Disappearing Dialect: the Idu-Mishmi Language of Arunachal Pradesh (India)

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ABSTRACT

India is home to 380 spoken languages and of these, almost 66 dialects are spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. It is a hill state in India and is inhabited by 31 indigenous groups. The Idu-Mishmis are one of the major sub-groups of the greater Mishmi indigenous group of Arunachal Pradesh. They have a distinctive dialect which falls into the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. However, the Idu-Mishmis' language faces an unknown fate. Changing lifestyles, a formal modern education system, a small population and most of all, a changed lingua-franca, have pushed their language onto its deathbed and so their oral traditions are gradually disappearing. Their told and untold stories uncover layers of interconnected reasons why the survival of their language is at risk, and this case study tries to capture the views and concerns of the Idu-Mishmis about the fate of their entire language.

Keywords

endangered language, Arunachal Pradesh, Idu-Mishmi indigenous group, oral tradition, genealogy narration, inter-generational transmission, Dibang Valley, Roing, Idu, Idu script, Tibeto-Burman, *Anga-Āpuyā, Ang-Nga-Āliyā, Ānjā, igu*, Idu-Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS), Ignazio Buttitta

The Oral Languages of Arunachal Pradesh

Language is not just a means of communication but it also represents the rich fabric of cultural expressions. It carries an individual's or a community's identity and mediates value systems, social codes, world-views and the sense of belonging (UNESCO: 2009, p.67). Since Independence, India has accepted the principle of language sovereignty that makes India a safe home for languages. India is home to 380 spoken languages (Müller: 1995) and of these, almost 66 dialects are spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh is a hill state inhabited by 31 indigenous groups along with various sub-groups (Singh: 1995). It is located in the lap of the great Himalayan mountain range. The whole structure of the linguistic diversity of Arunachal Pradesh is based on the verbal form, as only the Khamptis,

Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khambas and Membas have their own script (Singh: 1995). The evidence of the richness of oral traditions and expressions is visible in the mythical stories of the origin of the tribes, in their prayers and rituals, in their knowledge and skills, and in their performing arts (Elwin: 1957, 1958, 1970; Sarkar: 1974; Pandey and Duarah: 1999).

The vitality of languages is a benchmark for cultural diversity because virtually every major aspect of human culture, from kinship classification to religion, is dependent on language for its transmission (Haarmann: 2004). Oral traditions and expressions, including language, serve as a repository of knowledge, values, beliefs and collective memory, which is transmitted through songs, dance, drama, etc. (UNESCO ICH Kit: 2010). The death of a language inevitably means the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions (Crystal: 2000). However, in recent years, the rate at which languages and oral traditions are disappearing has increased alarmingly because of the rapid progress of globalisation. Globalisation poses many challenges [rapid urbanisation, large-scale migration, industrialisation and environmental change and modern communications media (print/electronic and the internet)] to the survival of oral traditions and expressions (UNESCO ICH kit: 2010). Being a home of linguistic diversity, Arunachal Pradesh cannot escape from the challenges posed by globalisation. Most of the indigenous groups of Arunachal Pradesh face an unknown fate for their oral languages and traditions because globalisation has not left any buffer zones of time in which they could adapt to the rapidly changing world (Dhar: 2005; Dutta: 1997; Pandey: 1996; Ray: 2009; Riba: 1997; Sebastian: 1999). One of these groups is the Idu-Mishmis.

The Idu-Mishmi indigenous group is one of the major sub-groups of the greater Mishmi indigenous group and it is one of the 31 indigenous groups of Arunachal

