

An Evaluation of original Tai cultural Heritage among the Tai Ahom of Assam in the light of their Ethno-cultural contacts and exchanges with other Ethnic groups in Northeast India

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The Ahom are an offshoot of the Tai-Yai or Shan people who came to settle in the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam in 1228 A.D. They started their migration from King Chen Muang Mao Lung in 1215 A.D. and ruled the whole Brahmaputra valley until 1834 A.D. At present they are distributed throughout upper and middle Assam. They now number more than ten million.

The Ahom brought to Assam a kind of Tai culture that was typical of the Muang Mao Lung areas of the Shweli (Ruili) River on the Sino-Myanmar border in the last part of 11th century and first part of the 12th century. They then moved through the Irrawady and Salween river valleys of Myanmar and crossed the Patkai hills, entering the upper Brahmaputra valley. On the way they met various tribes such as the Naga, Pyu, Singpho, etc. In the Brahmaputra valley they came into contact with tribes like the Moran, Borahi, Kachari, Singpho, Deori, Chutia, etc.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Ahom encountered the Koch, Dimacha, Bodo, Tiwa-lalung, Jayantia, Mising, Kalita, Hindu, Brahmins, Kayasthas and some other tribes. So it was that they were exposed to various traditional Hindu, Buddhist and Tibeto-Burman tribal cultures and different kinds of folk religious practices. The Ahom's cultural life contrasted with the diverse cultural patterns of the Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups of hills and plains, major Indian Hindu-Aryan and Aryan-influenced ethnic groups, and various sects of Hinduism and Buddhism. After two hundred years of settlement yet another cultural influence impinged upon them, namely the Islamic culture as it spread to the area. So, their six hundred years of rule endured conflicts and truces, friendships and enmities. Their long reign allowed the Ahom to know the Bhutanese of Bhutan Jayantia and the Khasi of Meghalaya, as well as the Adi, Nocte, Nichi, Singpho, Apatani, Mising and Misimi of Arunachal Pradesh (a hill state of North East India).

While, on the one hand, the Tai came into contact with these ethnic minorities, they also lived in some isolation in the hills. Thus, the Ahom were geographically separated from their Irrawaddy-Sindwin-Menam-Mekong-Lanchang-Ruili Tai 'kith and kin' by the natural barrier of the Patkai Range. For this reason, they were forced to make extra effort to keep close contact with the Tai Shan of Myanmar. They often visited each other's territory; noble families preserved relations

through marriages; and regular royal missions were arranged. The Ahom maintained overland contacts through missions with their origins at Muang Mao over the years.

Time and again, Tai brethren came to settle in the Ahom kingdom of Assam. Small groups of Tai Yai living beyond Patkai, such as the Khamti, Turung, Khamyang, Phake and Aiton, came first and then later Tai migrants who had, by that time, been influenced by Theravada Brahmanic Buddhism. Still later, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the Burmese came into daily control of Tai Shan territory, and after the Burmese, the Ahom had to deal with the British Empire.

The British time accelerated migration with numerous Indian peoples (from Bihar, Rajasthan, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh) and Nepalese people from Nepal, moving to Assam. Just a few years prior to Indian Independence in 1947 (and also after Independence) many immigrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) settled in Assam. Immigration from Bangladesh continues to date. Thus, there came to be many ethnicities from other states inhabiting Ahom territory. Overall, the Ahom had to face an amazing cultural hotch potch. In this state of marked cultural and political mixture, the Ahom were in time reduced to being just one component part of a very multicultural Assamese community and society. Even within the present Brahmanic Hindu system of religion, the Ahom social position was adjusted so that they became a lower caste than the Aryan or Aryanized Assamese people.

In the face of such political, cultural and religious upheavals, the Ahom have endured constant pressure from powerful Hindu Brahmanic, Vaishnavite and other sectarian religious and cultural practices. More recently, the Ahom have been subject to tremendous pressure from a strong Brahmanic Sanskritized Indian culture - but in the light of all this, their identity has not been submerged and they continue to maintain their age-old Tai traditions. From a superficial viewpoint, it looks like (and many scholars have commented on this) the Ahom appear to have lost their religion, culture and language and have been assimilated into the Assamese population. However, this is not the case. They have, however, adopted some aspects of the dominant Assamese culture as their own: they have almost completely abandoned the habit of living in stilt houses, they speak Ahomised Assamese, they practise some elements of sectarian Hindu religions, they have accepted the habit of wearing white *dhuti* and shirts like the Bengalis, their woman put vermilion on their foreheads after marriage, they have been initiated into different Hindu sects and they follow Gosain, the Vaishnavite Hindu saint, in some of his 'norms'. Even though they practise such sectarian religious customs and speak Ahomised Assamese, they have not left the old traditions totally behind. True enough, they observe Hinduistic rites and rituals, but they also observe their own traditional rites and rituals and practise the Tai ways of eating, games, customs and manners and they maintain their beliefs, folk tales,

proverbs, and folk songs. As Hindu religious books are available, they read and sing Hinduistic poems in Assamese, but they still strictly follow their original rites and rituals among themselves. The original Tai religion and culture are being practised in an adapted 'Assam-ised' way. A suitable analogy would be to say that like a banana, their religious skin is Assamese, but the inner edible part is original Tai. The real Tai can only be seen and understood if the Assamese 'coating' is removed.

