MISHMI PRAYER & MANTRAS



*Handwritten:*  
Manchow  
Mimua



AMIK WEE CHOW NEY  
MATAI WEE KLAM NEY  
TIMIK WEE CHOW NEW  
KAGAM WEE KLAM NEY  
SHUTO WEE CHOW NEY  
BORU WEE KLAM NEW  
HUTUNG WEE CHOW NEY  
KATAN WEE TAM NEY  
KANGUN WEE TAM NEY  
KAANYAN WEE TAM NEY

# 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



# 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 Devanagari?

- It has been suggested that the Mishmi languages could be written in Devanagari
- However, Devanagari 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 Devanagari 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

# 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



# 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: Scientific names**

The names for plants and animals in Kman also have their equivalent in international scientific nomenclature.

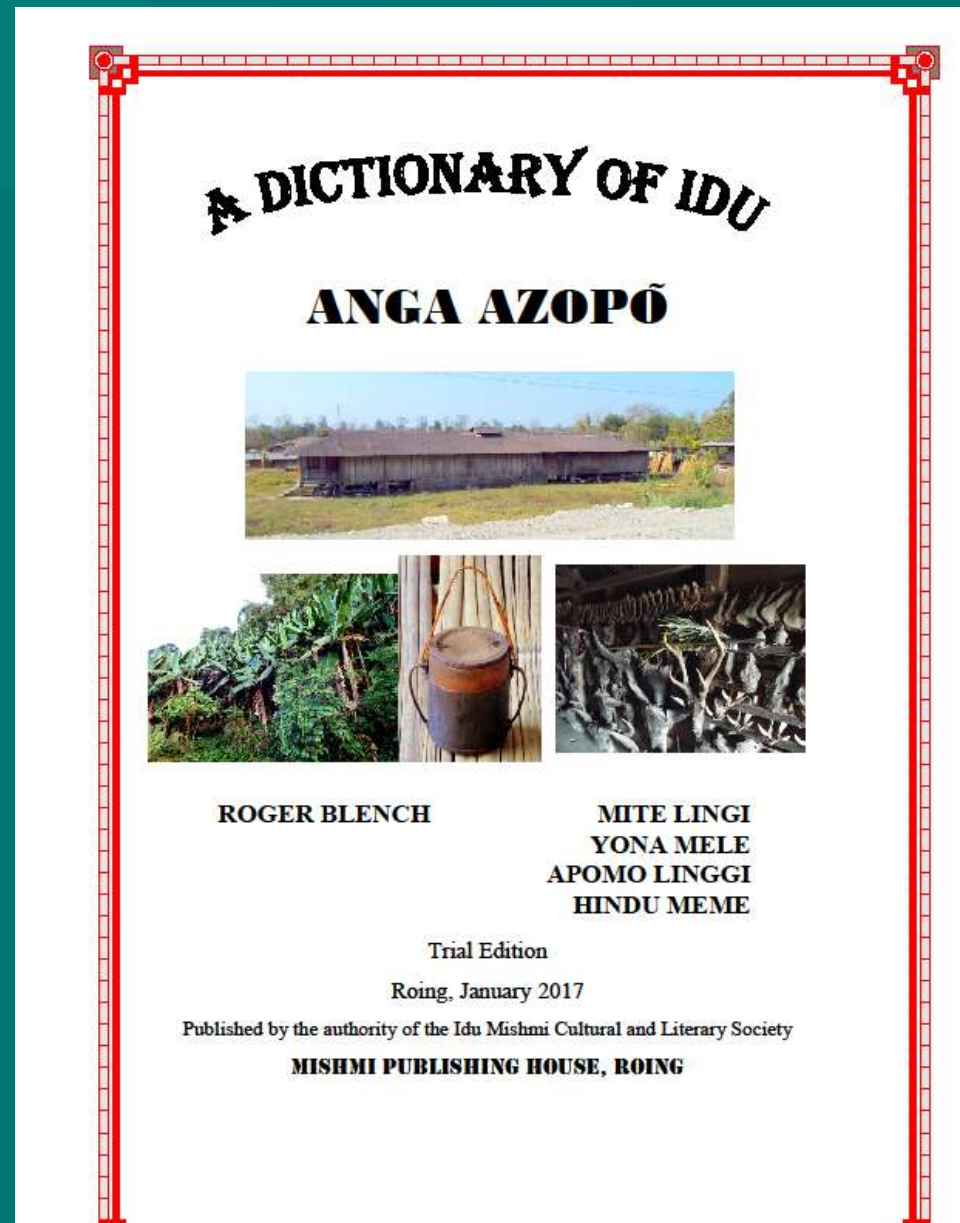
It is often not possible to identify these for certain, but the existence of various field guides, for mammals, birds and reptiles, makes it possible in some cases.

The guides used for this dictionary are listed in the references at the end. International names are given in English (where they exist) and also in Latin.

The situation for plants is more difficult, since there are no reliable regional guides. Sometimes the Assamese name can provide a clue, and these are given where known.

