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A sketch grammar of Igu, the shamanic language of the Kera'a

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers the first linguistic description of Igu, the shamanic language of the Kera'a (also 'Idu (Mishmi)'). The Kera'a are a Trans-Himalayan-speaking society of ca. 16 000 members, based in and around the northeastern-most Himalayan river valley of India, in the Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Kera'a refer to their modern spoken language simply as *Kera'a* or *Kera'a ekobe* ('Kera'a mouth'). For shamanic rituals, shamans recite in *Igu* (or *Igu ekobe*), which the Kera'a consider to be a separate language from Kera'a. Igu is mastered and used by shamans (and their assistants) in rituals, as well as passively understood by knowledgeable elders. This paper demonstrates that Igu partially differs on all core levels - lexical, phonological, morphological, syntactic - from Kera'a. While these differences can in part be accounted for by genre differences, they also point to Igu retaining ancestral forms and structures. Igu consists of several different historical layers, both older and more recent, and its research can thus make valuable contributions to elucidating Eastern Himalayan ethnolinguistic history.

KEYWORDS

Igu, Kera'a, shamanism, ritual language, sketch grammar, genre

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1 Introduction

This paper offers the first linguistic description of Igu, the shamanic language of the Kera'a. The Kera'a are a society of ca. 16 000 members, based in and around the northeastern-most Himalayan river valley of India, in the Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh (see Figure 1; the majority of this area is also claimed by China). An additional, smaller Kera'a population lives across the Tibetan border. The Kera'a refer to their Trans-Himalayan (or “Tibeto-Burman”) language of everyday use simply as *Kera'a* or *Kera'a ekobe* (‘Kera'a mouth’).¹ For shamanic rituals, shamans recite in *Igu* (or *Igu ekobe*), which the Kera'a consider to be a separate language. Igu is mastered and used by shamans (and their assistants) in rituals, as well as passively understood by knowledgeable elders. Igu is the Kera'a word for ‘shaman’, for the ‘shamanic ritual’, as well as for the language used in the ritual.

The restricted knowledge of the Igu language appears to be, in part, an effect of its endangered status. Delley (2021: 14-15), a member of the Kera'a community, reports how it used to be more widely understood in the community, along with community members' previously more intense engagement in the rituals. However, the practice of Igu shamanism, along with the use of the Igu language, remain comparatively vibrant among the Kera'a, even while clearly endangered, with hardly any young community members becoming shamans today and most shamans older than 50 yrs old (cf. Delley 2021: 10-16). This vitality contrasts somewhat with neighboring tribal societies, whose shamanic practices have been in part replaced, or influenced by, Christianity and/or Hinduism (see Chaudhuri 2013 on the Tani societies' Donyi-Polo belief systems). More generally, shamanic practices across Arunachal Pradesh remain more vibrant than those in several other Northeast Indian states. The research of Igu thus offers the opportunity of documenting and analyzing a shamanic language system that not only remains relatively vital, but is also used within a system of spiritual practices that

¹The data for this paper were recorded in August 2019 and February 2023 by Uta Reinöhl, assisted by Naomi Peck and Wifek Bouaziz, respectively. They were transcribed by Uta Reinöhl and translated by Uta Reinöhl and Igu Pachu Pulu, with Usha Wallner supporting the accurate rendering of Igu into script and translation. We thank Pinda Pulu and Anoko Mega for helping with the transcription and translation of some shorter sections of the recorded rituals. This paper was written by Uta Reinöhl and the linguistic analysis is hers. All responsibility for any inaccuracies lie with her. (Self-reference as “we” in this paper, however, inclusively encompasses all three authors, while Pachu Pulu is sometimes named individually for providing particular insights.) We also thank Razzeko Delley for providing much historical and anthropological contextualization for Uta Reinöhl's work on Kera'a and Igu more generally. Many thanks to Razzeko Delley, Naomi Peck, Wifek Bouaziz and an anonymous reviewer for providing comments on previous drafts of this paper. Finally, note that all statements in this paper on Kera'a are based, if not otherwise indicated, on ongoing work by Uta Reinöhl and Naomi Peck.

²Kera'a is otherwise known by the commonly used exonym Idu (or Idu Mishmi), as well as by the older Assamese-derived derogatory exonyms Chulikātā (or Chulikat(t)a) and Bebejiya for its two main dialects Midu and Mithu respectively (see Reinöhl 2022 for a detailed discussion of the histories and etymologies of all of these terms). The name Chulikātā, ‘cropped hair’ for the Kera'a's traditional hairstyle, still worn by older members of the community, is at the origin of the language's isocode: *clk*. Further languages spoken by the Kera'a include, in order of how wide-spread they are, Arunachali Hindi, English, Assamese and Nepali. Further Trans-Himalayan languages spoken in the area include, in particular, Tawṛā (also Digaru (Mishmi)), Kman (also Miju (Mishmi)) and the Tani language Adi. Various other languages, including Nagamese and further tribal languages, are spoken in lower numbers.

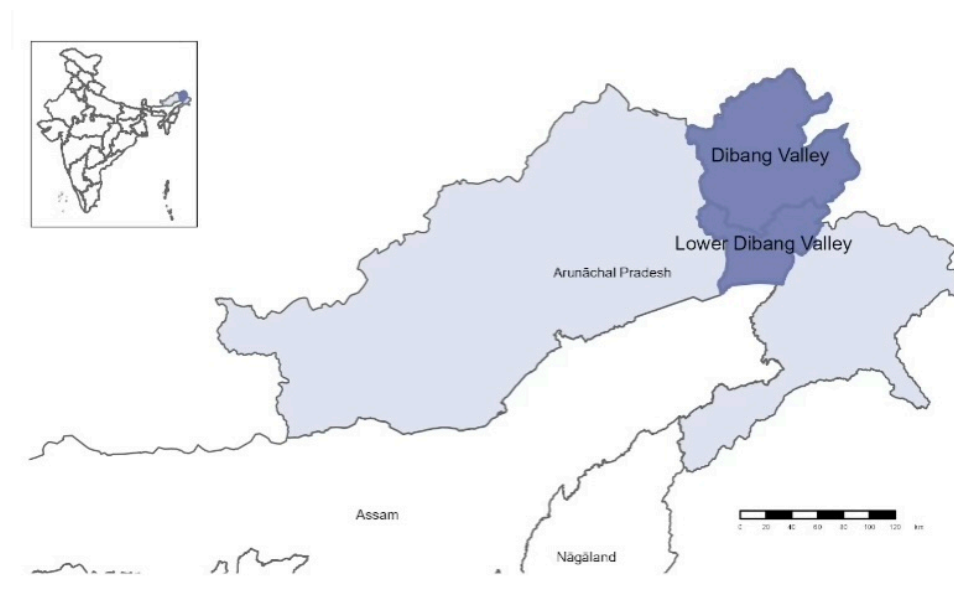


Figure 1 – Traditional Kera’a territory in India (credits: Naomi Peck)

remains largely unaffected by contact phenomena, its clearly endangered status notwithstanding.

From a linguistic viewpoint, a description of Igu adds valuable insights into the forms, meanings and poetic structures of a shamanic language, thus expanding research into Himalayan ritual languages more broadly (see e.g. Gaenszle (ed.) 2018 for studies of ritual languages in other Himalayan societies). As argued in Reinöhl (2022: 233), in the absence of historical written evidence, ritual languages as well as conservative dialects are also our best chance at detecting more ancestral terms and structures – whether in lexicon, phonology or morphosyntax – which can in turn guide us to a better understanding of Trans-Himalayan genealogy and areal patterns. This is particularly relevant given the now widespread agreement in Trans-Himalayan linguistics that earlier proposals of language trees were not (at all) sufficiently well-founded. Instead, it is commonly acknowledged that we still lack much of the necessary descriptive work to confidently propose groups on higher levels than the small, better substantiated subgroupings as e.g. represented in van Driem’s (e.g., 2014) “fallen leaves” model. As for Kera’a, Reinöhl (2022) provides evidence regarding a close relation between Kera’a and Tawrā (or Digaru (Mishmi), isocode: mhu), with no evidence for a similarly close relation with the third Mishmi language, Kman (or Miju (Mishmi), isocode: mxj).² The next closest relatives to Kera’a-Tawrā have been speculated to be the Tani languages and perhaps Milang (Post & Burling 2017, Modi 2013). It is, in particular, shamanic languages like Igu with their more ancestral layers, conserved through oral transmission, that promise advances in disentangling such potential genealogical - or language contact-related - ties between languages of this region. Besides providing a grammatical sketch of Igu, this paper therefore also adds a historical analysis of layers within Igu, as a contribution to future phylogenetically and regionally contextualized research on languages in India’s far Northeast.

Prior descriptions of Igu rituals from literary and/or anthropological perspectives include Baruah (1960), Blackburn (2005), Dele [Delley] (2018), Delley (2021, 2023a, 2023b), Verma (2022) and Mene & Miso (2022). Among these, Blackburn (2005) includes a one-page

²This presents another mismatch of linguistic and ethnic relations, which are not uncommon in the Eastern Himalayas (see Post & Burling 2017). Kera’a and Tawrā form a linguistic sub-group, while Tawrā and Kman form an ethnic one, including in the form of inter-marriage practices.

transcription segment of the Anja mourning chant. The most extended (loose) transcriptions and free translations of a variety of rituals, including excerpts of the longest and most socially important rituals *Ya* (death ritual) and *Reh* (grand celebratory ritual) can be found in the publications by Dele/Delley (2018, 2021, 2023a, 2023b). Community materials rendering selected Igu stories in condensed prose form include Miri (2012, 2018).

