

# **The languages and cultures of the Mishmi peoples**

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# Linguistic diversity in Arunachal Pradesh

- Arunachal Pradesh (and NE India in general) is a remarkable area for ethnolinguistic diversity (probably due to the mountainous terrain)
- Due to its special status in colonial times, and more recently proximity to China, its languages have been very little studied
- The region is an interface of three global religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity and their interaction with local religious traditions
- The societies are also structurally very diverse
- And there is now a strong urge within local peoples to document their own language, culture and customs



## Ethnolinguistic map of NE India

# 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 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, but is probably not 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 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 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



# The Mishmi peoples



# Why document other (or your own) societies?

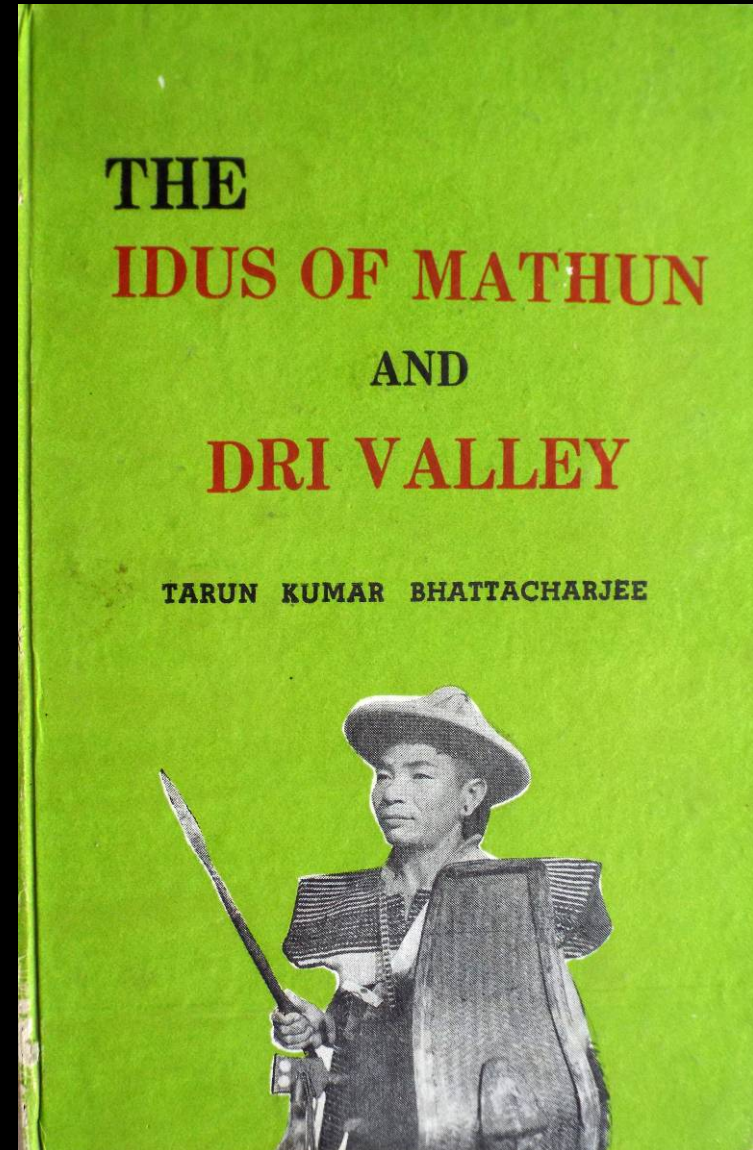
- We can speak our languages and live our culture without being conscious of it
- But the world is changing fast, new methods of communication are sometimes flooding out older ways of doing things, of material culture, of ritual practice
- We may want to wear modern lightweight fabrics or trainers, but this is not a reason not to document what clothes were worn in the past and how they were
- This is part of cultural identity and is particularly important in a globalising world
- The same is true of language and culture. Each language is unique and carries with it immense cultural baggage.
- Dictionaries and grammars are an essential part of cultural documentation

# Documenting indigenous communities

- Indian museums as a whole are fairly poor on minorities, and tend to focus on the culture and history of dominant cultures
- In the NE and Orissa, where minorities are dominant, museums play a part in representing culture, but not in a very effective way.
- In AP, the state museum shows each minority in a diorama, static figures in so-called typical costume and activities
- Needless to say village life isn't like that and the possibility of using even vaguely modern technology has evidently passed them by.
- Museums do play an important role in other parts of the world in interacting with local communities and responding to their wishes, but not yet in India.



