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# Western Rengma (Karbi Anglong, India) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Terüpvunyu (autonym), Western Rengma (exonym)
<b>Language Family:</b>	Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Angami-Pochuri
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	nre
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	
<b>Population:</b>	65,328 (2011 census)
<b>Location:</b>	26.298275, 93.655055
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	EGIDS 6a

## Summary

Western Rengma (Terüpvunyu /tərYϕuɾu/) is an undocumented Angami-Pochuri language from the Tibeto-Burman language family. Preliminary fieldwork was conducted during April 2018 in Karbi Anglong district, Assam, India to document the language and understand the language attitudes of the speakers, in addition to identifying domains of language use. The dominant language in the district is colloquial Assamese, an Eastern Indo-Aryan language used as a lingua franca by Rengma speakers, blended with Nagamese, a creole from the neighbouring state of Nagaland. Western Rengma bears a resemblance to Southern Rengma, while Northern Rengma is totally distinct. Research is still required to confirm the identity of Western and Central Rengma and to understand the sociolinguistic situation of the language.

## 1. Overview

The term Rengma is an exonym which derives from English ‘ring’ and ‘men’, according to native speakers. The Rengma people are found in northeast India, in the states of Nagaland of Manipur, and Karbi Anglong district of Assam. They have close affinities with the Zeme Naga. Although Rengma is a Naga language under the Angami-Pochuri group of the greater Tibeto-Burman family, Post & Burling (2017) write of the Rengma: ‘Sumi and Rengma stand somewhat apart, both from the Angami and Pochuri nuclei and from one another’. The Rengma Nagas can be classified into four groups based on dialectal variations: Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western (Eastern and Western Rengmas fall in the Central region of Rengma language distribution). The present work presents information on Western Rengma, also known as *Terüpvunyu* /tərYɸʊnu/, which is an autonym for both the language and the people. The research was conducted in April 2018 in Nkhenlari village (alternative name Khanarigaon), Karbi Anglong district in Assam.

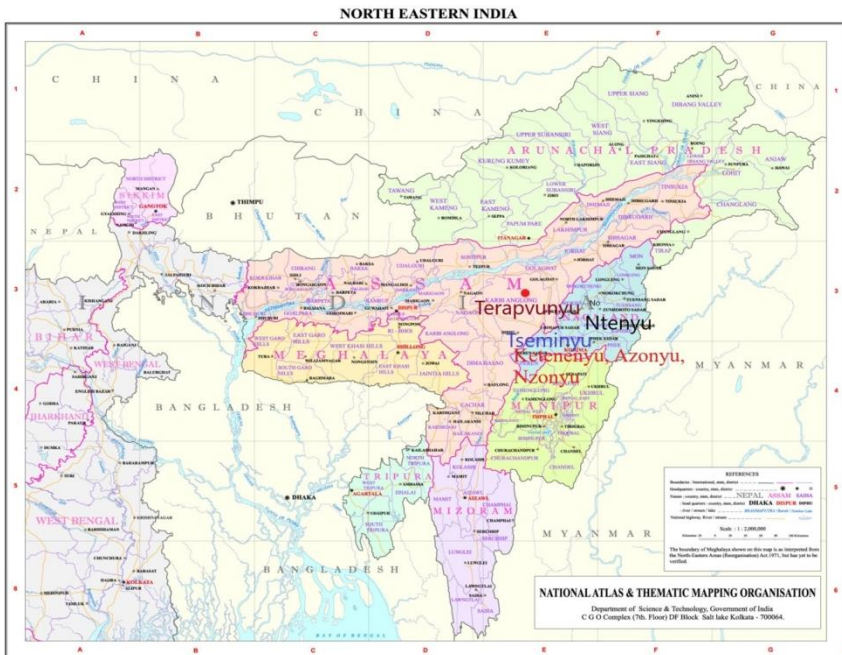


Figure 1. Rengma speaking areas in North-East India

According to the schema of Krauss (2006) the status of the Rengma Naga language can be said to be between stable (A: all speak, children and up) and unstable (A- some locations where children speak), which indicates that the language is in a vulnerable position of endangerment. This can be further validated from the scale of language endangerment listed in the UNESCO report of 2005, for the factor 1, i.e., intergenerational transmission, based on which Rengma can be said to be vulnerable, i.e. most children speak the language but it may be restricted to certain domains. So, it can be considered to be a vulnerably endangered language.