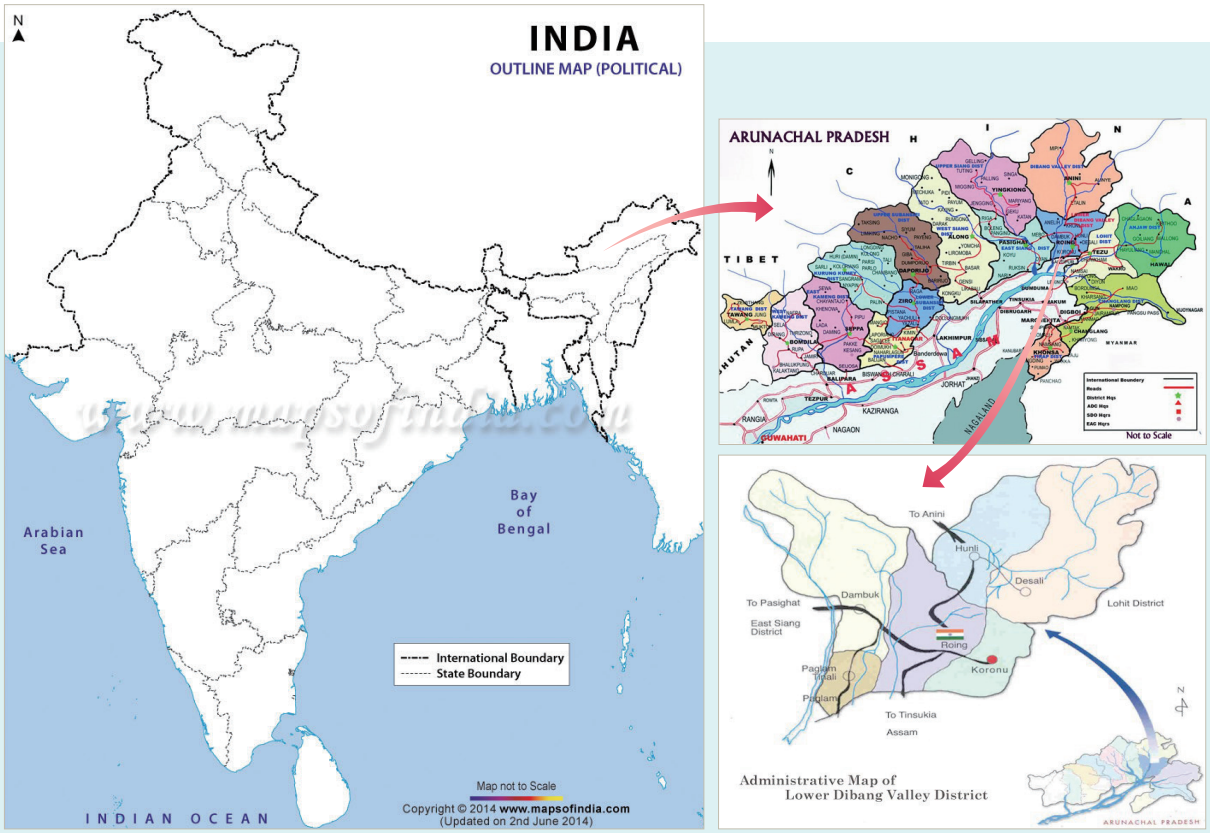


Figure 1
Lower Dibang Valley District and the area where the fieldwork was carried out. Image: courtesy of http://www.mapsofindia.com/free-download/india-outline-political-map-in-a4.html#, http://arunachalpradesh.nic.in/Pic-htms/mapofarunachal.htm http://roing.nic.in/images/ldibangmap.jpg

Pradesh. The Idu-Mishmis have a distinctive dialect, which is one of the Tibeto-Burman groups of languages. They have a rich oral language, but have not yet successfully developed a script. A case study was conducted to present a comprehensive picture of the present condition of the Idu-Mishmi language and oral traditions. What are their worries and woes and how do they respond to the situation? These were the primary questions my study sought to examine.

The study area and focus group: an overview

Discussing oral traditions and the challenges they face in the context of Arunachal Pradesh is very difficult because almost all the indigenous groups are rich in oral traditions and expressions. However, the oral traditions and expressions of the Idu-Mishmis were selected because the Idu-Mishmis form a separate cultural zone in Arunachal Pradesh with their distinctive beliefs, rituals, dialect and deep knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. This knowledge is reflected in their extensive, centuries-old, oral traditions.

