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Language Endangerment and Culture Loss - A Case Study of Tai Khamti

| Ritwiz Sarma



Discussion Paper

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ABSTRACT

Language has a deep and well-documented relationship with culture. Therefore, language loss has significant implications for communities' cultural heritage. This study attempts to analyse the cultural impact of language loss in Tai Khamti speakers, an endangered language community native to North-Eastern India. Primary data is collected to assess cultural markers relating to language maintenance, indigenous knowledge and documentation, linguistic cultural markers, and narrative forms. The analysis of this data provides insight into culture loss through language endangerment in North-Eastern India and the broader intersection of language and culture. Finally, the paper discusses the policy implications of the study.

Keywords: Language Endangerment, Tai Kadai, Language Policy, Cultural Heritage, Northeast India

INTRODUCTION:

Linguists estimate that around 7,000 languages are spoken globally (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). However, at least half of these languages may not exist after a few more generations since they are not taught as first languages to children. Such languages, at risk of extinction due to a lack of speakers, are called endangered languages. The Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages [SPPEL], launched by the Ministry of Education in 2013, listed 117 languages on the endangered list. Any language with less than 10,000 speakers qualified. Of the 117, 43 endangered languages belonged to the North-East India (SPPEL, n.d.).

With the 2003 UNESCO report postulating that language is “a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage” (Smeets, 2004), the fact that 36% of North-Eastern languages are endangered offers an insight into the region’s culture. The deep and symbiotic relationship between the two is present in almost every sociolinguistic study of endangerment or policy (Abbi et al., 2007; Guardado, 2006; Padharipande, 2002; Tulloch, 2010). This connection thus introduces the idea of language loss being closely related to culture loss, often associated with “the decay of traditional cultural heritage, values, and artifacts” (Kirsch, 2001). Some, like Saydee (2014), assert that the loss of language is in itself culture loss.

Building on this idea, this work attempts to analyse the cultural loss occurring in an endangered language community native to North-Eastern India. It argues that the rising tide of language endangerment in North-Eastern India is a cultural loss. The assessment of language loss and endangerment is influenced by Fishman’s (1991) theoretical contribution of Reversing Language Shift [RLS] which emphasises the efforts being made to keep heritage languages alive in a community and society by native speakers (ibid.).

This paper focuses on the Khamti community of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, which speaks the eponymous endangered language, Tai Khamti. The first section of this paper provides background information on the Khamtis and elaborates on the characteristics and effects of language loss specific to the community. The second section focuses on methodology. It also discusses the cultural markers used to assess culture loss and outlines the limitations of the data collected. The third section discusses the data obtained through the interviews and provides context to the findings through existing literature on culture and endangered languages. The concluding section interprets the data regarding culture loss and examines the policy implications.

CONTEXT

Tai Khamti is a member of the Tai Kadai family of languages. The Khamti people have resided in India since the late 18th century (Gogoi, 1971). They are settled predominantly in Arunachal Pradesh’s Lohit and Changlang districts and Assam’s Lakhimpur districts. The majority resides in the former. Discrepancies are found in the data around the exact number of speakers. According to the Census of 2011, the Khamti population¹ numbers 12,890 in the Lohit district. Additionally, Morey (2005) reports around 500 to 1000 speakers in Assam. A UNESCO report puts the number of speakers at 5,000 (Gaur et al., 2022). A significant number of Khamti speakers are also found across the border in Myanmar (Das, 2021).

1 - Total members of the community, not necessarily speakers.

