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Kera'a (Arunachal Pradesh, India) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Kera'a (Idu Mishmi, Idu, Luoba Yidu, Chulikata)
Language Dialects:	Midu, Mithu
Language Family:	Kera'a-Tawrã, Trans-Himalayan/Tibeto-Burman
ISO 639-3 Code:	clk
Glottolog Code:	idum1241
Population:	16,000 (Dele 2018)
Location:	Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, India
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 6b

Summary

Kera'a is a Trans-Himalayan language¹ traditionally spoken by the Kera'a (Idu Mishmi) in the Lower Dibang and Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh, located in disputed territory between India and China. The language is still widely-spoken in the valley by up to 16,000 speakers total, but ongoing

¹ The Trans-Himalayan family is more commonly termed Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman; however, these terms presuppose a certain genealogical organisation and are biased towards literate communities. I have chosen to use the more neutral 'Trans-Himalayan' following van Driem (2014) and Post (2019), among others.

cultural, economic and demographic change in the region due to outside forces has led to partial disruption of generational transmission. There are some previously published resources on the language such as phrasebooks, but little audiovisual material is available and no comprehensive grammatical description exists. This report is based on initial field trips to the area in the second half of 2019 and early 2020.

1. Overview

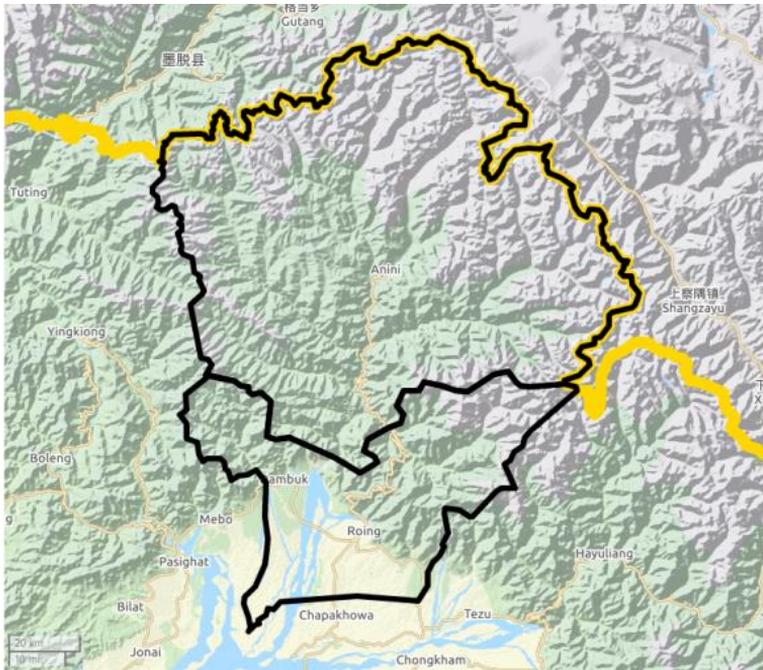
Kera'a is a Trans-Himalayan language spoken in Northeast India by up to 16,000 Kera'a and a small population located in China. It has been referred to in the literature by multiple names: Idu Mishmi (Pulu 2002), Idu (Pulu 1978), and Luoba Yidu (Jiang 2005, in reference to the Chinese variety). The pejorative Chulikata ('cropped hair', from Assamese) which refers to the traditional Idu hairstyle is still sometimes used; this name was adopted by the former British administration, and is the source from which the ISO 639-3 code for the language *clk* is derived. The tribals² commonly refer to themselves as Idu Mishmis and to the language as Idu, which – while still of Trans-Himalayan origin – is also an exonym (Reinöhl in press). However, they traditionally refer to their society, tribe, and language with the autonym Kera'a (with a range of different spellings). This term is still very much present in everyday life, and I follow Reinöhl (in press) in using Kera'a to refer to both the tribe and their language.