# Anthropology of the Idu



# Arunachal Pradesh State Museum





# Kman



# Tawra





# Idu



# What binds Mishmi together?

- The three Mishmi peoples, despite their distinct languages have much in common culturally
- Part of that shared heritage underlies the attempts to draw together Mishmi as a single group
- This is not necessarily helpful in language work
- But other features, such as architecture and shamanism are clearly held in common



# 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



# 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

- Each group has a slightly different system



# 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



# Shared culture

- Styles of dress are quite similar and in former times, almost all peoples shared the 'straight cut' hairstyle



# Idu traditional costume



# Multiple language 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

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

# Developing writing systems (aka scripts)

- The objective of writing down an unwritten language is to develop a way that can easily typed and read and is also easily taught to learners
- ❖ **The procedure is as follows;**
  - ❖ The language is analysed according to scientific linguistic principles
  - ❖ The principles are set out in an orthography document [this document]
  - ❖ The orthography document makes suggestions for ways of writing the sounds of the language
  - ❖ It also sets out problems in writing and choices to be made



# Developing writing systems (aka scripts)

- **The community is responsible for;**
- Forming a language development committee which is representative of speakers of the language
- Creating a 'paper trail', that is a document recording the decisions of the committee and the reasons for those decisions
- Discussing the options for a writing system and making choices, giving reasons for those choices
- **Then;**
- The language development committee then forwards its decisions back to the author of the orthography document and the document is updated with this information
- The language development committee receives this revised document, reads and approves it