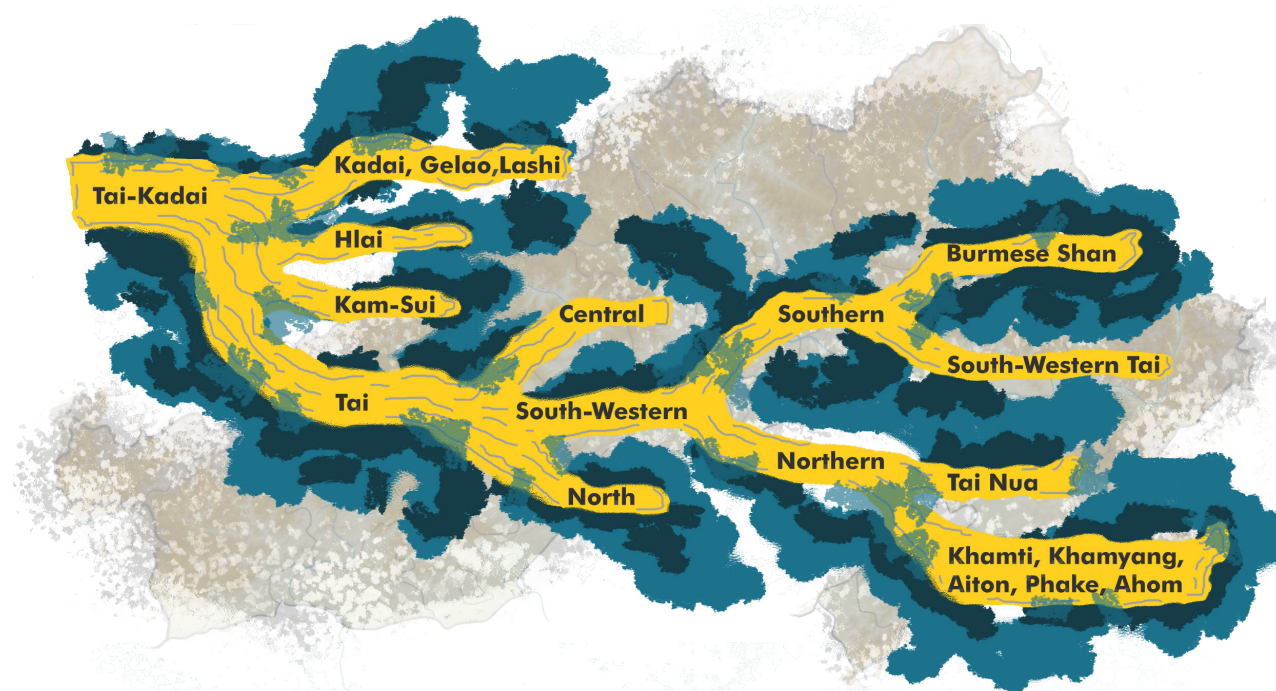


Figure 1. Family tree of Tai-Kadai (Das & Abbi, 2022)

The Khamti are the largest group of speakers among all the Tai language groups, which are mostly endangered or extinct. Tai Aiton, Tai Phake, and Tai Khamyang groups coexist with Khamti. While they have a considerably lower number of speakers than Khamti, Morey (2005) reports language rejuvenation efforts in the Pawoimukh region. The dominant language in the areas where the Tai live is Assamese. Thus many Tai people exhibit proficiency in the language. There is a large population of Singpho speakers in the Lohit district who enjoy close relations with the Khamtis. This population is often bilingual in Khamti and engages in inter-community matrimony (Das, 2021). Singpho bilingualism has led to an interesting phenomenon called asymmetric bilingualism. Herein Singphos may speak Khamti, but Khamtis do not speak Singpho, and a language shift from Singpho to Khamti has been documented (ibid.).

Tais are Buddhist by religion and have a history of written tradition “brought from Burma” (Grierson, 1904). The Khamtis are deeply connected to the forests and woodlands surrounding most of Lohit and Changlang. The logging industry brought enormous wealth to the tribe, propelling Chongkham, a Khamti-dominated village, to fame as “Asia’s richest village” (Mazumdar, 2010). Many families owned sawmills, plywood factories, and a preponderance of ‘pet’ elephants used during the timber boom for logging operations (Kaushik, 2021). The Supreme Court’s ban on tree-felling in forests (T. N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad vs Union Of India & Ors, 1996) resulted in Chongkham’s golden period coming to an end for most of the tribe, while the wealthier families were able to pivot to the tea garden business.

Tai Khamti, therefore, provides an example of a language that is endangered but not critically so. It enjoys both majority, bilingual, and minority status in different districts. Lexically, it is similar to many languages in the Tai-Kadai and Tibeto-Burman families, to which many North-Eastern languages belong. Families in the community belong to different economic and social strata, owing to industrial events over the past two decades and the caste-like two-level social stratification of the society (Morey, 2005), respectively.