Additionally, the Western Rengma villages are remote, especially Nkhenlari village, in terms of educational and medical facilities, as well as transport and communication. The village is distant from others and the people live under extreme poverty which constrains them from going out for further study to receive higher education. In addition, their main source of income is based on *jhum* (shifting) cultivation. The only communication with the outside world, namely with speakers of Assamese, Bodo, and Karbi, is in a localised code-mixed Assamese and Nagamese, which is used in the market, transport, and for any other access. Thus, Rengma is vulnerable and limited to only the home domain. However, the villagers' attitudes towards their language are positive. The parent generation always uses it and wants their children to learn Rengma as their first language, and the children generation also uses Rengma among themselves in their everyday life.

There are very few works on Rengma language and culture, and none so far includes Western Rengma. One of the earliest works on Rengma is Mills (1937) which mentions socio-cultural aspects, historical background, geographical description, and language description. Marrison (1967) documents the Naga languages and also mentions the variety of Rengma called 'Ntenyi' (Northern Rengma). Kath (2005) discusses the religion, festivals, traditions and migration of the Rengmas. Post & Burling (2017) illustrates the classification of Rengma in the Angami-Pochuri group; Southern, Northern, and Eastern Rengma are identified, however for Western Rengma spoken in Karbi they have no written records.

Besides these, there are also non-linguistic works contributed by the members of the Rengma community. Sebü (2005) writes about traditional folk songs of the Rengma Nagas and Sebü (2006) discusses their marriage system. There have been attempts to write a grammar book for the language by active members of the Rengma Literary Society but the results are unclear at present. Currently, they use a Roman script with diacritics (e.g. the language and ethnic group name is written *Terüpvunyu*) in locally written documents, books, banners, placards, and even text messages in WhatsApp.

## 2. Current Research

The present field study is the first attempt at documenting the Western Rengma Naga language (Terüpvunyu) and was undertaken in early April 2018 as a part of the course *Field Linguistics* undertaken by second-semester students of the M.A. in Linguistics and Endangered Languages, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Tezpur University, under the supervision of the course instructor, Monali Longmailai. The documentation was conducted at Nkhenlari village from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> April 2018. The entire work is based on elicitation plus collective narratives, through personal interaction, recording, and questionnaires. The questionnaires were based on the model in Abbi (2001) and Singh, Bhattacharjee, Chakraborty & Tripathi (2016). Approximately 2,000 words from various semantic domains (based on a Swadesh wordlist) and 400 sentences were collected, in addition to a few folk songs and narratives. For photography and video a Nikon L330 DSL camera and mobile phones were used, and for audio recording a Sony ICD-UX560F/S 4 digital sound recorder was used. The language of communication was code-mixed Assamese and Nagamese, in addition to English.

The documentation of Western Rengma was designed to cover two aspects: a sketch grammar, and a sociolinguistic survey. The primary task was to determine the consonantal and vowel phonemes, and identify the pattern of tones. Nasalization of vowels, which was mostly progressive, and nasal consonants, especially the palatal nasal, were observed to be highly productive. Thus, ongoing research will also observe phonological processes related to nasalization, together with other prominent sound features such as aspiration, and assimilation. Initially, it was observed that Western Rengma is rich in nouns and verbs with a strong presence of reduplication, compounding, and serial verbs. It also remains for us to describe the case system, based on the narratives and elicited sentences. Tense-aspect-mood (TAM) is a crucial issue in Rengma since there is no clear morphological representation of tense to indicate time, and semantic and pragmatic factors need to be examined from the data to study this feature. That is, time is expressed in terms of speech event situations as either completive, marked with the help of serial verbs, or incompletive elsewhere. Longmailai (2019) is an initial account of the tense and aspect system.

Besides the grammatical analysis of the language, a large amount of work remains to be done to understand dialectal variation of Rengma, i.e. if they are dialects or distinct languages. As far as mutual intelligibility is concerned, it is relatively low between the Eastern/Western (Central), Northern, and Southern dialects. Again, the factors leading to the differences in these dialects need to be examined in terms of words from various semantic domains such as kinship, body parts, numerals, and names, to identify the degree of lexical convergence and divergence. In addition, the folkloristic aspects with songs, origin myths, narratives, dialogues, proverbs, and riddles, need to be further

documented to understand the use of lexical items in these folk genres and their relevance in the socio-cultural practices of the greater Rengma community. In future work, a sociolinguistic questionnaire will be used with a five degree scale to seek to probe more deeply into the social and language attitudes of both younger and parental generations to better understand the vulnerability of the language.

The current research project has set a target to publish a sketch grammar and to work on the linguistic situation of the Western Rengma language, in addition to the compilation of a basic dictionary (using the SIL software tool FLEx), and a set of folklore texts that will be accessible to the speech community.

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