# Developing writing systems (aka scripts)

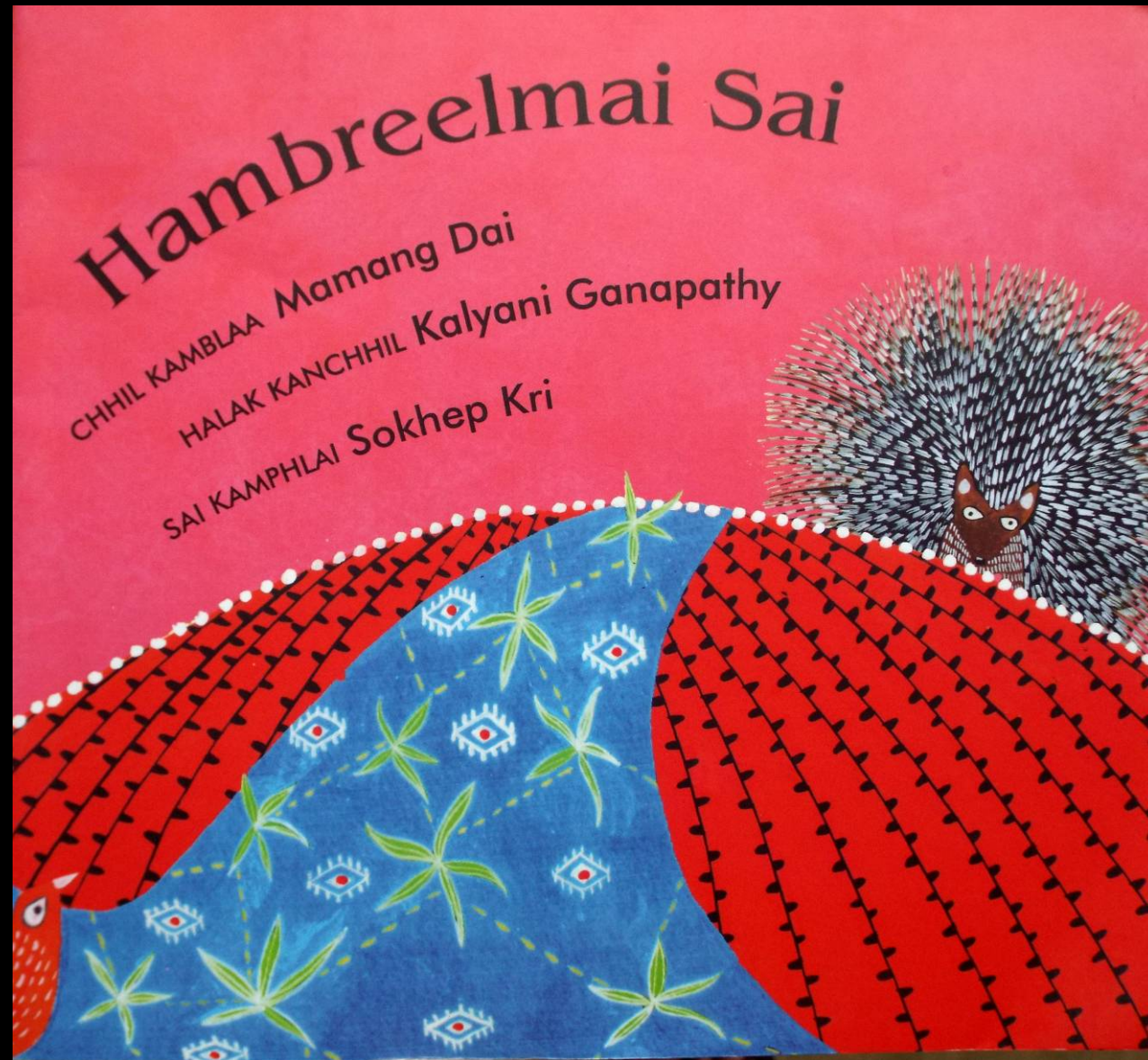
- **Next steps**

- A trial primer must be created, a booklet which teaches new readers how to write their language
- This should *not* be printed until it has been tested
- When it has been tested, some problems will surely be found. The primer and possibly the orthography will need to be updated
- A final version of the primer can be printed and tested on a larger scale
- Preliminary books can be printed
- At the same time a first version of the dictionary can be circulated, to help new readers write their language