Some common cultural elements of wider distribution among the different groups of Tai people in larger areas are seemingly very old, and among the Ahom of Assam some of these elements can be seen. Having wider distribution, these elements may be categorised as part of the old Tai cultural heritage that remains a part of the cultural identity of the Ahom today. Although the Ahom have borrowed various aspects of their culture from other ethnic groups of the Tibeto-Burman branch and other Aryan peoples, many cultural aspects that can be observed among other Tai groups cannot be so easily categorised as borrowed ones. Naturally, the Ahom possess some unique cultural characteristics. Some of these, though not present among other Tai groups, cannot simply be discounted as non-Tai traditions. It may be that other Tai groups have lost these cultural characteristics over time, possibly due to some unavoidable pressure or influence, but the Ahom have maintained these up to the present (or at least up till recent times). Though there has always been some communication with other Tai groups, the lines of this communication to other Tai groups were fret with the difficulties of crossing the Patkai Mountains. Surprisingly, many cultural elements they brought with them in 1228 AD have been maintained until today, either without change or with only small changes or modifications necessary for the new environment. Some traditions of Ahom culture are similar to elements of Chinese culture or of some ethnic minorities in China, especially the people of Yunnan Province. Of course, one might at first assume that Ahom culture resembles Tai culture mostly, even though at present they are also practising the traditions similar to other Assamese ethnic groups. However Assamese culture is *not* an isolated ethnic culture, it is a culture comprised of elements from several different ethnic groups. Overall, the situation today is a synthesis of Ahom of Upper Assam and the Konch of Lower Assam that has resulted in a composite Assamese culture more or less influenced by Hinduism and Aryan Sanskritized Hinduism, a practice known as syncretism.

In Upper Assam (i.e. the upper Brahmaputra valley) the Ahom exerted great influence (due to their dominance for so many years as rulers and setters of local cultural tradition) on other ethnic minorities and 'Tai-ised' some of the ethnic cultures too. In this way many of the old traditional Tai cultural elements of the Ahom have become part of the mainstream Assamese culture found among both the Ahom and the other ethnic groups of Assam. This can be seen when we make a comparison between the original tribal and Tai groups.

Some of the old Tai cultural patterns (which were practised by the Ahom and other Tai groups in the past, even prior to 13th century, though not practised among the Ahom today) are referred to in their historical documents. Good descriptions can be read in the Buranji (History of Ahom) and other early manuscripts. These Ahom documents may give us some insights into past Tai traditions dating back to at least the first century. Some of these old traditional Tai cultural elements may be reflected (or even hidden) in the Hindu Vaishnavite Tantric Buddhist and Sakti cults (and associated culture) of Assam (in terms of material culture, sericulture, roads, buildings and bridges, and dress).

Besides Khwan and Ancestor worship, there are other religious and cultural content that may be categorised as old Tai cultural elements. These are to be found in the different rites and rituals: rice cultivation, household customs and manners, and festivals as well as language and literature, fables, traditional medicines, the use of plants and plant products (ethno-biological aspects), art and crafts, dance and musical techniques, sericulture and sports.

The Ahom have been deeply influenced by Hinduism. A considerable number of Ahom have adopted different Hindu sectarian religions prevalent in Assam among other ethnic groups. But instead of *solely* observing Hindu sectarian rites and rituals, the Ahom practise syncretism, accepting some elements of these religions while practising their old traditions side by side with these. These old traditions were practised then, and are still practised today. They have adapted (and added to) their traditions to suit life in Assam. They have translated their folk tales, proverbs and other oral and written literature into Assamese. Ahom histories were also translated into the Assamese language as well as being written in Tai. Both Tai and Assamese languages were used for documentation. However, towards the latter part of their rule (i.e. the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) the use of the Tai language by the Ahom clans almost completely ceased, except for the priestly clan. Language shift had occurred and Assamese had taken the place of the Tai language. Hindu religious books (which in some cases would have been translated into Tai during the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries) were later written mostly or wholly in Assamese. Tai elements however, were intermingled with, or superimposed on, Assamese Hindu practises. Assamese Hindu religious hymns, songs, proverbs and folk songs were sung using the old traditional Tai tone and rhythms. The rhythm and tone of the recitation of Assamese Hindu religious scriptures and folk songs prevalent among the Ahom (and even the whole of upper Assam) are quite similar to those of other Tai groups of Southeast Asia and Yunnan. As for music, the Ahom have retained their traditional rhythms until now. Drum beating and the playing of the flute, horn, cymbals and other stringed instruments of the Ahom, shows remarkable similarity to that of the Tai of Southeast Asia and Yunnan.