# Dictionary cover

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



# ILDC hard at work





# 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 glide 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 attached
- These can be seen from the following sets of words



# Kman consonants

## Kman consonants

	Bilabia l	Labio- dental	Alveolar	Retro - flex	Palato- alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glott al
Plosive	p, p <sup>h</sup> b		t, d	t <sup>h</sup> [t]			k, g	k <sup>h</sup> ʔ
Fricative		f v	s, [s <sup>h</sup> ] [z]		ʃ			h
Affricate			ts dz		tʃ, tʃ <sup>h</sup> dʒ			
Nasal	m		n			ɲ	ŋ	
Flapped			r					
Lateral			l	[ɭ]				
Approximants	w	[ʋ]					y	

# Kman consonants

Kman has a series of allophones of specific consonants, realised in individual ways before front vowels, principally /i/. Apart from /t/ these are all continuants. These are;

/w/

[ʋ]

/l/

[ɭ]

/s/

[s<sup>h</sup>]

/t/

[t]

# Kman double consonants

Kman has a small number of long consonants, principally /ŋ/, /p/, /t/ and /w/ shown below. These are presumed to former morpheme boundaries which have become lexicalised.

## Kman double consonants

### Kman

### Gloss

ēŋŋà

face

māŋŋit

dilemma

cāŋŋèʔ

strainer with long handle

tēppàl

imprisonment

tēpphyã

liquid food prepared with a fish stomach

ēttà

to beckon

tūwwə̀y

steep rope bridge

# Kman vowels

The vowels of Kman are shown in the Table ;

## Kman vowels

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		ʉ (ʉ) u
Close-Mid	e		o
Open		a	

# Kman nasalised vowels

## Kman nasalised vowels

Kman	Gloss
cākrã	triangular drying net
dēhã	large-billed crow
gãwã	zigzag
tàŋgã	shoulder-blade
tàŋgrã	basket for vegetables
tūpphyã	liquid food prepared with the stomach of a fish
lōŋshãy	large eagle
gārõꞤ	herb sp.
gẽwẽ	zigzag, twisty
làhõ	sweet potato
māwẽ?	herb sp.



# Kman doubled vowels

Kman	Gloss
glāàt	village
sāàt	to murder, kill
bō̃ò	to low (cow, mithun)
gṑò	plate
pyṑò	to smear a paste
yū̀̀	wasp sp.

# 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 tone heights although these are not arranged in neat sets
- But are rather sliding tones which move between one level and another

# Kman is a tone language II

The Kman tone system has three phonetic tone heights marked as follows;

High-            ‘

Mid               -

Low              `

# Kman is a tone language III

Only the mid-tone occurs on monosyllabic roots. The underlying system consists of glide tones which apply either to single segments but form a system of suprasegmental patterns applied to polysyllabic words and compounds. The glides so far identified are High-Mid, High-Low and Mid-Low, marked as follows;

High-Low	^	Basic
High-Mid	ˆ	Phonetic only
Mid-Low	˘	Basic
Low-Mid	˙	Loanwords only

# Kman is a tone language IV

Kman tones are highly mobile in compounds and sentence contexts. This is almost certainly due to the suprasegmentals nature of the tones. Thus;  
or;

iṽt

enemy

īt tāmpūì

raid, attack

āmìk

sun

àmìk khlēt

sunrise

# 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 <sup>-</sup> .lùì	buffalo

So the use of -w and -y is recommended

# 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.

# Kman animal names in hunting register

English	Kman	Hunters'
<b>Mammals</b>		
male musk deer	təlā	bèp
female musk deer	təlā	shāw
takin	khyām	brīmā kāyōŋ
goral	sāl	brê
serow	rāʔây	sék kâlēŋ
bear	kūm	hōm wōrtōŋ
deer	pāhì	hī tàmbroŋ
wild pig	t̄sòm	cùl kēnūŋ
monkey I	ēmùk	d.hyùcī d.hyū ŋān
monkey II	ēmùk	māhūì
elephant	m̄n.yōŋ	sāk tōyōŋ

# Kman words in hunting register

food	shyàt	mūk k <sup>h</sup> wī (monkey faeces)
chili	bìtǿí	kēsāy
garlic	təmàʔ	māʔkāw
salt	təmìn	blāy k`.pà
ginger	dīʔìŋ	yēlkā
rice	hākù	dāp kàmbīʔ
maize	bō	kāwyūŋ
millet	d.rōò	kāŋgràw
meat	s <sup>h</sup> în	l <sup>h</sup> m
wine, beer	s <sup>h</sup> î	sh <sup>h</sup> û kàmbòn

# Where next: a grammar?

- The companion volume to a dictionary is a grammar, a guide to how and why Idu puts together its sentences
- This is much harder to write than a dictionary, as we don't know the rules and speakers have no innate perception
- Everyone speaks grammatically, but does not necessarily know the rules of grammar
- A grammar has been drafted and perhaps a circulation version will be ready by 2018

# Bringing in all Kman

- As we have seen, there have been several attempts to write Kman but the script is not very satisfactory
- Although we urge all Kman 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



# 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.



# Further ahead

- Next year, 2018, is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Re collective festival, celebrated by all three groups
- We hope to have a hard-cover dictionary ready for local printing and circulation copies of the grammars of Idu and Tawra





# THANKS





# THANKS

❖ To the many  
individuals who helped  
us in the field  
especially the ILDC  
and CALSOM