A critical note in studying the endangered status of Khamti is that it is a tonal language. It functions within a seven-tone framework, where a tone change causes a semantic change to the lexeme. Das (2014) found that tonality was inherent in the Khamti people's perception of language. Their teachers cannot teach non-speakers to perceive tones in spoken language. It is taken for granted that the student can do so. The decline of tonality thus seems to be a valuable metric to assess for language change, if not loss, but this requires further study.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses ten semi-structured interviews with members of the subject community to elicit data on language and culture loss (e.g., Guardado, 2006; Abbi et al., 2007). This paper assesses culture loss through questions on culture markers. These markers were initially selected through a literature review (e.g., Huanca et al., 2009) which was unanimously affirmed as being culturally important by interviewees². The four cultural features under discussion are:

Language identification and maintenance

RLS focuses on language maintenance by members of the community. An essential part of language maintenance is the presence of self-identification with the language or community (e.g., Saydee, 2014; Tulloch, 2010). The latter concept is added to by Fishman (1991), who describes it as the symbolic relation between language and culture. Herein the language and the culture are identified as representative of each other to both members and outsiders. Therefore, this section of the questionnaire is relevant for both language and culture loss and asks interviewees about intra-community language maintenance and identification.

Indigenous knowledge and documentation

This section deals with indigenous knowledge preserved in the endangered language and efforts towards its documentation. Abbi (2021) documents an essential section of indigenous knowledge, such as the unique names of flora, including medicinal plants, that are common in the community region. The loss of the language would inherently lead to the loss of such community knowledge. This consequence is explained by Fishman (1991) as reflective of the 'indexical' relation, that is, the unique ability of the community language to name the artefacts of that culture.

As aforementioned, the Khamtis, who work predominantly in the forest-based industry, have traditional knowledge of medicinal plants which grow in the region (Das & Tag, 2006). This study looks into the effect of language loss on the naming of herbs and medicinal plants mentioned in Das and Tag (2006) as well as any other medicinal plants that the interviewees were aware of as being common in the area.

Use of honorifics and inter-generational communication

The Khamti people have strong family and social structures. Morey (2005) reports a caste-like two-level social stratification is present. Family elders, in-laws, and certain privileged sections of

2 - The questionnaire included questions on the importance of the cultural markers under discussion to the community.

society (irrespective of gender and relative age distinction), such as the clergy, are referred to with deference (Das, 2014). All these mentioned social hierarchies combine to create Tai Khamti's complex and well-developed system of honorifics (ibid.), whose usage with the appropriate tone is considered necessary (C. Mounkang, personal communication, July 6, 2022). This section of the questionnaire examines both the usage of honorifics by interviewees and the effect of language loss on honorifics.

Folktales and songs

Indigenous folktales, creation myths, and songs are considered part of a community's intangible cultural heritage. Language has a critical role in the preservation of cultural heritage (Couratier, 2008). For example, Abbi et al. (2007) note that "the old people of the community (rarely) ever narrate any story to their children" (ibid.). Storytelling as an activity has disappeared. The loss of the genre of narration due to language loss has severe implications since it terminates the diffusion of oral history, as well as inter-generational communication. This section investigates the prevalence of narration through stories and songs and the presence of communication between generations.

DISCUSSION

The respondents to this interview were members of the Khamti community in Arunachal Pradesh. They constituted state government workers, teachers, independent artists, and members of the Buddhist clergy between the age range of 25 to 63. All respondents were bilingual and could speak at least one majority tongue³ such as English, Hindi, or Assamese. Their bilingual proficiency was demonstrated during the interview. They were also uniformly educated to at least a graduate level. Most respondents lived in or close to districts with a high Khamti population. It may be reasonably concluded that the respondents belong to the upper economic and social echelon of Khamti society.

The respondents also unanimously reported learning the Khamti language exclusively at home, which, while appropriate for a mother tongue, also brings into question the role of formal education. The government's institution of Khamti as the third language in schools has been helpful in this regard (T. Namchom, personal communication, July 11, 2022). However, its relative recency means that the first generation of Khamti children to be taught Khamti at school are yet to reach adulthood.