The Idu-Mishmis mainly inhabit Dibang Valley district and Lower Dibang Valley district. The population of Idu-Mishmis was 9,076 as recorded in the census of 2001and this rose to approximately 12,000 in the census of 2011 (the exact size of the current population of the Idu-Mishmi group has not been released) in both the Dibang Valley districts. Roing, the headquarters of the Lower Dibang Valley district, was the location for this case study. There are fifteen Idu-Mishmi villages in and around Roing where majority of the Idu-Mishmi people live. [Figure 1]

The fieldwork was conducted in Roing in 2012. My case study primarily concentrated on the transmission of oral language and traditions to the young Idus, as only transmission to the next generation and use in everyday life keep language and oral traditions alive. It also focused on the status of Idu priests as in most of the indigenous groups of Arunachal Pradesh the priest is the main bearer and carrier of oral traditions. To collect data, unstructured and open-ended individual and group ethnographic interviews were conducted with the Idu locals. Unstructured interviews have general areas of interests but conversations develop in their own way within these areas. The number of people in the community who can speak Idu fluently, the development of an Idu script, different forms of oral tradition and expressions and their everyday use, the status of the Idu priests and government and community level initiatives for preserving the language were the general areas covered in the interviews. These were descriptive and in-depth issues and were not treated as fixed or closed questions, rather they were handled flexibly according to the way the conversations developed. Non-participant observation, an ethnographic technique (Gobo: 2008, p.191) along with audio-visual techniques (recordings) was extensively used to collect data.

Idu-Mishmi oral traditions and expressions including language

The oral tradition of the Idu-Mishmis is divided into two parts. The priestly language is called *Anga-Āpuyā*, while the colloquial version is known as *Ang-Nga-Āliyā*. Each community of Arunachal Pradesh has a voluminous oral literature on the myths and legends surrounding their origin and religious belief, and the priest of every community has the essential duty to preserve and pass on this literature to the next generation. The Idu priest is known as an *Igu*. The priests are therefore treasure-troves of Idu-Mishmi oral tradition as it is primarily passed on through them. Chants are the most important part of the Idu-Mishmi oral traditions and expressions. The *Igu* mainly recite these chants which are based on myths of origin. The chanting is a process of narration and includes the creation of universe (*innilāfritāzu*), the evolution of mankind (*yupuāyu thru*), the origin and migration of the Idu-Mishmi, the struggle of mankind against malevolent spirits (*Kinu*), the invocation of benevolent spirits and the origin of animals, birds, crops and festivals (Lingi: 2011). The priestly chants begin with the narration of genealogies, then proceed to prayers for the rituals of particular occasions and then for the well-being of households. The chants are also full of rich geographical information. For instance a river is mentioned in the chants for death rituals:

Oh, the boatman, please take the boat and cross the river
The soul starts the journey to the other side of the river



Plate 1
An Idu kitchen.
Photo: Author, October 2012.



Plate 2
An Idu woman at her loom.
Photo: Author, October 2012.

Here the river is the Brahmaputra according to one informant.

Though the chants and narratives are mostly recited by priests, informants explained that no form of oral tradition is restricted to a specific group within the community, like women or priests.

In colloquial speech, there are proverbs, tales, legends, myths, songs, rhymes, etc.. The stories, proverbs and rhymes, in fact all forms of Idu-Mishmi oral tradition, tell of their society, social values and their world-view. Informants (both female and male, and priests) told interesting stories that indicated the formation of their eating habits, their hairstyles and childbirth rituals. One story explains that Idu-Mishmi women do not eat any meat except chicken because once in the past, the Idu-Mishmi women secretly ate chicken when their menfolk were busy hunting in the forest. [Plate 1] When the men came back they were angry and decided that none of the women would be allowed to eat any kind of meat they had hunted from that day onwards. They would have to make do with chicken. Another story says that women should feed their baby from the right breast when they feed it for the first time, because if they feed it from the left breast first the child will become left-handed and will not be able to use a bow and arrow properly.