The data for this paper come from approx. 10hrs of recorded Igu rituals, which includes an approximately 7hr recording of an Ayi ritual and four recordings of Kāliwu rituals, each lasting between ca. 15 and 60mins. The rituals were performed by three different shamans: Igu Romine Mega performed a Kāliwu ritual in 2017. Igu Mola Mili performed the Ayi ritual in August 2019. Igu Pachu Pulu performed two Kāliwu rituals in August 2019 and one in February 2023 (each for different ‘clients’). The two Kāliwu rituals from 2019, lasting approx. 15mins and 20mins respectively, and the first ca. 30mins of the Ayi ritual have been fully transcribed, interlinearized and translated by Uta Reinöhl (UR), Pachu Pulu (PP) and Usha Wallner (UW). PP enabled phonological representation of the chant and provided word-by-word meanings and free translations in Kera’a and Hindi to UR. UW served as linguistic and cultural mediator, confirming pronunciations with PP and discussing ritual myths underlying the chants with PP and UR in order to grasp their meaning in more detail. UR transcribed the chant and added interlinearizations as well as free translations based on discussions with PP and UW in Hindi and English, interspersed with Kera’a and German (the latter, in conversation with UW). See Bouaziz (2022) for a detailed conversation-analytic, interactional-linguistic analysis of routinization phenomena in these recorded, multi-party and multi-lingual fieldwork sessions.³

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a brief introduction to Igu shamanism. Section 3 provides outlines of Igu phonology (including stylization), lexicon and morphology, and morphosyntax and syntax. An assessment of Igu’s genealogical position relative to Kera’a follows in section 4, where we discuss younger, intermediate and ancestral linguistic layers within our Igu data. Section 5 concludes.

2 Igu shamanism

The animistic-shamanic beliefs and practices of the Kera’a and other Mishmi tribes are mentioned in the earliest colonial sources from the 19th century including Dalton (1872) and Cooper (1873).⁴ Needham (1900: 16) makes specific reference to Igu as the term for the shaman (“sorcerer”) among the Kera’a (using the old derogatory, Assamese-based names “Chulikatta” and “Bebejiya” for the two dialect groups, Midu and Mithu, respectively). Igu myths are also recounted in Verrier Elwin’s publications (e.g. Elwin 1958 [1999]: 237, 263-265) and a more detailed description of Igu shamanism is found in Baruah (1960: 69-95).

The rituals of Igu shamanism⁵ range in duration from a few minutes to several days and may involve one or several shamans, and optionally assistants, depending on the ritual.

³ All the Igu rituals that we have recorded are currently prepared for formal handover to the Kera’a society in linguistically enriched while appropriately accessible form (i.e. in the form of subtitled videos, including transcriptions and Kera’a and/or English translations). These and additional fieldwork data and file formats have also been archived in the Language Archive Cologne, a University of Cologne-based archive for audio-video data to ensure the lasting storage of data from endangered languages (Reinöhl 2024). All conditions for archiving including access rights follow the wishes of the Kera’a representative body, the Idu Mishmi Literary and Cultural Society (IMCLS). Audio files for all full-line or full-verse examples in this paper are provided in this OSF repository: <https://osf.io/byu2g/>

⁴ It is interesting to see how Dalton (1872) recognizes the “religious” status of rituals (e.g. of a “religious dance”, 1872: 21) but then reverts to his Christian beliefs that a “religion” deserves the name only in connection to belief in an afterlife: “I have met with no people so entirely devoid of religious feeling as are the Chalikatas [i.e. Chulikatta, for the Midu dialect group; authors’ note]. I had long conversations on the subject with several of the chiefs, and they utterly rejected all notions of a future state or of immortality of any kind.” (1872: 21)

⁵ “Shaman” and its derivatives are the locally used English translation for Igu (e.g., see publications by Dele/Delley). Our adoption of this term should not be read as taking a particular stance, or offering a particular analysis, with regard to its uses in religious studies or anthropology. However, the role of the Igu ‘shaman’ as intermediary between this world and a spiritual beyond, who can travel in that beyond and interact with spirits directly, appears to be adequately captured by the label.

Performative aspects include chanting, sometimes instruments, and sometimes movement and/or facial expression performance. The longest and most socially prominent rituals include the death ritual – *Ya* – which features the journey of a deceased person’s soul, a ritual narrative that is wide-spread in the Eastern Himalayan region (Blackburn 2005). The *Ya(h)* ritual is described in its performative, social and literary aspects in the monograph Dele [Delley] (2018). The other major ritual *Reh* (also *Rē* in older pronunciations), which celebrates a man at the height of his life and power, is described in Delley (2023a). *Reh*, under the name “Public *Reh*”, has since the 1960s become institutionalized as a public community festival with some elements of traditional *Reh*, and otherwise the characteristics of a large celebratory community gathering. During rituals, shamans (and, optionally, their assistants) chant almost continuously. Smaller (shorter and socially less prominent) rituals typically involve one shaman who chants and performs a ritual continuously for up to a day (see Delley 2021 and 2023b for such smaller rituals).

This paper is based on the analysis of two different healing rituals: The *Kāliwu* (also *Kanliwu*) ritual and the *Ayi*⁶ ritual. The *Kāliwu* ritual is described from a performative and literary perspective in Dele (Delley 2021). It is performed for minor ailments such as headaches or other minor pains, injuries or discomforts. The *Ayi* ritual is performed for more serious ailments. While markedly differing in duration (the shorter *Kāliwu* rituals lasting between 15mins and 1hr, and the *Ayi* ritual lasting approx. 7 hrs), both rituals share the same macro structure, beginning with protection chants for the shaman and his or her client, followed by an invocation of the client’s clan lineages and then mythological, allegorical stories that are appropriate to the ailment in question. The rituals end in concluding performances such as the offering and “blessing” of a *Kāliwu* (type of turmeric root) as protection for the client in the *Kāliwu* ritual, or the killing of a chicken by the shaman in the *Ayi* ritual.

So far, *Igu* stands out not only as a one of the most vital shamanic traditions in the Eastern Himalayas, but also for not showing any traces of Hindu, Christian or other influence. Large swaths of the Himalayan regions have undergone religious shifts or intense contact-induced change towards the region’s world religions. This includes direct neighbours of the *Kera’a*, the *Tani* tribes whose *Donyi-Polo* belief system encodes traditional beliefs superimposed by a Hindu spiritual framework (Chaudhuri 2013). The Christian influence in the region shows less in syncretism with traditional practices, but, at least on the surface, in conversion. While conversion to Christianity is present also among the *Kera’a*, this is, so far, not a widespread phenomenon and *Igu* shamanism retains its dominant position as the main spiritual framework. From a linguistic standpoint, too, there is no evidence so far of any kind of (language) contact influence from other religious practices.

3 Linguistic description

Before we discuss the linguistic categories and structures found in *Igu*, we will address the question of whether to conceive of *Igu* as a language in its own right or as a register of *Kera’a* (section 3.1). We will then discuss some preliminaries of fieldwork that are specific to the research of a ritual language more generally, and specifically to that of *Igu* (section 3.2). We then turn to the linguistic levels of phonology (3.3), morphology and lexicon (3.4) and morphosyntax and syntax (3.5).

⁶A phonological spelling would be /ai/, but we here follow the locally used spelling.

3.1. Language or register?

It is worth considering whether Igu should be regarded as a language or register, given its restriction to a delimited domain in Kera'a social spheres. However, there are several factors that distinguish Igu from a register.

First of all, members of Kera'a society unequivocally consider Kera'a and Igu to be separate languages. Igu is only mastered by shamans, and to some degree by their assistants and passively by knowledgeable elders. Those who are not shamans will tell you that they have no competence in Igu.⁷ From a linguistic-ideological viewpoint, then, Igu is unambiguously regarded a separate language, proper competence in which only a small subset of Kera'a speakers are entitled to. A register, by contrast, is a style potentially adopted, and in principle understood, by the majority, or at least a substantial subset, of a speech community. The view of Igu as a separate language even extends to expert community scholars who rely on the expert knowledge of shamans, rather than assuming the epistemic authority of “knowing” Igu themselves (see e.g. the introductory marks in the publications by Dele/Delley). In our fieldwork, it is especially exchanges between the shaman Pachu Pulu and the (Kera'a) intermediary Usha Wallner, on whether or not a certain Igu word corresponds or does not correspond to a Kera'a word, which reveal language-ideological attitudes towards Igu as a separate language (see Bouaziz 2022 on an interactional-linguistic analysis of our fieldwork process on Igu).

This leads to another point. The local stance towards Igu as different from Kera'a is supported by substantial lexical and structural differences. We show in this paper that Igu partly differs from Kera'a not only in its lexicon, but also in its (morpho-)phonology, morphology, morphosyntax and syntax. Despite the restriction of Igu to shamanic ritual contexts, we thus consider a categorization of Igu as a language in its own right to be appropriate, from language-ideological, listener-focused as well as structural-linguistic viewpoints.⁸

3.2. A note on notation and the fieldwork process

It is a special feature of documenting a ritual language that this language itself cannot, strictly speaking, be used in the process of transcription and translation. The reason for this is that Igu only exists in its natural mode in performed, chanted ritual. It is not used for other, e.g. more casual uses, and certainly not for explicating itself. For example, when we want to elucidate the meaning of a particular word or morpheme, we cannot embed it in another, spontaneously produced example context in Igu, as one would normally do in linguistic fieldwork. Instead, we draw for this on Kera'a (besides Hindi and English, see remarks above). This, in turn, brings its own difficulties, given the central question of how exactly Igu and Kera'a are related. For example, when the Igu original differs from the Kera'a “translation”, it can be difficult to determine to what extent this is due to a difference in languages, to genre, or simply to a preference for paraphrase over identical reproduction.⁹

Genre, in particular, is of central concern in working on a ritual language. The reason for this is simple: the difference between what is literally said and actually intended is particularly significant in ritual. Our Kera'a (and English) free translations often differ notably, sometimes widely, from the literal original, when they attempt to catch the deeper, intended messages. In

⁷However, see the remarks in the introductory section that the knowledge of Igu may have been more widespread in former times. In translation and transcription work with our co-author, the shaman Pachu Pulu, other elderly members of the community who were present would sometimes join the discussion regarding e.g. the precise meaning or mythological backstory of a particular word or line.

⁸More precisely, Igu is a formal register of a variety (sufficiently) different from Kera'a to deserve being characterized as a separate language or historiolect. This different language, in turn, is only represented and conserved by its oral tradition, Igu, and hence named for it. Thanks to Razzeko Delley for discussing this finer point with UR.