On community identification

When asked about the language spoken at home, all respondents reported speaking some amount of Tai Khamti while mentioning traces of different majority tongues being present. When asked how they referred to their mother tongue, many referred to Tai Khamti as just "Tai". Since the word "Tai" could be misinterpreted as referring to one of the other languages in the Tai family (S. Namchum, personal communication, July 11, 2022), this choice may represent Tai Khamti's dominant role in different varieties of Tai in the erstwhile Lohit district. Respondents also uniformly reported some level of bilingualism in the common verbal repertoire. Some words of the majority tongue were often used while communicating in Khamti, even outside of technical words, which may not have direct translations in the mother tongue (T. Munkang, personal communication, July 16, 2022). Hindi

3 - The majority tongue, is the default language of an area, often characterised as "the language in which information about public affairs is communicated, learned, and transmitted" (Perez & Tavits, 2022), especially in formal education.

words often crop up in the spoken lexicon of the youth in particular (W. Mungkang, personal communication, August 19, 2022). Mungkang (ibid.) opines that this may be due to economic reasons, as explained later in this section.

The Khamti community, therefore, shows signs of language shift toward the majority tongue. The majority tongue differs perceptibly relative to age, as older respondents are more likely to report competency in Assamese, while younger respondents are often bilingual in Hindi. This observation is similar to that of Das' (2021), who further finds that linguistic elements of Assamese have merged into the verbal repertoire of both the Tai and Singpho people, even though the Assamese influence has decreased over the years.

However, the interviews revealed that language maintenance was reasonably prevalent in the Khamti community. When asked about language teaching at home, older respondents reported teaching their wards Khamti during childhood. Younger respondents confirmed that they were taught Khamti at home and generally speak Khamti with companions of the same age group. Language shift in the Northeast is understood to be driven by endangered language speakers choosing to adopt a more dominant language to find better educational or career opportunities (Association of Commonwealth Universities, n.d.). This is not the case with the Khamti community, at least at home. Children are encouraged to speak the mother tongue, and majority tongue teaching is largely confined to formal education (T. Namchoom, personal communication, July 11, 2022). The principles of RLS would thus suggest that Khamti is making significant steps towards language rejuvenation.

The attitude towards language maintenance also reflects this conclusion. Interviewees were realistic yet upbeat when asked how long they thought their language would survive. They accepted that the low number of speakers meant that rejuvenation efforts were required but pointed out examples of language promotion known to them. When asked if they saw Khamti being spoken two or three generations from now, they unanimously agreed.

On indigenous knowledge

Currently, there is no substantive dictionary of Tai Khamti. The current major work related to documentation is the formalisation and digitalisation of the script by local civil society organisations and scholars including Mannoï (personal communication, August 2, 2022). Teachers of Tai Khamti often use books published in Myanmar as reference material (T. Namchoom, personal communication, July 11, 2022). The ongoing work on the script has already produced one digital font of the Tai Khamti script (K. Mannoï, personal communication, August 2, 2022). This work is relevant because it asserts the distinct identity of the sizeable Indian Tai-Khamti populace while implying that cultural knowledge will survive, since it is documented, even if no speakers remain (ibid.).

An excellent example of this concept is the work of Mougkang (personal communication, July 6, 2022) in the documentation of traditional Khamti home remedies, which use locally available herbs. Ethnomedicinal studies show the effectiveness of these remedies (Das & Tag, 2006). However, these studies are undertaken from an outsider's perspective and hence miss the relevant cultural context, indigenous script, and the local names of flora. The latter is particularly relevant since traditional plants tend to be endemic to the region and have no specific names outside of the tribal name (Abbi, 2021). The uniqueness of these traditional names is further demonstrated by the respondents, who could not find perfect equivalents to these terms in any majority tongue. When asked how they would refer to these plants while speaking to a non-speaker, most resorted to visual descriptions or using generic terms such as 'vegetable' or 'grass'. C. Mougkang (personal communication, July 6, 2022)

points out that “[those] things that are not common become hard to express. These [plants] are uncommon, they are not found everywhere.”

It is also observed that the community is unable to describe the ingredients of indigenous medicines in the majority tongue⁴. When asked what a particular medicine constitutes, a common response was that medicines were prepared using a “local method” (T. Namchoom, personal communication, August 8, 2022). A translation of the names of the ingredients was also difficult to obtain without resorting to generic names, as had been the case earlier. To clarify this use of generic names, respondents were asked if they usually referred to medicinal plants with a generic name. All respondents affirmed that specific names were used. C. Mounkang (personal communication, July 6, 2022) sums up: “The name of the medicinal herb is often derived from the illness itself. Thus, it becomes impossible. I cannot call it by [any other] name.”