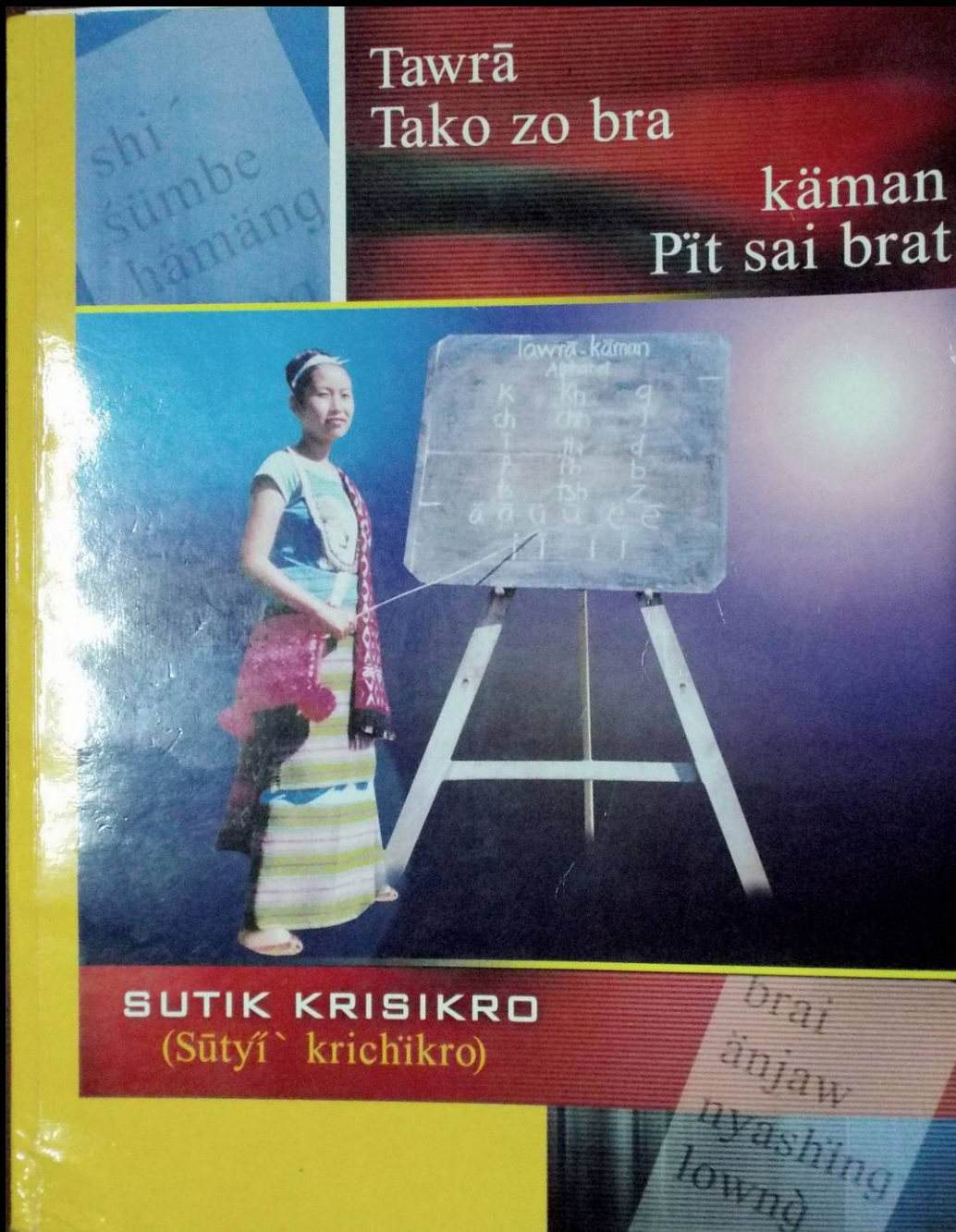
- **REMEMBER**

- Idu is not like any other language in the world, and especially unlike Hindi, Nepali or Assamese. It has quite different sounds and quite different grammar. Therefore there is no reason to write it in the same way. Idu must have its own writing system which reflects the language.

# A children's story in Kman

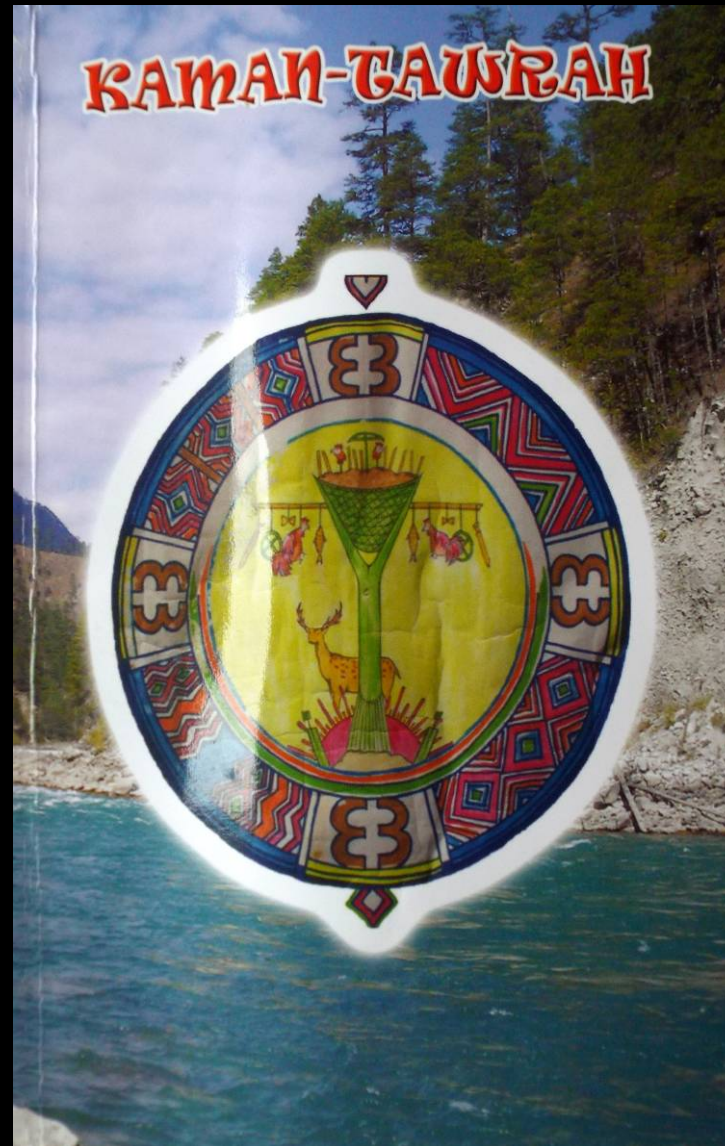






**An earlier  
publication  
on Tawra and  
Kman  
writing**

# Kman and Tawra culture



# Achievements so far

- Documentation of all three languages in digital form has been carried out in the last three weeks
- This has been written up as a series of proposals for writing systems which have been distributed to interested persons
- It is emphasised that these are highly preliminary, that they should be read and considered by the community
- In the meantime, the digital data will be transcribed fully and sent back to the community for further revision and additions
- In particular we hope to develop an agreed writing system in the next couple of years, along with first versions of dictionaries.



# Idu Language Development Committee



# Most important museum of Mishmi culture





# and so?

- The richness of culture in Arunachal Pradesh remains largely unexplored
- Some of its languages and cultural practices are in danger of being forgotten or lost as a result of globalisation and the influence of Hindi
- Writing systems for languages will assist, especially if they result in the use of minority speech forms
- But writing is no use unless parents are transmitting the language in the house
- There is no contradiction between speaking your own language in the house and a major language to outsiders (such as Hindi or English)

# THANKS

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