⁹All our .eaf files include free translations not only in English, but also in Kera'a, in addition to English glosses, to help with these questions.

addition, whereas the Igu original is poetically structured, with intense use of parallelism (see Reinöhl, to appear), the Kera'a (and English) free translations are not. In assessing Igu grammar, it is thus essential to bear in mind the particular affordances of oral art, rather than treating this use of language as directly comparable to e.g. spontaneously produced language (which, in turn, most of our Kera'a corpus consists of).

Another important factor must be taken into account when researching Igu: Igu is chanted, and it is presently unclear what this means for the realization of lexical tone. Tone has a high functional load in Kera'a, and we have no reason to assume a different state of affairs for Igu. However, it is quite unclear whether, and if yes, how, tone interacts with the chanting melodies of Igu. In Kera'a, a majority of words, especially verbs, function words and particles, are monosyllabic and monomorphemic, and there are numerous minimal sets of three, four, five or more segmentally identical homonyms, which are distinguished only by tone (Reinöhl & Peck, in prep.). The same applies to a lesser extent to multisyllabic lexemes. Since we cannot, for Igu, rely on information from tone in assigning glosses, we occasionally add a question mark to a gloss in order to indicate less-than-high confidence. We do the same when the interpretation of a particular word or morpheme is not sufficiently clear in view of the often highly specific and rich spiritual and mythological content required to fully understand the deeper meaning or precise function. In a small handful of cases, we leave a morpheme or word unglossed, pending more information.

3.3. Phonology

We discuss Igu phonology and phonotactics in section 3.3.1 and sound stylization in section 3.3.2. We discuss (morpho-)phonological differences between Igu and Kera'a in section 4.

3.3.1. Phonological system and phonotactics

The phonological inventory of Igu is shared with Kera'a.¹⁰ Tables 1 and 2 summarize its phonemic inventory for consonants and vowels (see Reinöhl & Peck, in prep., for a detailed discussion of Kera'a phonology).

	bilabial (unrounded)	bilabial (rounded)	alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
Plosives	p p ^h ~ f <ph>	p ^w p ^{hw}	t t ^h <th>		k k ^h <kh>	
Nasal	b m	b ^w m ^w	d n		g ŋ <ng>	
Fricative			s	ʃ <sh> tʃ <ch>		h
Affricates			ts dz z <z>	tʃ ^h <chh> dʒ <dj>		
Approximant		w	r	j <y>		
Lat. approx.			l			

Table 1 – Consonant inventory of Kera'a and Igu

The lexemes in (1) illustrate the consonantal phonemes. (Given the yet-to-be-determined use of tone in chanted Igu, these are segmental representations only.) The vocabulary pool

¹⁰The consonantal phonemes /p^w/, /p^{hw}/, /m^w/, /ts/ (alveolar voiceless affricate) and /ch^h/ (aspirated palatal affricate), known from Kera'a, are not so far attested in Igu. However, they are relatively rare in Kera'a, and so this may be a coincidental gap in our Igu data.

does not provide minimal pairs, or evidence, for all consonants, but lemmas in (1) are chosen as to provide contexts as comparable as possible. All lemmas show consonants in word-initial position (with the exception of /b^w/, which is attested but only non-initially), preferably in monosyllabic (and monomorphemic) words and preferably before a vowel, which is preferably /a/. Preference is also given to content words over function words and particles. We depart from these environments only where there is no lemma providing a more closely comparable context.

(1) Consonantal phonemes in word-initial position (represented in practical orthography, see Table 1)

/p/	<i>pasu</i>	‘large ant species’
/ph/	<i>phri</i>	‘burn, burnt’
/b/	<i>bea</i>	‘earlier, in mythological times’
/pw/	-	
/phw/	-	
/bw/	<i>lobwi</i>	‘affliction’
/t/	<i>tamrõ</i>	‘shamanic assistant’
/th/	<i>thru</i>	‘to run’
/d/	<i>dãbre</i>	‘dusk, west’
/k/	<i>koko</i>	‘destruction’
/kh/	<i>khinu</i>	‘spirit’
/g/	<i>gondõ</i>	‘moon-lit night’
/m/	<i>mudu</i>	‘sky’
/n/	<i>ne</i>	(2PL)
/ng/	<i>nga</i>	(1SG)
/s/	<i>sia</i>	‘who’
/sh/	<i>shashi</i>	‘possessed (by a spirit)’
/h/	<i>hi</i>	‘to be able’, (POT)
/ts/	-	-
/z/	<i>za</i>	‘to come down’
/ch/	<i>chi</i>	‘liquid, juice’ (occurrence in a compound: mra-chi ‘poison-juice’)
/chh/	-	-
/ja/	<i>djahuwi</i>	‘lake’ (jahu denotes a mythical lake that contains dangerous water snakes, wi means ‘water body’)
/w/	<i>we</i>	‘to hang on a hook’
/r/	<i>ralõ</i>	‘far’
/y/	<i>yahri</i>	‘sky (mythological name)’
/l/	<i>la</i>	‘to say’

The next table shows the vowel inventory shared by Kera’a and Igu:¹¹

i, ï	u, ù
e, ë	o, õ
a, ã	

Table 2 – Vowel inventory of Kera’a and Igu (~ indicating nasalization)

Minimal (or near-minimal) sets are shown for some of the vowels in (2) and (3). Remaining

¹¹So far, there is no attestation of /ɲ/, which is however well-attested for Kera’a. Given the otherwise full attestation of the vowel inventory known from Kera’a, it is likely that this is an accidental gap in our data.

vowels are shown in other contexts in (4).

(2) (Near-)minimal set for vowels following /m/

/ma/	<i>ma</i>	(LOC)
/me/	<i>me</i>	(NOM)
/mi/	<i>mi</i>	(NEG)
/mu/	<i>mudu</i>	‘sky’

(3) Near-minimal set vowels following /z/

/za/	<i>za</i>	‘to come down’
/zi/	<i>zinu</i>	‘supreme’ (often for ‘supreme spirit’)
/zõ/	<i>ãzõ</i>	‘script’ (<i>ãzõ</i> likely containing the morpheme <i>zõ</i> ‘design’) ¹²

(4) Attestations of remaining vowels

/ã/	<i>ãzõ</i>	‘script’
/ũ/	<i>agrarũ</i>	‘ant species’
/ẽ/	<i>alatarẽ</i>	‘(type of) medicine’
/ĩ/	-	-

While we cannot, in our fully analyzed material, identify minimal pairs for every phoneme contrast, we can nevertheless be confident that the above inventories are a faithful representation of Igu phonology. Firstly, a significant percentage of Igu lexicon is shared with Kera’a. (Some of the lemmas provided above are shared with Kera’a, while others are Igu-specific. See more details on Igu lexicon below.) Secondly, Igu lexicon shows no departure - only gaps - relative to the phonological inventory established for Kera’a (see Reinöhl & Peck, in prep., for more detailed discussion).

As mentioned above, the realization of tone in Igu is, to date, unclear. Kera’a has a tone system of five level tones with an unusually high functional load relative to most neighboring languages in the Eastern Himalayas (Reinöhl & Peck, in prep.; cf. Kaland et al. 2021 for a phonetic approach). While Igu chanting is highly melodic, it is unclear at this point whether or not its prosodic contours interact with tone. Given that Igu shares its basic linguistic structures with Kera’a, as outlined in this section and over the next sections, it does seem likely that tone plays a role in Igu as well. Future research may yield insights by taking off from those parts of Igu vocabulary that are shared with Kera’a as well as by non-chanted renditions of Igu lines in our (recorded) transcription and translation sessions.

The phonotactic structure of Igu is, like its segmental inventory, shared with Kera’a, with syllables being, with few exceptions in fast speech, either of the shape V, CV or CrV.¹³ Attested prosodic word shapes range from monosyllabic – with either syllable shape – to pentasyllabic. The following verse (ex. (5)) offers a first illustration of the syllable and word shapes in Igu.

¹²It is a yet unsolved mystery what *ãzõ* may have historically referred to, with no evidence for the traditional use of writing. Knowledge of writing systems in the region, whether e.g. by the Chutiya and Ahom empires, the Tibetans, or materially-based techniques such as the counting-stick system of traditional Nyishi jurisdiction may conceivably have been present in different historical periods. Also note that *ãzõ*, while literally meaning ‘script’, is often rendered as ‘wisdom’ or ‘knowledge’ in free translations. In other renderings, it is explained as referring to ‘traditional craft knowledge’ more generally, and the sense of ‘script’ may be a later development. Thanks to Razzeko Delley for discussing the meaning of *ãzõ* with us.

¹³As in Kera’a, CrV-syllables are sometimes stably realized with the cluster, but in other words frequently reduced, with the rhotic elided. An example attested from Igu (and seen in examples in this paper) is *djah(r)uwi* (dangerous_watersnake_lake-water_body), i.e. ‘lake of dangerous snakes’. It is a question for future research to determine conditions, if any, on this cluster simplification. (On *djah(r)uwi*, also note that there is variation between *wi* and *wu* for ‘water body’, with alternative attestations of the variants *djahiwu* as well as *djahuwu*, the latter possibly showing forward vowel assimilation (thanks to Razzeko Delley for supplying these alternative forms).

- (5)¹⁴ *bea aya=go eto āzō wa Atulimipri*
 earlier DEM=DAT chicken wisdom TOP A.
mudu wa Atulimipri aru'a
 sky TOP A.¹⁵ epidemic
 ‘long ago and now, as for the chicken’s knowledge, as for Atulimipri
 in the sky, (and the) epidemic ...’
 [kaliwu_9:19]

While the segmental phonology and phonotactics of Igu correspond to those of Kera’a, there are phonological differences in the realization of specific (sets of) lexemes between Igu and Kera’a. We will discuss these differences in section 4, where we contextualize them within layers of different historical time depths within Igu.