On the use of honorifics

All respondents reported the use of honorifics in everyday speech, most prominently towards the elderly and clergy. These honorifics carry over untranslated in their Khamti form when speaking in the majority tongue. Here, translations are slightly more successful. For example, the Axom word *gaon burha* is perfectly synonymous with the Khamti word for “village head” (C. Mounkang, personal communication, July 6, 2022). However, transliterations for honorifics, such as the formal term referring to the female spouse (‘*ya-cao-hen*’, literally meaning “one who takes care of the house”) become unwieldy and unfit for normal use (T. Mungkang, personal communication, July 16, 2022).

The transfer of honorifics is also seen as a fundamental characteristic of the language rather than a special mark of humility or affection towards the person being addressed. When asked about dropping honorifics, T. Namchoom (personal communication, August 8, 2022) remarked that an older person would not necessarily feel offended by a younger person addressing them without the appropriate honorifics but pointed out that honorifics are an important feature. Missing the honorific would thus be more of a grammatical error than a sign of disrespect. The maintenance of these markers in the language by the speakers is also significant according to the principles of RLS. This is a particularly evocative example of how a language absorbs the speaker into its “linguistic culture” (Schiffman, 1996), wherein the speaker engages with the belief systems and attitudes inherent to it. Even unknowingly, as in this case.

On folklore and songs

Initial questions on storytelling brought forth an interesting conundrum as all respondents reported having listened to folktales during their childhood, usually from an older family member. However, six out of ten could not remember titles, and only two among those six could recall some plotlines. The few who could remember folktales in detail were above the age of 40. When asked if they heard stories as children, they reported engaging in and witnessing some level of storytelling from elders to children, nephews/nieces, or grandchildren. Some references to faulty memory were made. C. Mounkang (personal communication, July 6, 2022) claims, “Like my father used to tell me stories, I cannot quite remember that. But some stories I can tell... [but] I cannot quite narrate like that.”

The folktales generally centre around Buddhist mythology. However, some respondents also mentioned generic retellings of children’s tales that found their way into Khamti from different

languages, primarily English (T. Namchoom, personal communication, July 11, 2022). When asked if these folktales were unique to the Khamti culture, most respondents affirmed that they had not heard similar stories in the majority tongue. The preservation of these tales is found in some books, including foreign textbooks (ibid.). According to RLS, the decline in narrative practices indicates flagging maintenance, which raises questions about the language's robustness.

Songs are much more popular and memorable, with all respondents having listened to both traditional and modern songs in Khamti. While some had heard family members singing traditional songs at home, four reported having heard traditional music performed in public by local musicians. The traditional songs of the Khamtis are mostly related to worship and thus have ceremonial value. The Khamti youth also produce contemporary music – both in the majority tongue (largely English) and a smaller number in the mother tongue (Mansai, personal communication, 12 August 2022). Respondents are aware of modern Khamti music. Their methods of access include YouTube and the distribution of physical media such as DVDs (T. Namchoom, personal communication, 11 July 2022).

The decline in storytelling is particularly prevalent amongst younger respondents. This may be due to the lack of exposure to the language as they enter formal education (Padharipande, 2002). The effects of language shift on younger respondents are also demonstrated through the choice of English lyrics for self-produced music in consideration of the inherent economic benefits of choosing a language with a wider reach (Association of Commonwealth Universities, n.d.). Nonetheless, the presence of narrative acts, such as storytelling in the family and public performances of traditional music, is an encouraging sign since it provides accessible points of contact with the language to the general public.

On possible limitations

In varying degrees, all respondents are aware that their language is endangered. Two actively participate in language rejuvenation programmes, which may colour their responses to some questions. Bilingualism was a necessary selection criterion for certain sections of the questionnaire to be answered, and this has naturally contributed to a sample that generally belongs to the upper class of Khamti society, which can afford outside exposure or English-medium education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Khamti are keenly aware of their identity and exhibit sincere language maintenance, perhaps as a direct consequence of the former. It can be seen that language can retain certain aspects of the speaker community's traditions and culture and serve as a vehicle to pass it on to the next generation. It is also seen that the language itself is irreplaceable. The conservation of indigenous knowledge is either impractical or impossible through translation, and language shift is observed to be eroding cultural artefacts or values. Therefore, the data clearly demonstrates the connection between language and culture and affirms the interrelation between the two. The latter observation that language shift affects culture loss is based on the demonstration of the importance of language to the practice and propagation of culture.