The language predicament

A non-Idu NGO worker who has worked for the empowerment of Idu women for many years observed that the language was a 'life support system.' As I got to know them, I found that almost all the Idu-Mishmis accepted this fact and regretted that the number of Idu speaking people was gradually decreasing. The present lingua franca of the Idu-Mishmis is Hindi. Even at home, Hindi is the preferred language; children and parents do not talk in Idu with each other. Hindi or sometimes a hybrid (English or Hindi mixed with the Idu language) is used within the family. A majority of the Idu-Mishmis revealed that only the older generation can speak Idu fluently and regretted that their children cannot speak it. A woman I met during my fieldwork expressed her regret that her children could not understand words related to weaving on a handloom and could not identify the parts of the loom in the local language. [Plate 2] The intriguing fact is that the youngest members (under the age of 10) of the group with which I interacted could not speak the Idu language at all and mostly use Hindi in day to day conversation. Not only the younger generation, but also middle-aged Idu-Mishmi people were uncomfortable speaking in their mother tongue. Many Idu-Mishmi informants told me that they did not understand either the priestly language or the genealogical narratives the priests chanted, even though many of them were fluent in the colloquial version of Idu.

The modern education system has turned out to be a real problem in the process of transmitting the Idu-Mishmi language. As the Idu language has no script, it is neither taught, nor is it the medium of teaching, even in the primary schools located in Idu areas. The informants acknowledged that the majority of Idu children can speak Idu before starting school but after they go to school (generally at the age of 6 or 7) they gradually forget how to speak in Idu because they are taught only in Hindi or English and these are the languages they speak to their teachers and to non-Idu classmates. I observed that though Roing has many good quality educational institutions, they are mostly run by private organisations. These organisations are mainly from outside Arunachal Pradesh. Despite their best intentions, their biggest challenge is a lack of understanding and interest in local culture. Most of the teachers are appointed from outside the state and are unaware of the Idu-Mishmi culture and cannot relate to local people. Indeed they often have no interest in learning about local culture. The children are not encouraged by their teachers or the school authorities to communicate in Idu and so Idu children have no choice but to converse either in Hindi or English. The majority of Idu children are now sent to boarding schools either within Arunachal Pradesh or outside the state. These children cannot speak Idu at all.

Another interesting perspective was offered by an Idu-Mishmi informant in the course of our conversation. He said that those Idus who can afford to employ housemaids or babysitters for their children usually choose girls or women from other communities like the Adi, Nepali, Bihari, etc.. These housemaids speak to the children in Hindi and they sing lullabies in their own mother tongue. According to him, this worsens the situation, as even at home children cannot learn their own language properly in their formative years, and when these children are sent to boarding schools, they totally forget what little Idu they did know. [Plate 3]

An educated Idu businessman and language enthusiast shared a heart-wrenching story about his younger son. The boy is now twelve. As an Idu language enthusiast, the businessman insisted that everyone in his family should speak Idu. He reprimanded his children if they did not speak in Idu. Speaking in Idu at home and outside with Idu friends was compulsory for his children. His younger son could speak Idu before he started school but the problems started when he got to school. In school, the boy was taught in English and the teachers and his friends spoke in Hindi. As he was not permitted to speak in either Hindi or English at home and could only communicate in Idu in school because neither his teachers nor many of his friends could speak or understand it, he started to stammer and gradually stopped talking. His father was very worried and had to consult a doctor as the problem was becoming serious. According to the doctor, the child had no physiological problem but it was difficult for him to understand and speak three different languages at the same time. He was advised to stop forcing his son to speak Idu and



Plate 3
An Idu-Mishmi house.
Photo: Author, October 2012.



Plate 4
Pachu Pulu, an *igu* (priest) conducting a ritual during the *Reh* festival in February 2014.
Photo: Mite Lingi, February 2014.



Plate 5
The skulls of sacrificed *mithuns* are hung on the walls of houses to demonstrate the wealth of the household.
Photo: Author, October 2012.

allow him to develop normally; the father accepted the doctor's advice and gradually the boy began to talk again.

Many informants felt that inter-community marriages adversely affected the transmission of the Idu language and oral traditions to the next generation. This also relates to the issue of migration and their small population. Many Idu boys and girls are now going outside Arunachal Pradesh or northeast India for education or professional training, and many have settled in metropolitan Indian cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Chandigarh and Mumbai. Many of these boys and girls marry outside their community or sometime even outside their state. As the numbers of Idu people are very small the whole process has had a big impact on the transmission of the language. An informant who married outside his community said that though he could speak Idu fluently, his children could not speak it because his wife cannot speak Idu and hence they talk only in Hindi at home.