3.3.2. Stylization

Some aspects of Igu phonology are primary targets for stylization in chanting. For example, stylization affects the realization of prenasalization of Kera’a consonants (see Reinöhl & Peck, in prep.), which, in Igu, is often prolonged. An oft-occurring instance of this is the drawn-out prenasalization of Igu *bea* ‘long ago’, corresponding to Kera’a *baha*, also ‘long ago.’ *Bea*, in the same way as the expanded form *bea echago* (see below), functions as a line-initial tag introducing contents from a mythological time, such as narratives or other invocations of happenings in a prehistoric past when spirits roamed the world (see Reinöhl, in prep, on the poetics of Igu). It also functions to signal the transition from one topic to the next.¹⁶ Figure 2 and Figure 3 show an oscillogram and a spectrogram for an initial *bea* in one of the Kāliwu chants, where the prenasalization takes up almost a third of the whole initial line.¹⁷

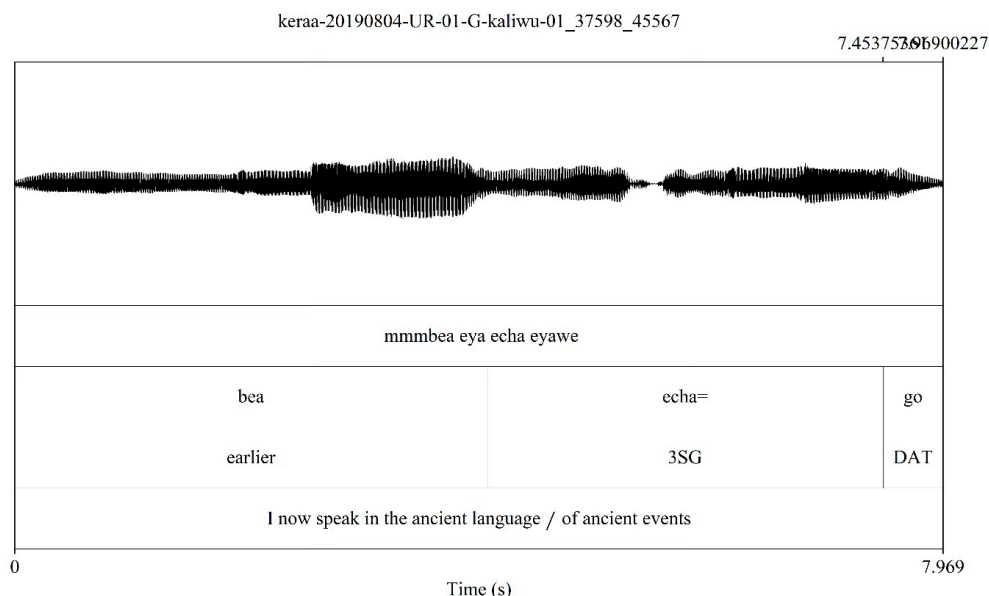


Figure 2 – Oscillogram for line-initial *bea* ‘long ago’¹⁸

¹⁶Glossing abbreviations used in this paper: cc = clause chaining, conv = converbal marker, cop = copula, dat = dative, decl = declarative, dem = demonstrative, foc = focus, hab = habitual, hon = honorific, imp = imperative, impf = imperfective, inch = inchoative, ill = illocutionary, loc = locative, neg = negation, nom = nominative, nmlz = nominalizer, pfv = perfective, pl = plural, poss = possessive, pot = potential, sg = singular, top = topic

¹⁷*Atulimipri* (or *Atuli* for short) is the name of a spirit or ‘goddess’, which can be loosely translated as ‘primordial mother’. Thanks to Razzeko Delley for discussing her role in the Kera’a belief system with us.

¹⁸Thanks to Razzeko Delley for discussing this point with UR.

¹⁷The corresponding audio recording is the beginning of the audio file “Example (36)”, retrievable from the OSF repository for this paper at <https://osf.io/byu2g/>.

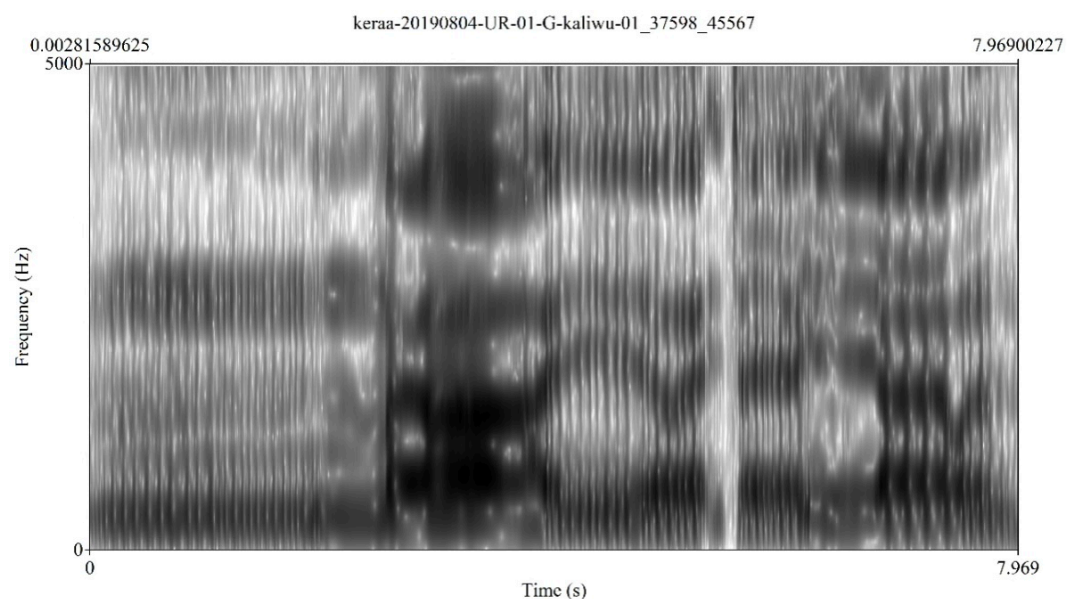


Figure 3 – Spectrogram for line-initial *bea* ‘long ago’

Figure 2 also shows additional stylization, namely the repetition of the demonstrative *echa* three times, with optional lenition of *-ch-* to *-y-*, and the lenition of the dative marker *go* to *we*. (Numerous repetitions of the formula *bea echago* throughout the rituals clarify the identity of the non-lenited forms. See more on the poetic structuring functions of *bea* and *bea echago* in Reinöhl, to appear). Lenition, more generally, is an oft-found device in sections of the chant where stylization is heightened.

Another type of sound-based stylization is the addition of a final phoneme /a/ to nouns. The final /a/ is realized with a preceding glottal stop, which is otherwise indicative of prosodic word boundaries, rather than word-internal transitions. Examples include the realization of *(i)mudu* ‘sky’ as *mudu-a* and *aru* ‘epidemic’ as *aru-a*. (The reader can hear this stylization in the audio files of, e.g., examples (5) and (32), <https://osf.io/byu2g/>). In the non-chanted repetition of these words in the fieldwork sessions, the shaman regularly realizes these forms without the additional final vowel, suggesting that they are indeed stylizations only, rather than e.g. morphologically different. (For the variation of the initial vowel in *(i)mudu* and other nouns, see section 4.3.) Another oft-found stylization device is vibrato, which however appears to in part depend on a shaman’s individual performance style (cf. Morey & Schöpf 2018 on vibrato in the Wihu song of the geographically close Tangsa dialect group).

3.4. Morphology and lexicon

Igu lexicon consists of words that are specific to Igu and words shared with Kera’a. As a general rule, individual syllables in all of the lexicon can almost always be equated with single morphemes. In other words, multi-syllabic words tend to be multi-morphemic. This is particularly true in the verbal domain, with verb roots usually being monosyllabic, optionally combining with prefixed causative *a-* and/or enclitic tense-aspect-mood-evidentiality (TAME) and/or discourse markers. Nouns may be monosyllabic, but are, more typically, multi-syllabic as well as multi-morphemic. With such morphologically complex nouns, both compounding and the suffixation of a size- and shape-classifier are common. While lexicalization effects may obscure the internal morphology of multi-morphemic nouns, the underlying structure

¹⁸Literally, the line depicted in this figure means ‘long ago (and) now’, indicating the connection between the mythological time and the presently occurring ritual.

generally conforms to the rule that a syllable represents, in principle, one morpheme.

In the following discussion we will first discuss Igu-specific lexicon before we sketch lexicon shared with Kera'a; for a more detailed discussion of Kera'a lexicon we refer the reader to Reinöhl & Peck (in prep.).

3.4.1. Igu-specific lexicon

Based on our data, we would estimate that about half of the word tokens are Igu-specific, whereas the other half is shared between Igu and Kera'a. It would, however, be difficult and even misleading to provide a definite account of Igu-specific lemmas, as Igu and Kera'a both form part of the complex, unevenly distributed repertoire space across Kera'a society. What is clear is that most Igu-specific terms are nouns, while verbs and function words are largely identical with those used in Kera'a (see section 4 for details on overlaps and divergences between the use of function words and grammatical morphemes). As outlined above and as in Kera'a, many Igu nouns are multi-syllabic, and thus multi-morphemic. Here, Igu-specific terms show a preference for compounding, as illustrated with some examples in the next paragraph and throughout this paper.

Igu-specific nouns can be differentiated into proper nouns and common nouns. Proper nouns refer, in particular, to the many types of spiritual beings, variably (and inadequately) translated as gods, spirits or demons. For example, proper names occurring in the Kāliwu and Ayi rituals include *Atulimipri* and *Anzōmamili* (the latter for a chicken spirit; see Delley 2021 for numerous other examples and discussion of the Kāliwu ritual). While such names may be fully or in part transparent in their etymology, others are not. For instance, *Atulimipri* consists of a first element *atu* which means, roughly, 'spirit'. The second part of the name, however, is currently unclear. *Anzōmamili* consists of a first part *anzō* (*āzō*) meaning 'script', and *mili* is a polite word for 'woman'. The full form *mamili* is, however, unclear.¹⁹

Outside of proper names, entities that hold an important role in the ritual are generally referred to by an Igu-specific common noun, rather than one shared with Kera'a. For example, dangerous water bodies that are of spiritual significance are referred to as *djahu-wi* (dangerous_watersnake_lake-water_body) rather than *machi*, Kera'a for 'water (body)'. The tongs that are one of the most important objects at the socially central location, the fire place in the middle of a Kera'a house or (main) room, are referred to as *atogi* and *alone*, rather than with the Kera'a form *atapra*. Often, nouns may also stand in metonymically for other entities, e.g. *ab^wi* 'weaving stick' often refers to a female referent, rather than being interpreted literally.