The Khamti language and culture are the majority within the Lohit district and are distributed extensively across Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, even while endangered (Das, 2014). Khamti rejuvenation efforts have been by far the most successful in comparison to the neighbouring Tai languages and Singpho (e.g., Das, 2021). This can be noted from the speaker populations as well (SPPEL,

n.d.). The Tai Khamti language maintenance, and thereby culture maintenance, efforts thus provide several policy recommendations for the revitalisation of endangered languages in the North East.

I. Cultural programmes

This study notes the value the Khamtis place on their language. A possible reason for this pride in identity and the Khamtis' distinctive efforts towards language maintenance is the heavy ceremonial usage of the language. Namchoom (personal communication, July 11, 2022) supports this by mentioning that the community is “only promoting [the language] on occasions like festivals and New Year⁵”. The importance of festivals are highlighted by Gogoi (1971) and Morey (2005), with both referring to the Khamti singing and recitation that takes place. Heritage festivals, especially geared towards Scheduled Tribes' communities, can help assert the importance of linguistic identity. Community members must also be equipped with resources and training to set up individual cultural events in the mother tongue. This will not only safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of the community but also provide a forum for community members to gather regularly.

II. Institutional language teaching

Multiple interviewees including Namchoom (personal communication, July 11, 2022), a schoolteacher, report that the Khamtis have benefitted from Tai Khamti as the third language in schools in the Namsai district. The essential concept behind this is that the three-language formula, which has dominated much of Indian language policy since 1968, needs to be implemented at the district level. The implementation would result in the third language being the major language of the district rather than that of the state (Association of Commonwealth Universities, n.d.; Schiffman, 2000). This allows minority languages at the state level to flourish, and more children are allowed to receive formal education in their mother tongue.

III. Reference materials

The troubles faced by Khamti teachers underline the importance of textbooks and reference material. In the absence of suitable material, language teaching and language maintenance at an institutional level cannot be maintained. The writing of grammar and dictionaries will aid both language teaching and documentation concerns. The ongoing efforts made by the Khamti community to create dictionaries should be supported by the government, considering the resource-intensive nature of such tasks. Gaur et al. (2022) also suggest the development of storybooks and other child-friendly linguistic tools for languages with scripts and audio resources such as podcasts and radio programmes for oral languages.

IV. Archiving and documentation

Documentation is also required in the form of manuscripts, artefacts, and digital archives. The Khamti community has managed to hold on to its musical traditions through the distribution of physical media and youth artists creating and publishing their work on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. Similarly, the development and digitalisation of the script have allowed for easier

5 - It is to be noted that in the context of the interview, Namchoom refers to this as an impediment rather than a boon. The implication is that they would prefer the language to be “promoted” year-round rather than only during the festive period.

printing of books. Policymakers must take note of this example and incentivise the documentation of languages for Indian ethnographic researchers and linguists. SPPEL and their associated grants, administered by the University Grants Commission, are a good step in this direction.

V. Funding

The collection of primary data through fieldwork in areas such as the Northeast is currently lacking. Gaur et al. (2022) further report that existing large repositories do not undertake fieldwork and depend on outdated primary data. The resource-intensive nature of such tasks is intimidating to scholars, especially considering the required tools for audio and video recording. Such documentation efforts, therefore, require institutional or governmental support and funding. An example of the amount of funding being provided elsewhere is provided by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme [ELDP], formerly at SOAS UK. It currently funds six projects in the North-East, all dealing with Tibeto-Burman languages (ELDP, n.d.). The smallest grant for documentation awarded by ELDP can reach a maximum amount of 10,000 pounds (9.05 lakh rupees as of September 20, 2022).