As the language disappears, the proverbs, lullabies etc. are also disappearing from everyday life. Informants said that there was no scope nowadays to use or listen to their native proverbs, tales, rhymes, etc. because they generally talk in Hindi with each other. Many elderly Idu-Mishmis said that though they converse in the Idu language with their parents or spouses, the use of proverbs etc. is very limited and Hindi proverbs are used instead. The situation is worse among the younger generation as they cannot speak Idu and so using Idu proverbs is out of the question. The elderly informants regretted that even they cannot remember many of the stories, rhymes and proverbs that they had heard in their childhood because they no longer use them. For instance, there is a kind of narrative, called *ānjā*, specifically meant for death rituals. This is a kind of mourning song - Blackburn (2005) calls it a *specialised verbal art* - which is sung in a low tone (almost whispering) to pray for the soul of the deceased and its salvation. To sing this, the singer must use the proper phrases, pronunciation and the correct melody. This mourning narrative is rapidly disappearing. Only a few Idus can sing this elaborate and specialised song - I met only one elderly Idu lady who could sing *ānjā*.

The number of priests is also on the decline because priesthood in Idu society is attained and not learned. [Plate 4] With the decreasing number of *Igus* (priests), the Idu-Mishmi language has suffered tremendously. In some villages there are no priests. Though Idu women can also become priests this is very rare and in recent years nobody in the community has become a priest. The

declining numbers of priests has increased the appeal of Christianity among the Idus. For example, as part of their death rituals there is continuous chanting of the genealogy of the deceased for the first four to five days. At present, this has been reduced to three days but even that is becoming impossible as it is so difficult to find a priest who can do it. Even if a priest is found, there are no listeners who can spare three days. An informant who hails from Anini in Dibang Valley district said that when his father, a priest in the Anini area, recently passed away, not only his village, but also two or three neighbouring villages lost their lone priest. As the Idu-Mishmi villages of the Anini region are distributed over a large area, finding a priest to do the death rituals was always difficult. Even if a priest was found, finding a 'companion' for the priest was equally difficult. The companion is very important in Idu society as without them the ceremonial obligations would be incomplete. The companion has to repeat every word after the priest as he recites it. There are now not more than ten priests in the entire community and according to that informant, there are virtually no companions.

Environmental change is a big issue for the Idu-Mishmis. Research indicates that the loss of any language has a negative impact on ecological diversity, and the erosion of language diversity is linked to the loss of knowledge about flora and fauna (Harmon and Loh: 2008). During my fieldwork I observed that the Idus consider the high magnitude hydro-electrical project on the river Dibang to be a major threat. A number of the Idus are anxious and concerned that if the dam is constructed it will result in the loss of three villages and a large part of their forest. Almost 80% of the Idu-Mishmi territory is covered in thick green forest and this forest is an important part of their life. It forms ideal pasture for their most expensive livestock, the *Mithun* (*Bos frontalis*)[i]. *Mithun* are sacrificed (sometimes by their hundreds) at the *Reh* festival, the main festival of the Idu-Mishmis during which they celebrate their marriages. [Plate 5] Again, to attain priesthood, they believe a person has to meditate in the forest to gain cosmic power. Because of the dam, a large proportion of Idu-Mishmi people will have to be relocated to another area, and as a small indigenous group they cannot afford this loss. One concerned Idu-Mishmi person wrote in *Reh Souvenir* (2011) that their culture is endangered as the majority of their socio-religious and socio-cultural practices are nature-based and so they face huge challenges to their existence and identity because of the high magnitude hydro-electrical project (Linggi: 2011).

Will the Idu-Mishmi language survive?