These two lexical domains - compounds for proper names (often only partly transparent) and compounds for spiritually significant entities (both transparent and intransparent formations found) - form the main lexical domains of Igu-specific vocabulary. (In some cases, it is difficult to draw a line between these two categories, as the term for a spiritually significant object may double as the name for the spirit residing in or associated with that object.) For each of these categories, we find several dozen examples in our data, with many more examples in other Igu rituals, given their different mythological settings and spiritual functions.

3.4.2. Lexicon shared with Kera'a

We first discuss the major word classes, nouns (3.4.2.1), verbs (3.4.2.2), adjectives and adverbs (3.4.2.3), numerals and quantifiers (3.4.2.4). We then turn to pronouns (3.4.2.5),

¹⁹In other rituals, *mamili* is used on its own to denote the spirit of a chicken; thanks to Razzeko Delley for this information.

adpositions (3.4.2.6) and information-structural particles (3.4.2.7).

3.4.2.1 Nouns Even while nouns are the primary domain of Igu-specific vocabulary, numerous Igu nouns are shared with Kera'a. While relatively rare in Kera'a, monosyllabic nouns are almost entirely missing in Igu. Exceptions include *mra* meaning 'soul'. Disyllabic nouns are more common. While the equation of a syllable with a morpheme often holds, there are some cases that are not synchronically segmentable, even though historical analyses may be suggestive (e.g. *zinu* 'supreme (spirit)' and *khinu* 'spirit'). Nouns with complex morphology either show a compounding structure or the suffixation with a size-and-shape classifier (themselves historically deriving from nouns). Examples of compounds include *ini-lô* 'sun-shine' and *mra-chi* 'poison-juice'. An example for a classified noun is *enambô* 'nose' with *-bô* marking rod-like shapes (as it does in Kera'a). Another frequent classifier is *-ru* (possibly, from *ru* 'line') designating thin, long, pointed objects (e.g. *aju-ru* for 'king cobra', or *(k)âli-ru* for turmeric growing in a long, pointed shape).

There are, so far, no attestations of borrowings – if so conceived – from languages other than Kera'a into Igu. This includes the potential false friend *mitu* 'bos frontalis' (Lat.) which however is Igu and not to be confused with the Assamese term *mithun* (ex. (6)).

- (6) *inu-wi* *mitu-wi* *shũ-tõ-ne*
 Siang_tributary-water_body Mithun-lake hang-take?-IMP
 ‘at the Siang tributary, at the Mithun lake, hang (the net)’
 [ayi 25:28]

The *bos frontalis* acts as the primary status symbol among the Kera'a and many other communities of the region.²⁰ Their sacrificial slaughter plays a central role in major Igu rituals. Whether or not *mitu* may be a source for *mithun* must remain entirely speculative at this point. The Kera'a term corresponding to Igu *mitu* is *sha*.

3.4.2.2 Verbs In contrast to nouns, verbs tend to be shared between Igu and Kera'a. The noun-verb asymmetry in terms of Igu-specific vocabulary is likely linked to the importance of spiritual beings and entities in Igu ritual, as indicated in the previous section. There is no evidence so far for lexicalization effects in the verbal domain; however, this question will need more detailed investigation in the future.

Verb stems tend to be monosyllabic and monomorphemic. Examples of oft-occurring verbs in the Igu material analyzed by us include *za* ‘to come down’, *la* ‘to say’, *ba* ‘to go’, *dji* ‘to sit’ (also used with existential meaning and as a copula) and *pra* ‘(to be) good’. Verbal stems may combine with the causative prefix *a-* and with a host of suffixes encoding grammatical, illocutionary and other functions. We discuss the most frequent and best established ones of these morphemes in the chapter on morphosyntax and syntax (in sections 3.5.1.1-3.5.1.8).

3.4.2.3. Adjectives and adverbs Kera'a possesses a class of underived adjectives, but the situation in Igu is less straightforward given their very rare attestation in our data. There are few unambiguous cases (one is *ichinu* 'left (side)') that can be grouped separately from (stative) verbs given their distribution (e.g., their use in attributive function). Some adverbs are attested in underived, bare form. These include, primarily, temporal and spatial adverbs, notably *bea* 'long ago', *alō* 'above' and *ralō* 'far'.²¹ Manner and other types of event or state

²⁰Kera'a speakers, in general, are fully aware of the few Assamese terms in their language as having been borrowed. These include *mardjari* 'cat' (with the borrowing facilitated, perhaps, by the rough phonological resemblance to the Kera'a word, *mekari*), as well as the colonial derogatory terms Chulikatta and Bebejiva for the Midu and Mithu clans, respectively.

²¹ Kera'a shows, in its prestige dialect Midu, rare-reaching word-initial consonant loss in CV syllables, as discussed in section 4.3 (see Reinöhl 2022, Culhane et al. 2023). It is conceivable that *ralō* and *alō* thus present variants of the same lemma. However, their meanings are routinely

modification tend to be realized as verbs, in Igu as in Kera'a.

3.4.2.4 Numerals and quantifiers Our Igu ritual data contain evidence of only one numeral, *manga* 'five', in the following example. (Here, *yabra* appears to stand in metonymically for the animal. See Reinöhl, to appear, for details on the intensive use of metonymy in Igu.)

- (7) (m)elanggõ yabra ba manga
 moonshine water_snake_place room? five
 'in the moonshine, the water snake (can hide) in five rooms'
 [kaliwu_a_complete_05:37]

Quantifiers are similarly rarely attested, including a couple of cases of *pume* 'all, everything'.

3.4.2.5 Pronouns Only a small handful of pronouns are attested, which can be accounted for by genre. The material consists of, predominantly, mythological narratives told in the 3rd person or impersonal mode, and occasional direct addresses by the shaman to a spiritual being (including other shamans in the spiritual world).

The most frequently occurring pronoun is the proximate demonstrative singular pronoun *echa* ('this'), used in pronominal function, which also features in the oft-used phrasal *bea echa=go*, 'long ago (and) now'. Another less frequent demonstrative singular pronoun is non-proximate *aya* 'that'.

The 2nd plural personal pronoun *ne* occurs occasionally, typically in conjunction with a clitic =*ga*, with *ne=ga* translated as 'your (PL) place'. The identity of *ga* will require additional research; it may be a historical forerunner of the locative clitic =*a* found in Kera'a. In addition to *ne*, the expanded 2nd person plural form *ane* is also occasionally attested. The only other attested pronoun is the interrogative form *sia* 'who'. It is found in combination with the optional nominative marker *me*, as well as with the marker *ne*, which, in Kera'a, occurs on participants ranking low in agentivity.

3.4.2.6 Adposition Adpositions include the nominative marker *me*, the dative marker *go*, and the locative marker *ma*, all also found in Kera'a. Kera'a *me* is used near-obligatorily in some dialectal varieties, but optionally in others; in our Igu material, it is often missing: whereas it is absent from ex. (8), it appears in ex. (9). The factors determining its distribution, like its distribution in Kera'a, are subject to future investigation, including the possibility of an alternative analysis as an optional ergative marker.

- (8) mudu Atuli thru-zu-za-ne ...
 sky A. run-?-come_down-CONV ...
 'Atuli came running from the sky, ...'
 [kaliwu_9:41]

- (9) echa me bra-la ...
 this NOM grow-PFV ...
 'this grows ...'
 [kaliwu_3:22]

Go and *ma* primarily occur in fixed expressions ((*bea*) *echa=go* 'long ago (and) now' and *alõ=ma* (above=LOC) 'above'), but occasionally also elsewhere, as illustrated in (10) and (11).

translated as 'far' and 'above' respectively. This suggests either of two scenarios: the lexicalization of each variant and thus a lemma split, or that we are dealing with separate lemmas also in a historical sense. Another option is that the different translations are due to contextual factors, rather than a lemma split. The attestation of only a handful of examples does not, at present, suggest a clear solution.

However, both adpositions are optional, as shown with the bare locative in (12), contrasting with the adpositionally marked locative with the same noun (typically realized as *(i)mudu*, sometimes as *(i)mudo*), in (11). There is no clear indication, at this point, of any kind of differential marking governing the presence vs. absence of these markers. It appears to be a general pattern that adpositions are used much more rarely in Igu in comparison to Kera'a. The specific distribution is a question for future research.

- (10) *a"bi go phridi go lob"i go shu-tō-mu*
 weaving_stick DAT female_power? DAT affliction DAT hang-take?-INCH
 'about the affliction to the female, you hang back (i.e. stay away)!' [ayi_a_23:14]

- (11) *ape-ne idubru mudo ma*
 swipe-CONV creeper_species sky LOC
 'swiping away the creeper **in the sky**' [ayi_a_5:12]

- (12) *mudu atuli alōdju*
 sky A. spiritual_turmeric
 'Atuli [is], with the turmeric, **in the sky**' [ayi_a_15:47]

3.4.2.7 Particles Relative to Kera'a, the Igu material analyzed by us displays only a reduced set of particles that have information-structural roles (see section 3.5.1 for discourse-managing verbal suffixes). As in Kera'a, however, *wa* is used occasionally. While we subscribe to the skepticism towards one-to-one form-to-function mappings in information structure (see Matić & Wedgwood 2013), its function can be approximated by the label of 'topic marker' (see ex. (13)).

- (13) *m(b)ea halō mudu wa*
 long_ago celestial_sea sky TOP
djahru-wi Anumeta
 dangerous_water_snake-water_body spiritual_snake
 'Long ago, as for the sea in the sky, the Anumeta (lived in) dangerous lakes' [kaliwu_11:09]

3.5. Morphosyntax and Syntax

Igu, in principle, shares many morphosyntactic structures with Kera'a, but with some marked differences in the frequency of particular construction types. There are also some markers and constructions that are, to date, found either only in Igu or in Kera'a. We first discuss the verbal domain, giving a brief overview of verb phrase structure, before going through the most common and most clearly functionally categorizable verbal affixes (3.5.1). We then move on to noun phrases and adpositional phrases in 3.5.2, before we discuss clause structure in 3.5.3.