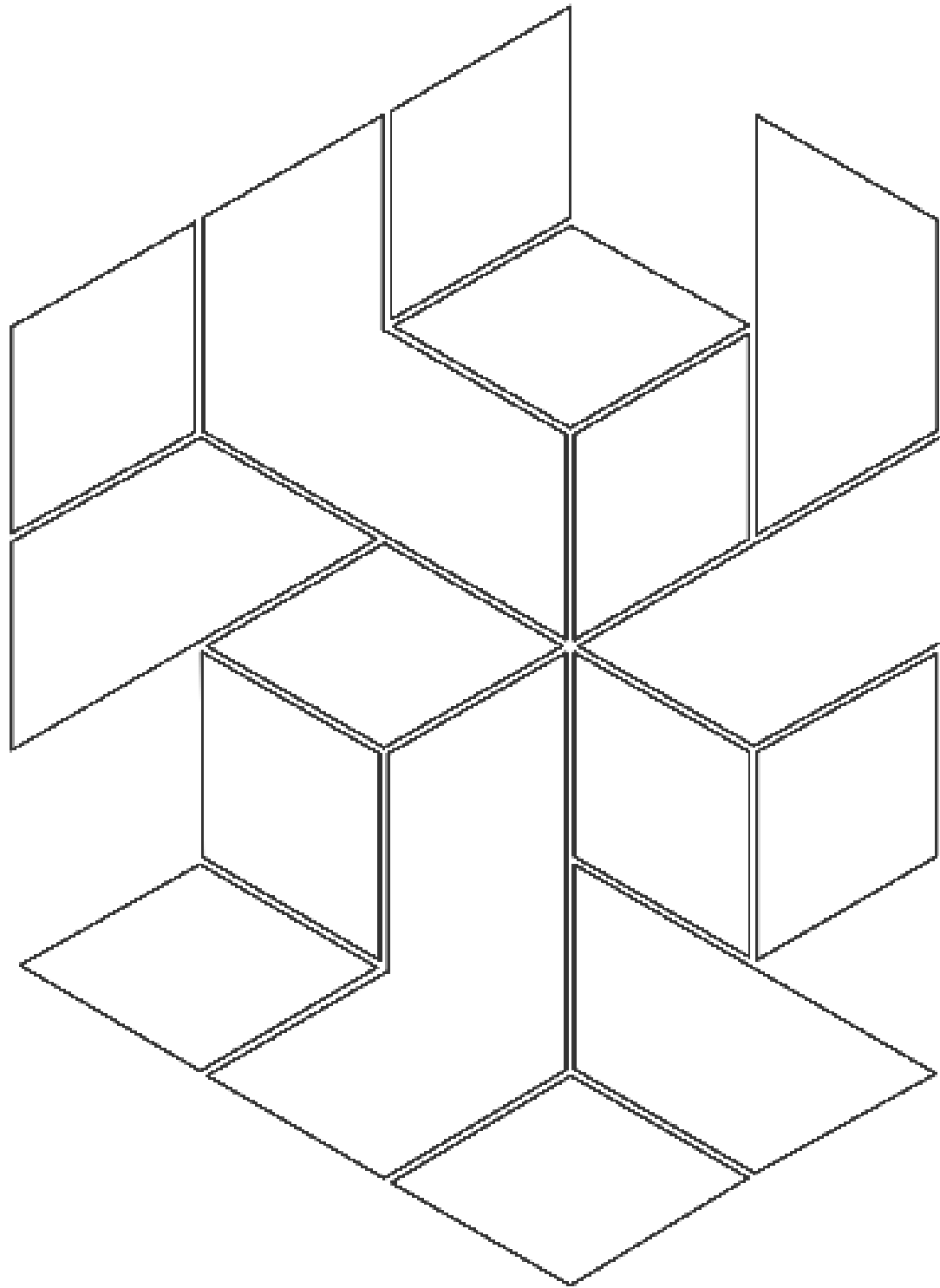
VI. Building local capacity

The work of the Tai Khamti Heritage and Literary Festival has been exemplary in the documentation and revitalisation efforts of Tai Khamti and in coordination with non-Khamti researchers. The presence of community stakeholders aids research and administration initiatives and, more importantly, ensures that the community itself is part of decision-making processes. Community members should also be trained in language documentation and archiving and be provided with the necessary tools and resources to build community spirit through cultural programmes. The importance of community involvement in language revitalisation is stressed by Fishman's (1991) principles of RLS and summarised by Gaur et al. (2022): "Only a community can keep its language alive. No governmental or non-governmental initiative is sufficient in this regard."

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