Non-tribals have historically treated the Kera'a as one of three 'Mishmi' tribes, along with the Tawrā (Digaru Mishmi) and Kman (Miju Mishmi). The three are said to be linked historio-culturally (Mills 1952). However, only Kera'a and Tawrā show evidence of forming a separate (sub-)branch of Trans-Himalayan, and there are indications that they are more closely related to the Tani languages than to Kman (Post & Burling 2017; Sagart et al. 2019; Reinöhl in press). Official sources such as the Indian Census (2011) still treat the three tribes and their languages under the single label, and as such, we lack an accurate count of the number of Kera'a speakers, although it is likely to be over 10,000. The language is locally infamous as being quite hard to learn; as such, the majority of speakers are the Kera'a themselves, and very few 'outsiders' learn or speak the language. For example, trade with the

² I follow the usage of indigenous peoples of Northeast India in employing the terms 'tribe' and 'tribals' when referring to their own communities in English. These terms are also used widely within India, including by government and local authorities, and are not considered offensive in this context.

neighbouring Milang tribe was conducted through an Adi variety (Modi 2017). I discuss the current linguistic situation below.

The traditional land of the Kera'a is the Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh, which falls in disputed territory between India and China (Figure 1). It is yet unknown how or when the tribals arrived in the Mishmi Hills; one proposal suggests that Kera'a followed the Lohit River southwest from the Zayu Valley prior to recent memory (Dele 2018). Today, Kera'a live in three main towns within the valley (Roing, Hunli, Anini) and in various villages located in the area (e.g. Desali, Aohali, Etalin, and Koronu). A small population live over the Indo-China border, having been cut off from the rest of the Kera'a when the border was closed as a result of the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The Indian Kera'a have no contact with the Chinese Kera'a.



*Figure 1: Map of Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley*³

³ Both figures were made with uMap, an open source mapping system. An interactive version of the maps in this document is available at <http://u.osmfr.org/m/399827/> (accessed 2020-09-28).

The Kera'a have been recognised outside India for their environmentally harmonious lifestyle (Flourishing Diversity 2019). Families live in houses constructed with various types of bamboo, and often grow, hunt or forage their food in the local environment. Taboos surrounding marriage and meat-eating are much stricter than in neighbouring tribes (Reinöhl in press). These days, urban Kera'a favour concrete-based structures and relaxed marriage taboos, while those living outside the three main towns tend to maintain traditional lifestyle choices. Some tribals have moved to other city centres in pursuit of economic opportunities, and diaspora populations can be found in Tezu and Itanagar. Figure 2 displays all Kera'a towns (red) and villages (blue) mentioned in this article; Tezu is to the east of Lower Dibang Valley, and Itanagar to the southwest.

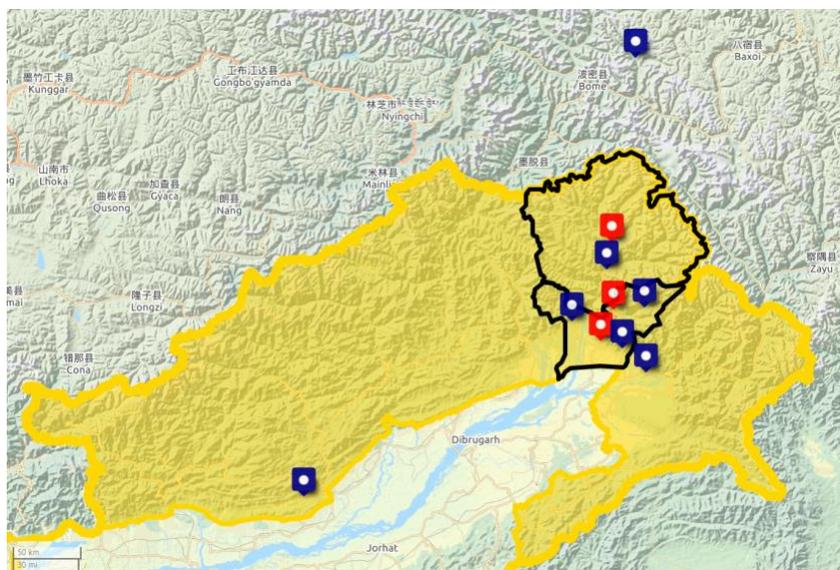


Figure 2: Kera'a Communities

The community distinguishes two main varieties of Kera'a based mainly on lexical and phonological differences: Midu and Mithu, with Mithu demonstrably the more conservative of the two (Reinöhl in press). Migration after the Dibang Valley earthquake in 1950 blurred traditional geographical boundaries between dialectal areas; however, the two varieties remain distinct. Midu is the more prestigious dialect, and is spoken by the majority of Kera'a. Mithu speakers are often bidialectal (i.e., speak both Midu and Mithu) but many transition to solely speaking Midu if they have moved from a village to Roing or Anini.