3.5.1. Verbal phrases and verbal morphology

Like in Kera'a, there are no cross-referencing pronominal forms and no fusional morphemes attaching to the verb. Grammatical categories are expressed by bound, agglutinative morphemes, expressing number (overt marking for plural), polarity (overt marking for negation), tense and

aspect categories, and various speech act and other discourse categories. An example for the typically moderately complex verbal morphology is shown in ex. (14).

- (14) *alodju atogi dji-mi-ma*
 holy_turmeric tong sit-NEG-HON
 ‘(Shaman says: I’m sitting here with) tongs and holy turmeric,
 please don’t sit (i.e. don’t come near)!’
 [ayi_a_8:51]

As in Kera’a we find examples of verb serialization, where the serialized verb stems typically merge on the prosodic word level. The second verb hosts additional morphology. The two next examples show oft-found combinations of lexical stems:

- (15) *dābre ambōna we-pi-mu*
 dusk spiritual_weapon hook-fold_back-INCH
 ‘arrow spirit from the west, you fold back on the hook (i.e., stay back)!’
 [ayi_a_28:17]

- (16) *ab^wi-ku lob^wi thru-do-mi*
 weaving_stick-abode sickness run-jump-NEG
 ‘sickness in the women’s place, do not attack!’
 [ayi_a_7:54]

Example (17) illustrates a potential pattern of verb serialization where the two verbs do not form one prosodic word, as there is a small pause between them. However, the precise interpretation of this example in terms of its argument structure calls into question whether or not the two verbs form a primary unit. Alternatively, *gri* instead first chunks with *atō* ‘tong’:

- (17) *alōdju atō gri dji-mi-ma*
 turmeric tong grab sit-NEG-HON
 ‘with the turmeric spirit, holding the tong, please do not sit
 (i.e. do not come near)!’
 [ayi_a_23:35]

Different from Kera’a, most verbs in our Igu data are trisyllabic and trimorphemic, whether based on one lexical verb stem and two grammatical or discourse morphemes, or two lexical morphemes and one grammatical or discourse morpheme.²² The preponderance of trisyllabic verbs is likely linked to the poetic function of verbs to form larger, paragraph-like sections, identified by subsequent lines ending in the same or similar complex verb of identical morphosyllabic length (see Reinöhl, to appear, for more discussion and examples of poetic units).

Besides full lexical verbs, we also, in a small handful of cases, find the copula *i*, which is known from Kera’a and illustrated in ex. (18).²³ Normally, *i* is used in Kera’a with animates, while it is used in ex. (18) with what is literally an inanimate referent. However, the tongs in Igu ritual have a special spiritual meaning, and are often considered spirits.²⁴

²²The distinction between lexical and grammatical can be, as in many languages, difficult to draw, with different stages of grammaticalization attested. So some verbs may also be analyzed as a combination of lexical morphemes only.

²³The Kera’a position verb *kha-*, indicating horizontal orientation, is not so far attested in our Igu material.

²⁴It is, however, not impossible that the *-i-* is a stylistic lengthening of the previous vowel, which is why we add a question marker to the gloss, pending the analysis of more occurrences of the copula in Igu material.

- (18) *atō ashati atō bri-i la*
tong shield tong powerful-COP say
‘(the Igu) asks for a powerful tong as a shield’
[kaliwu_a_complete_00:22]

The syntax of verb phrases is usually quite simple, with most verb phrases consisting of one lexical verb only as seen in several examples above. This contrasts with Kera’a and other Northeast Indian Trans-Himalayan languages of everyday communication that show diverse, productively used complex predicates. It remains a question for future work to investigate to what extent and in what ways Igu may indeed depart from Kera’a in showing less complex verb phrase structure.

In the next subsections we go through the most frequent and/or most clearly identifiable verbal morphemes fulfilling grammatical or discourse-managing functions. While some of these are familiar from Kera’a, some appear, at this point, to be Igu-specific.

3.5.1.1 Causative *a-* We start with the only verbal prefix, which is *a-* for causative meaning. Its function as a causativizer is quite clear for Kera’a, and the handful of examples from Igu are also, in principle, in accordance with this analysis (e.g. *abe*, ‘keep (sth./s.o.) aside!’). However, in the few examples attested in our Igu data, an initial /a/ is not morphologically separable for speakers, as in the following example, where *ape* as a whole is rendered as ‘to fling’ or ‘to swipe’:

- (19) *ape-ne idubru mudo ma*
swipe-CONV creeper_species sky LOC
‘swiping (at) the creeper in the sky’
[ayi_a_5:12]

3.5.1.2 Plural *-ga* While common in Kera’a, the plural agreement marker in Igu is surprisingly rare, or rather, is hard to identify. This is due to the segmental homophony with the habitual marker *-ga*, and most occurrences of this form appear to encode the habitual use, rather than marking plural (see section 3.5.1.5). One example where it may indeed mark plural (even while the habitual meaning is also compatible) is the following:

- (20) *āli-ru adadji bra-dji-ga*
turmeric-pointed fern grow-IMPF-PL/HAB
‘the turmeric and the fern grow (in a pointed shape)’
[ayi_a_18:41]

3.5.1.3 Negation marker *-mi* The negation marker *-mi*, also known from Kera’a, occurs frequently, due to its use in the many statements or imperatives addressed to various spirits. This marker either combines with verb stems on its own, as illustrated in (21), or co-occurs with other grammatical morphemes. A particularly frequent combination found in our material is with the inchoative marker, as in (22).

- (21) *ab^wi-ku lob^wi thru-do-mi*
weaving_stick_place affliction run-jump-NEG
‘the sickness must not attack in the women’s place’
[ayi_a_7:54]

- (22) *mimu djahu-wi do-mu-mi*
 west dangerous_lake-water_body fall-INCH-NEG
 ‘(Let me) not fall into the western, dangerous lake!’
 [ayi_a_6:35]

In contrast to Kera’a, we do not find the other emphatic negation marker *-kum(i)/-gum(i)*. It is unclear at this point whether the absence of *-kum(i)/-gum(i)* is a difference between Igu and Kera’a or coincidental gap in the data that we have been able to analyze so far.

3.5.1.4 Perfective *-la* and perfect *-chi* The perfective aspectual morpheme *-la* is very common in Kera’a, but rare in our Igu data. One Igu example can be seen in ex. (23). The perfect morpheme *-chi*, and which is known from Kera’a, in our Igu data always co-occurs with the marker *-me*; the latter, in Kera’a, acts as a clause chaining marker (ex. (24)). An interpretation of the *-chi-me* chain in (24) as involving the possessive marker *chi* and the nominal marker *me*, is, in principle also thinkable, but requires more investigation.²⁵

- (23) *echa me bra-la ...*
 this NOM grow-PFV ...
 ‘this grows ...’
 [kaliwu_3:22]

- (24) ... *za-ba-chi-me rapi*
 ... come_down-go-PF-CC? south
 ‘(the snake was boasting) while going down south’
 [kaliwu_6:27]

3.5.1.5 Inchoative *-mu* The relatively frequent marker *-mu* is associated with inchoative function, as in ex. (25), marking the – often sudden – onset of an action. It is unclear at this point whether or not there is a link to the segmentally identical, nominalizing morpheme in Kera’a.

- (25) *ab^wi go phridi go lob^wi go shu-tõ-mu*
 weaving_stick DAT female_power? DAT affliction DAT hang-take?-INCH
 ‘to the affliction to the female, you hang back (i.e. stay away)!’
 [ayi_a_23:14]

3.5.1.6 Habitual *-ga* The habitual suffix *-ga* most often combines with the verb *la* ‘to say’, such as in the oft-recurring line-final complex verb *la-ga-chi-me* [say-HAB-PF-CC], ‘they used to say’. Alternatively, it is also regularly found in combination only with *la*, without additional morphology:

- (26) *atuya sia=me akoko wẽ-go-ha la-ga*
 above who=NOM destruction intent?-ILL? say-HAB
 ‘“who will destroy (it) above?” they would say’
 [kaliwu_7:31]

3.5.1.7 Declarative *-da* The suffix *-da* is used as a declarative marker, as it is in Kera’a. The following examples illustrate its use in combination with and without an additional grammatical marker:

²⁵Thanks to Naomi Peck for discussing this point with us.

- (27) *idu* *brub^wib^wi* *ga-mu-da*
 creeper_species power? protect-INCH-DECL
 ‘(you) should protect (s.o.) (from) the creeper!’
 [ayi_a_10:55]

- (28) *embrẽ=go* *lõ-da*
 sickness=DAT cast_aside-DECL
 ‘cast aside that sickness!’
 [kaliwu_01:10]

While the uses of *-da* seem to be well-approximated by the label “declarative”, it is not clear at this point, either in Igu or in Kera’a, what determines its use as opposed to its absence in similar context which also seemingly involve someone’s use of a declarative speech act.

3.5.1.8 Imperative *-ne* The marker *-ne* is associated with imperative function in Igu. There are uses in Kera’a which can be similarly interpreted, but the relation to the segmentally identical marker found in converb constructions still needs to be elucidated. The next two examples illustrate uses of *-ne*:

- (29) *inu-wi* *mitun-wi* *shu-tõ-ne*
 Siang_tributary-water_body Mithun-water_body hang-take?-IMP
 ‘at the Siang, where the Mithuns are, you hang back (i.e. stay away)!’
 [ayi_a_25:28]

- (30) *i-ga-mu-ne*
 come-HAB?-INCH-IMP
 ‘(it, i.e. spiritual wealth) should come!’
 [kaliwu_2:40]

3.5.1.9 Other markers In addition to *-ne*, there are additional morphemes translated as having imperative function, including *-ge* (e.g. *shũ-tõ-ge* [hang-take?-IMP?], and *-de* (e.g. *we-pi-de* [hang_on_hook-fold_back-IMP?]). As for *-ge*, the context is not sufficiently transparent in order to ascertain whether or not it can be connected to the sequential meaning associated with a segmentally identical marker in Kera’a. A further marker, *-na* appears occasionally in what also appears to be imperative illocution; this marker is, in Kera’a, more broadly used to mark repeated actions and sometimes irrealis functions (Reinöhl & Peck, in prep.).