The most important part of safeguarding oral traditions and expressions, including language, is to maintain their everyday role in society. The main organisation working for the preservation and development of the Idu language is the Idu-Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS). In 2007 this society sent three Idu elders to the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) in Hyderabad to develop a written language. Afterwards, they continued to try to develop a proper script for their language, however they have still not fully succeeded. The government of Arunachal Pradesh accepts the third language policy for the mother tongues of the indigenous groups in the schools of the state, but unfortunately the Idu-Mishmi cannot benefit from this policy in the schools of their locality as they do not have a script yet.

Many of the Idus I met spoke about their attempts to teach the Idu language to their children. A noticeable number of young Idu-Mishmis have shown an interest in saving their language. One of the women informants established a school in Roing where the students could learn Idu in the fourth and fifth standards. She advocates saving and popularising the oral form of Idu rather than the written form as she believes that the language will survive if the Idu people can speak it. She composes Idu rhymes for the young children to improve their vocabulary. They have also started to compile genealogical records, the basis of their oral tradition and of all their rituals and events. They recorded many Idu songs, chants, prayers and the like, and made a docu-feature film about their culture. They have also organised seminars about their literature and traditional knowledge. The research department of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh publishes books on Idu-Mishmi proverbs and language. The School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London has also documented the Idu-Mishmi oral tradition in their project on tribal transitions (October 2002 to October 2007).

However, despite all these attempts and efforts, it cannot be said that the Idu-Mishmi language has passed

the worst. UNESCO's *Language Vitality and Endangerment framework* (2009, p.77) identified nine factors for assessing the vitality of a language. The Idu-Mishmi language fits most of the parameters.

Table 1.
Test of the vitality of the Idu-Mishmi language from fieldwork*

Vitality of Idu-Mishmi Language	
Community members attitude towards their own language	Unconcerned and uninterested
Inter-generational language transmission	Decreasing in every generation
Availability of materials for language education and literary materials	Very few
Governmental and institutional attitudes to language and policies, including official status and use	Accepted as third language but it is not taught or used as medium of teaching as it has no script
Response to new domains and media	Positive
Type and quality of documentation	Amateur

Source: Adapted from UNESCO *World Report 2009*.77*(Of the nine parameters in the UNESCO's *Language Vitality and Endangerment framework*, I have only listed those parameters, which I could observe and assess during my fieldwork 2012.)

Most of the younger generation of Idu-Mishmis cannot speak their mother tongue. [Plate 6] The formal education system has had the biggest negative impact on the transmission of the Idu oral language and this is made worse by the small population, changed lingua-franca, declining number of priests and increasing interest in new religions, inter-community marriages, migration to mega-cities and the threat of the unwanted river dam. Most of the Idu-Mishmi people I met during my fieldwork were anxious, worried and felt helpless, not only about their language but also about their Idu identity. Few of them are hopeful that their new generation will definitely start to take an interest in their language and learn it properly, while others believe that it is impossible to save the Idu language as the population of Idus is very small. One of my informants remarked angrily that even endangered animals have rights and laws for their protection but the endangered human indigenous groups do not. The Idus are struggling hard to preserve their language and culture, but only time can tell how successful they will be.

The words of the Sicilian poet, Ignazio Buttitta, truly reflect the pain and agony of the Idu-Mishmis:



Plate 6
Idu children in traditional dress.
Photo: Mite Lingi, February 2014.

A unpopulo
mittitilu a catina
spugghiatillu
attupatici a vucca
éancoralibiru
Livatici u travagghiu
upassaportu
atavulaunnimancia
ulettuunnidormi
éancorariccu.
Unpopulu,
diventapoviru e servu,
quannu ci arrobbanu a lingua
addudat di patri:
épersu pi sempri.

(Put a people in chains, strip them,
plug up their mouths;
they are still free.
Take away their jobs, their passports,
the tables they eat on,
the beds they sleep in;
they are still rich.

A people becomes poor and enslaved,
when they are robbed of the tongue
left them by their ancestors:
Then they are lost forever.)

Ignazio Buttitta, Sicilian poet,
(born 1899, 'Lingua e Dialetu'.
Taken from *Our Creative Diversity*
UNESCO: 1995, p.178)

ENDNOTE

[1]a large semi-domesticated bovine found in Northeast India, Bangladesh, northern Burma and in Yunnan, China.

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