Linguistic evidence suggests that Kera'a has been traditionally maintained with little evident intensive language contact with languages of neighbouring tribes or trade partners (Reinöhl in press). Borrowings, oral history and archaeological evidence show evidence of previous contact with Tibetan populations, but it is not clear yet whether this led to structural change in the language. Certainly, there are no obvious borrowings from the languages spoken by the other Mishmi tribes, despite their close proximity.

Since the 1970s, the ongoing Indian colonisation of Arunachal Pradesh has led to the rise of multilingualism in the Kera'a population, most of whom are bilingual in Kera'a and either Hindi or Assamese (the local *lingua francas*); many also speak English or Nepali. Urban adult Kera'a believe their language is culturally important and want their children to learn it; however, in practice, many use Hindi at home, and some children and young adults are growing up with only a passive knowledge of Kera'a, especially in the main transport hub of Roing, at the foot of the mountains. This situation is exacerbated by schooling, which is conducted solely in Hindi and English. This directly impacts the fluency of young speakers: if they attended a local school, they likely had Kera'a input from older relatives; if they were sent to boarding school outside the valley, they were only exposed to Kera'a during school holidays with little-to-no input throughout the rest of the year. The current generation of Kera'a parents currently faces the dilemma of what languages to teach their children, and the growing awareness that not teaching Kera'a may lead to its eventual replacement.

Furthermore, Kera'a is not correctly identified in the Indian Census (included instead under the umbrella term 'Mishmi'), nor included in the list of 22 Scheduled Languages in India whose development the government is required to support (Census 2011). Community groups are currently attempting to raise the prestige of the language and expand the domains of use through initiatives such as radio broadcasts in Kera'a and dedicated language classes for children.

The biggest hurdle for the future is the lack of a single, consistent, officially recognised writing system. A roman-based script is in use by the community, but vowels are often mistranscribed.⁴ More recently, Blench (2018) has proposed another writing system including schwa and multiple diacritics, but it does not suit modern needs well, as it is hard to encode and difficult for speakers to type on computers or mobile devices without the installation of a specialised keyboard, which does not yet exist, to my knowledge.

⁴ The vowels /e/ <e> and /i/ <i> were (and are) often mistranscribed as <a> and <e>, respectively. This is likely due to a lack of one-to-one grapheme and phoneme correspondence in English writing, such as when <e> often represents /i/.

2. Documentation

Short lists of words and phrases in Kera'a have been collected in a handful of publications, such as Pulu (1978) and Pulu (2002). Linguistic description of the Kera'a spoken in China can be found in Jiang (2005). Blench has begun work on some aspects of the language and culture from an anthropological-linguistic viewpoint.⁵ The culture is slightly better documented in the literature: see Elwin (1959), and Blackburn (2005), Chaudhuri (2008), and Dele (2018) on Igu (shamanic) rituals. Reinöhl is currently investigating the history of Kera'a through documenting dialectal variation and ritualistic language.

Various articles and videos about the Kera'a can be found online (see Appendix, page 33).

3. Current Research

I am currently undertaking a PhD at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg as part of the Emmy Noether Gruppe 'Non-hierarchicality in grammar: construction formation without word class distinction across categories and languages'. The four members of the project (Prof. Dr. Uta Reinöhl (PI), myself, Kirsten Culhane, and Maria Vollmer) are creating paralex corpora with narrative and conversational data to investigate how phrases are formed in languages which display word class flexibility. In particular, Kera'a was selected to provide a diachronic perspective on multiverbal constructions.

Due to COVID-19, my initial plans to write a typological-functional grammar of Kera'a for my thesis have become unfeasible, and instead I am investigating complex verbal constructions in languages of the Eastern Himalayas. I will complement this with a sketch grammar of Kera'a in the next few years alongside an open-access corpus with *Language Archive Cologne*,⁶ built together with Reinöhl. This corpus will include a range of traditional folktales and practices such as Igu chants, alongside examples of typical day-to-day language use. Recordings will be entirely processed and analysed using the annotation software ELAN (Version 5.9, 2020). The community is actively involved in the collection, transcription, and translation of the materials, as well as being directly consulted in the process of generating and disseminating the results.

⁵ See <https://www.rogerblench.info/> (accessed 2020-09-22).

⁶ <https://lac.uni-koeln.de/> (accessed 2020-09-28)

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Appendix: Idu Mishmi Media

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