The verbal suffix *-ma* (not to be confused with the locative adposition *ma*, which may also occur with nominalized verb forms) occurs in our Igu data most often in the negated verb form *jimima*, as in the following example. Here, the form appears to lend a honorific sense to utterances:

- (31) *abrapo* *alone* *dji-mi-ma*
 surname_of_turmeric short_tong sit-NEG-HON
 ‘(Shaman says:) I’m holding the small tongs
 and the turmeric, don’t come near!’
 [ayi_a_08:59]

In Kera’a, a suffix *-ma* can occur either alternatively to, or in combination with, the evidential marker *-põ* for first-hand knowledge. Besides imperative contexts, this marker also occurs in interrogatives and in statements about 3rd parties. When used in 1st person contexts, it has been associated with a respectful stance (e.g. *asa-dji* [know-IMPF] ‘I know’ vs. *asa-dji-m(a)* ‘I know,

respectfully’). It is too early to be certain of its precise functional categorization (or whether we are dealing with more than one morpheme), in Kera’a or in Igu, but we will preliminarily gloss this form here for Igu as a honorific marker, as this function appears compatible with all attested uses.

Like in Kera’a, verbs sometimes combine with *-doma* (which likely includes the locative marker *-ma*), resulting in a nominalized form, as seen in ex. (32).

- (32) *bea* *echa=go* *alo=ma* *inilõ* *aru’a*
 earlier DEM=DAT above=LOC sunshine epidemic
lombrõ *ru-ga-doma*
 bad_sunshine sick-HAB?-NMLZ
 ‘earlier and now, above, the harmful sunshine (makes/creates) sickness’
[kaliwu_4:28]

3.5.2. Noun phrases and adpositional phrases

Noun phrases comprise nouns and (rarely) adjectives, accompanied by function words (demonstratives, quantifiers, numerals, adpositions) or discourse markers. Noun phrases in our attested Igu data consist of a maximum of three words, such as seen in ex. (33), which involves an unmarked possessor relation between the two nouns, ‘as for the chicken’s script/wisdom’. There is no example in our Igu ritual with more than one function word or discourse clitic in a phrase headed by a noun.

- (33) *bea* *aya=go* *eto* *ãzõ* *wa* *Atulimipri* *mudu*
 earlier DEM=DAT chicken script TOP A. sky
wa *Atulimipri* *aru’a*
 TOP A. epidemic
 ‘long ago and now, as for the chicken’s wisdom, as for Atulimipri in
 the sky, (and) sickness’
[kaliwu_9:19]

The only combination of more than one function word or discourse clitic is found when a demonstrative is the head of the phrase, as in the oft-found combination *echa=go* (see ex. (33)).

For the combination of nouns with adpositions, it is questionable whether one should assume a level of adpositional phrase above the level of noun phrase, in view of the fact that adpositions seem to alternate, rather than combine, with other adnominal function words and discourse particles. An argument for a higher adpositional level may, however, be seen in the frequent occurrence of bare nominal forms, as in the following example:

- (34) = (31) *abrapo* *alone* *dji-mi-ma*
 surname_of_turmeric short_tong sit-NEG-HON
 ‘(Shaman says:) I’m holding the small tongs
 and the turmeric, don’t come near!’
[ayi_a_08:59]

There is one type of case where it seems quite clear that a hierarchy should be assumed, involving an internal possessor. The possessor relation may be either unmarked (as in ex. (33)) or (more rarely) marked with the adposition *chi* as in the headless phrase shown in ex. (35).

- (35) *mare chi ata chi ela*
 west POSSE banana_tree POSS timber_tree
chi we-pi-mu
 POSS hang_on_hook-fold_back-INCH
 ‘(spirits of) the western banana tree, of the timber tree, stay back!’
 [ayi_a_28:28]

While the syntax of verb phrases as well as noun phrases is comparatively simple in Igu, it is noteworthy that noun phrases, in particular, often convey far more complex content than they do in Kera’a, due to them being imbued with deeper, mythological and spiritual content (see Reinöhl, to appear).

Finally, another note is in order on the high noun-to-verb ration found in Igu, which sets it apart from Kera’a. A high noun-to-verb ration has also been found in other ritual languages of the region, including in Puma Rai (Kiranti), where it has been attributed to the frequent use of binomials in Gaenszle et al. (2011). Binomials refer to the encoding of a concept not with one noun, but with two adjacent nouns, which are phonologically similar and act as one lexical unit (e.g. *chorom borom* ‘dried meat’, Gaenszle et al. 2011: 372). In Igu, by contrast, such binomials are not so far attested, but the noun-to-verb ration is nonetheless high. This is due to the fact that many lines consist of one or several nouns only (plus optionally other non-verbs), whether in referential, predicative or other function. A good illustration of this is found in the first lines of one of the Kāliwu rituals, where the first verb only appears in the sixth line:

- (36) *mmmbea eya echa eya=go /*
 long_ago DEM DEM DEM=DAT
 ‘long ago and now
- m(b)ea ini anome wea zinu we /*
 long_ago sun spirit_name TOP spirit TOP
 long ago, as for the sun spirit, the spirit
- ab^wi shelō /*
 weaving_stick long_life
 from birth to death
- lopu embrē*
 spiritual_space sickness
 (protection from) sickness (that would befall us) in our spiritual space
- broku shashi /*
 power_of_sun crazy
 the power of the sun (makes) crazy
- embre=go? lō-da /*
 sickness=DAT? cast_aside-DECL
 cast aside that sickness!’
- [kaliwu_00:35-01:14]

We return to the topic of utterances built around isolated noun phrases in the next section.

3.5.3. Clause structure

Igu, like Kera'a and other Trans-Himalayan languages, is verb-final. When transitive, we find SOV order - although there are very few full clauses with two overt arguments attested. One is the following:

- (37) *atuya sia=me wẽ-go-ha la-ga*
 above who=NOM intent-?-ILL say-HAB
 ‘“who will (destroy) (it) above?” they say’
 [kaliwu 7:31]

Example (37) also illustrates the structure of quoted-speech clauses, marked by the use of *la* ‘to say’ at the line’s right edge.

The default SOV order notwithstanding, note that there are few lines where the pattern *noun (phrase) - noun (phrase) - verb (phrase)* actually forms a clause consisting of a verbal nucleus and two arguments. Consider again the following example, repeated from above:

- (38) = (31) *abrapo* *alone* *dji-mi-ma*
 surname_of_turmeric short_tong sit-NEG-HON
 ‘(Shaman says:) I’ m holding the small tongs
 and the turmeric, don’t come near!’
 [ayi a 08:59]

It is tempting to assume zero arguments in such cases and thus reconstruct an example like (38) as, essentially, a concatenation of three clauses, with the first two organized around (bare) nominal predicates (i.e., ‘(Here are/I’m holding) the small tongs. (Here is/I’m holding) the turmeric’). (Alternatively, one could understand the two noun phrases as one complex predicate involving two coordinated simple predicates.) It is doubtful, however, that a reduced-clause analysis does proper justice to the formulaic structures represented by ex. (38). Instead, we believe that it may be truer to the data to take them at face value, i.e. interpreting them roughly as ‘*Turmeric (!), Tongs (!), Don’t come here!*’ where the turmeric and the tongs are evoked as displays of power and deflection against dangerous spirits. In other words, while many lines show a structure of N(P) – N(P) – Verb, this surface pattern should by no means be interpreted as necessarily displaying SOV order. Instead, this pattern can involve a variety of underlying clause structures, from one to three clauses or stand-alone speech acts.²⁶

There are further cases where the use of noun phrases lacking any adpositional or information-structural marker are somewhat unclear. While the next example suggests the use of the nominalized form *rugadoma* as a nominal predicate, the evidence does not suffice for an analysis as such with certainty:

²⁶A reviewer suggests yet another alternative, a topic-comment analysis. Presumably, the two nouns (or noun phrases) would be a double-topic or coordinated-topic structure, and the verb (or predicate) would be the comment. Such an approach could be fruitful only if assuming a loose topic-comment structure along the lines of Li & Thompson (1976), i.e. with loose and underspecified semantic relations between topic and comment. Another, somewhat non-standard characteristic is that the comment would be, more often than not, an imperative speech act. This proposal is intriguing and deserves closer investigation in the future. What is clear at this point is that, while we often find loose semantic relations between the nouns (or noun phrases) and verbs (or verb phrases) forming a chanted line, we rarely find fully-fledged clause structure that would be typical of “subject prominence” (Li & Thompson 1976).

- (39) *bea echa=go alo=ma inilō aru'a*
earlier DEM=DAT above=LOC sunshine epidemic
lombrō ru-ga-doma
bad_sunshine sick-HAB?-NMLZ
‘earlier and now, above, the harmful sunshine (makes/creates) sickness’
[kaliwu_4:28]

The translation of the following example suggests a reading of *ashati* ‘shield’ (either on its own or bracketing one of the other two, or both, nouns to its left and right) in the role of secondary predicate, an analysis which must otherwise however remain speculative in the absence of further similarly structured lines:

- (40) *atō ashati atō bri-i la*
tong shield tong powerful-COP say
‘(the Igu asks for) a powerful tong as a shield’
[kaliwu_a_complete_00:22]

As mentioned above, there are few full-fledged simple clauses, one example of which was given above in ex. (26). There are even fewer complex clauses, at least as far as they are identifiable as such. However, there are occasional uses of converb clauses combining with main clauses, which involve the converb marker *-ne*, also used in Kera’a. Here is an example:

- (41) *ape-ne idubru mudo ma*
swipe-CONV creeper_species sky LOC
‘swiping (at) the creeper in the sky,

namu izui eba-ga
relative? soul_of_host house?-place
‘(I am now) at my relative’s house.’
[ayi_a_5:12]

4 Linguistic relationship between Igu and Kera’a

As with other Himalayan ritual languages, it is clear that Igu consists, from a structural point of view, of multiple historical layers. This includes, on the one hand, the preservation of ancestral layers that have been conserved through more or less faithful oral transmission in apprentice-style learning (see Miri 2018: *Preface*, Ong 1982). On the other hand, our analysis reveals that Igu is a living language, through its existence in re-performance, and thus shows more recent, even some very recent, linguistic features. Igu thus broadly corresponds to Gaenszle’s characterization of ritual languages in the Himalayas:

There is no doubt that the basic features have been stable for many generations, and thus the linguistic repertoire often contains what can be described as archaisms, e.g. lexical forms that have retained older morphological characteristics. But here again a word of caution is called for. Usually the oral recitations are “compositions-in-performance”, i.e. not fixed like written texts, but built from stable formulas. And thus they are always in a somewhat fluid state, they can be and have been subject to some degree of change. For example, the ritual vocabulary, in spite of a generally conservative tendency, will have absorbed terms from the dominant lingua franca, e.g. Nepali in Nepal. Thus the linguistic variety retained in the lexicon and grammar

4.1. Young layer

(42) *bea* *aya=go* *eto* *ãzo* *wa*
earlier DEM=DAT chicken knowledge TOP
Atulimipri *muɖu* *wa* *aru'a*
A. sky TOP epidemic
‘long ago and now, as for the chicken’s knowledge,
as for Atulimipri in the sky, (and) sickness
[kaliwu 9:19]

4.2. Intermediate layer

Most of the verb stems that have been quoted in the examples in this paper belong here, as do most of the function words. However, note that there are marked difference in the use especially of adpositions, which we will discuss more in the next section, along with other syntactic differences that may be attributed to differences between the languages, to genre effects, or both.

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It is not quite clear, at this point, how to best interpret this shared inventory of lexemes and function words across Igu and Kera'a. It may be seen as borrowed into Igu over time, with Igu constantly updated through re-performance (while retaining other ancestral terms and structures). Or, it may be interpreted as Igu and Kera'a accessing the same pool of forms, without a process of borrowing from one language into the other. It is too early, at this point, to offer a definite assessment of how to best characterize the status of these shared terms and structures, other than that they are neither clearly young nor old.

4.3. Ancestral layer

We will first address phonological and lexical differences, before turning to the more difficult question of how to interpret morphological, morphosyntactic and syntactic points of difference.

A notable segmental difference between Kera'a and Igu concerns the absence of word-initial vowels in Igu in a set of nouns which otherwise have an initial vowel in Kera'a, e.g. *(i)mudu* 'sky', *(a)khu* 'anger' or *(a)koko* 'destruction'. An example can be found in the following verse:

- (43) *mudu Atuli aloju*
 sky A. sacrificial_turmeric
 'in the sky, Atuli (shall protect with) sacrificial turmeric'
 [ayi_a_7:06]

The precise distribution of the vowel-less variants still needs to be determined, including whether it is best characterized as phonologically, morpho-phonologically or lexically conditioned. While almost always realized with a vowel in Kera'a, and frequently without a vowel in Igu, occasional vowel-less realizations of the nouns in question have been observed in Kera'a²⁸, and similarly realizations with the vowel in Igu. In his glossary, Delley (2021: 186) explicitly contrasts *mudu* for Igu with *imudu* for Kera'a, suggesting that the contrast does seem to have a certain salience. The relatively high degree of regularity of this phenomenon, the exact scope of which still needs to be determined, suggests that it is not an effect of stylization, but potentially due to historical differences between varieties.

There are further lexeme-specific differences which may or may not point to historical variation.²⁹ A prominent example involves the introductory tag *bea* 'earlier', often realized with a glide as [beya] and/or with pronounced labialization [b^wea], which introduces chanted lines as invoking a mythological past. *Bea* corresponds to Kera'a *baha* with the same literal meaning, albeit without the specific tagging function relating to a type of Igu creation time. The word is stably realized with a front rather than back vowel in Igu, and so this does not seem to be a case of stylization. Wifek Bouaziz (2022) analyzes with conversation-analytic methodology an exchange between the shaman and Usha Wallner in a fieldwork session on the meaning and form of *bea* and whether or not it corresponds to Kera'a *baha*. This exchange clearly shows the salience in the shaman's mind of both a clearly delimited pronunciation of the two forms, while corresponding in meaning. Future research will need to determine whether or not similar cases of what at this point appears to be a lexeme-specific, if salient, difference allows for broader generalizations.

Lexically, we have seen that it is especially nouns that are older. This includes not only proper nouns, but many terms for entities of spiritual significance, where the Igu terms differ from

²⁸Wifek Bouaziz (p.c.) observed this for some nouns in the speech of Midu speakers in Anini (upper Dibang Valley District), in a fieldtrip in September 2023. Vowel-less realizations may also occur in Kera'a compounds (Naomi Peck, p.c.).

²⁹It is, of course, also conceivable that Igu is not only, in part, older, but also situated on a dialectally parallel branch to modern Kera'a. There are no reasons at this point to assume this, but future research may change this assessment. At the same time, we assume that straightforward branching models are always an idealization disregarding real variation.

- (45) *modu Atuli thru-zu-za-ne* ...
 sky A. run-?-come_down-CONV ...
 ‘Atoli came running from the sky, ...’
 [kaliwu_9:41]

- (46) *alodju atogi dji-mi-ma*
 holy_turmeric tongs sit-NEG-HON
 ‘Turmeric! Tongs! You stay away!’
 [ayi_a_8:51]

It is an open question at this point whether the markers altogether missing in either Kera’a (inchoative *-mu*) or Igu (negation marker *-kum(i)/gum(i)* and ablative marker *ne*) should best be interpreted as evidence for grammatical change or genre, or yet other factors (including, of course, the possibility that they are simply missing in our data set, but not in principle in either Igu or Kera’a).

Summarizing, we can quite clearly identify layers of different ancestry, ranging from the older to the innovative. Across all levels of (morpho-)phonology, lexicon, morphology and morphosyntax we find aspects belonging to different historical layers. More ancestral structures that stand out include the lack of initial vowels on sets of nouns, the much rarer use of adpositions, and the absence of some markers well known from Kera’a. Intermediate layers include, in particular, the large swaths of verbal lexemes and function words shared between Igu and Kera’a. Innovative aspects within Igu are ones not only overlapping with Kera’a, but innovative even within Kera’a, such as content words displaying word-initial consonant loss.

What is striking is that the different historical layers come together within single lines, as seen in the following example (bold print for younger-layer forms, regular print for intermediate-layer forms, underlining for ancestral-layer forms):

- (47) *bea aya=go eto ãzo wa*
 earlier DEM=DAT chicken knowledge TOP
Atulimipri mudu wa Atulimipri aru’a
 A. sky TOP A. epidemic
 ‘long ago and now, as for the chicken’s knowledge,
 as for Atulimipri in the sky, (and) sickness
 [kaliwu_9:19]

There is no reason, at this point, to assume any kind of contact influence. However, this may be simply due to the lack of full descriptions of several of the surrounding spoken languages, including Tawrã (a thorough description of which is currently finalized in a dissertation project by Rolf Hotz, University of Sydney) and the other, more distantly related Mishmi languages, Kman (also “Miju (Mishmi)”). Perhaps more importantly, there is no linguistic description of any ritual languages in the immediately surrounding Mishmi and Tani languages. Linguistic work on the geographically closest ritual language is Stephen Morey’s and his colleagues work on Wihu (e.g. Morey & Schöpf 2012, 2018, Morey 2022).

Finally, Igu can clearly be grouped in the Kera’a lineage after the split-off between Kera’a and Tawrã. Igu, like Kera’a, shows the same rampant loss of consonantal codas, which are retained in Tawrã (Reinöhl 2022). Igu also participates, at least in the case of some lexemes, in the word-initial consonant loss otherwise found in Kera’a’s prestige dialect Midu, while the more conservative dialect Mithu as well as Tawrã retain these onsets (for more detail, see Reinöhl 2022 and Culhane et al. 2023).

5 Conclusion

This paper presents the first linguistic description of Igu, the shamanic language of the Kera'a community. While Igu shows significant similarities with the contemporary spoken language, Kera'a, it also shows significant differences from Kera'a on all levels: Igu and Kera'a largely share their phonological inventories and phonotactics, with Igu even partially participating in the innovative word-initial consonant loss within Kera'a. On the other hand, Igu shows word-initial absence of vowels in a set of nouns, unlike Kera'a, besides some other morpho-phonological and lexeme-specific phonological differences. In morphology, Igu is, like Kera'a, a language combining isolating and agglutinating strategies, the latter in particular in the verbal domain. Its lexicon is Igu-specific especially in the nominal domain, and otherwise largely shared between Igu and Kera'a. In morphosyntax, there are some notable departures between Igu and Kera'a, including the much rarer use of adpositions in Igu and the attestation of some grammatical morphemes only in one language and not the other. Igu syntax, finally, conforms to the basic SOV pattern of Kera'a. However, many lines appear to consist of clauses or utterances built around separate phrases (often bare nouns and verbs), a phenomenon that can likely be attributed to genre rather than to e.g. rampant zero arguments. All in all, the differences between Igu and Kera'a support the local linguistic-ideological stance towards Igu as a separate language or historiolect, rather than a register within Kera'a.

In addition to sketching the forms and structures of Igu, this paper also offered an assessment of the different historical layers within Igu. As with other Himalayan ritual languages, we do not see a monolithic linguistic system, but can identify layers that are historically older as well as more recent, attesting to the living character of Igu oral art as existing in performance and thus amenable to change. What stands out, firstly, are forms and structures attested in Igu that are clearly innovative even in spoken Kera'a. At the same time, Igu also attests to ancestral layers, in particular in the realm of nouns for entities that play important roles in the ritual, as well as in morpho-syntax. The ancestral nouns, in particular, have an enhanced potential to elucidate questions of deeper genealogical relations, or of shedding light on Kera'a and Igu's contact history. (There is, at this point, no evidence so far for influence from another language other than Kera'a onto Igu.) What is certain at this point is that Igu can be grouped within the Kera'a cloud of varieties, as it displays changes that are posterior to the split of Proto-Kera'a-Tawra (Reinöhl 2022). Future work into the linguistics of Igu will profit, in particular, from taking into account its poetic organization, e.g. when it comes to parallelism in lexicon and syntax. Here, the analysis of parallel terms and lines will mutually inform each other in the quest for uncovering the status of Igu, in particular, and of Himalayan ritual languages, more generally, in terms of their performative conditions, genre specifics, and potentials for uncovering Trans-Himalayan linguistic and cultural history (see Reinöhl, to appear).

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