It is possible that the Ahom group of Tai people might have left their homeland before being converted to Buddhism. It can be assumed, however, that in time they became aware of Buddhism from Tai of the Muang Mao, although it was a corrupt or transformed form of Buddhism - one modified to suit the environment, culture and way of life. They probably preferred to honour their age-old traditional Tai cultural heritage rather than replace it with that of Buddhism. Within their culture there are some religio-cultural elements that are generally recognised as Chinese in origin - which are still prevalent among the Ahom of today. This is one reason why we can assume that they may have brought with them the Tai cultural patterns practised in the last part of the 12th century in and around Muang Mao. Although by this time many Tais had already settled in other parts of Southeast Asia, in Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, the Tai group (under the able leadership of Hso Hkan Hpa) certainly maintained close contact with each other. Interestingly, Hso Hkan Hpa himself came into contact with the Chinese through war, friendship and various political/other relationships. Therefore, it is Hso Hkan Hpa and his followers who carried a fairly Chinese Tai culture with them to the Brahmaputra valley. Some of its notable features are:

1. Ancestor worship

Ancestor worship is one of the main characteristics of Tai Ahom culture. It is also one of the oldest socio-cultural (and traditional) religious customs of the Chinese people as well. From the earliest times veneration of predecessors has been practised by the Tai and the Ahom alike. There is, for example, early evidence that traces ancestor worship back to Lyengdon, the Lord of Heaven and an ancient Tai king. He suggested to his two grandsons, Prince Khun Lung and Prince Khun Lai, that they worship him by beating drums, sacrificing elephants and oxen every year and that only then would he look from heaven on them with favour. The reign of King Lyengdon (ruler of Muang Phii) is fixed in the 6th or 7th century, which establishes that ancestor worship was in practice among the Tai at this early date. In China, ancestor worship is an act of obeisance. Many people make regular offerings to the dead, including those who they are not directly descended from, sometimes extending to quite distant relatives. A Tai person worships his ancestors because he is obligated to do so. Ancestors are thought to be benevolent. They may do harm to living descendants if these descendants do not pay obeisance with offerings. A man is free to believe in gods or not to, but one has to believe in ancestors. So it is tradition that the Ahom practice a variety of rites and rituals pertaining to ancestor worship. Though Vaishnavite Hindus have framed laws to forbid obeisance to ancestors, they have failed to curtail the practice amongst the Ahom. A person after death was thought to become a *phii* 'spirit' or *Dam Phii* 'spirit of the dead'.

In Ahom houses there is typically an ancestral post or *Chou dam* in the main hall. Offering is done at this post in worship of dead spirits. Ancestor worship is a common practice among other Tai groups too. However, due to the influence of Theravada Buddhism, the rites and rituals associated with ancestor worship are no longer performed with the same amount of grandeur. Tai minority groups of Assam also practised ancestor worship through the sacrificing of buffalo, but due to the strict prohibitions of Burmese Theravada Buddhism, they have now abandoned this practice (ancestor worship is still a common belief however). Me-Dam Me-phii (Worship of dead ancestor spirits) is held annually with social gatherings accompanied by feasts and seminars throughout Ahom-inhabited areas of Assam.

2. Burial practises among the Ahom

Burial rites and rituals and the construction of burial vaults have been common since ancient times. There is evidence of such practises from the Stone Age. Burial mounds of soil, pre-dating the Bronze Age have been discovered in Europe. In ancient Greece, during the Mycenaean age, tomb architecture became highly sophisticated. In Ohio, in the United States, burial tombs of soil were constructed as early as 1000 BC. It was a popular custom amongst the ancient Mississippi Indians. Such burial tombs can be seen in China too. The burial vault of Shi Huang Ti, an emperor of China from the 3rd century BC, is one of the best examples of such Chinese burial tombs. The Sumerians also constructed burial tombs and buried their dead along with living retainers, ornaments and food, etc. The Mayas of Mexico also buried the living with the dead.

The pyramids of ancient Egypt are possibly the most impressive example of ancient burial tombs. Among the Ahom, burial practices were also strictly observed. Vaults of soil, stone, brick and wood were constructed since the days of Hso Ka Faa. Examples of royal tombs can be seen in a place called Choraideo (Doi Che Rai or Che Tam Doi) in the Sibsagar district of Assam. Hso Ka Phaa built his first capital in Che Rai Doi. The burial vaults of all of the 42 Ahom kings are located in the same place. The Shan also bury their dead (Gurdon 1990:17). The burial tombs of Ahom are known as Moidam. The Ahom group of Tai people carried on this tradition of their ancestors. They did not simply replace their traditions with those of the local ethnic groups on their arrival in Assam (even though their traditions were very alien to the ethnic Assamese of those days). However, there are no records available. Only the Khasi people of Meghalaya State (probably an ancient Mon-Khmer offshoot) were in the habit of erecting a stone slab or monolith on the burial ground. The Tai may have constructed burial tombs in the 6th century (when they lived in the Muang Phii Kingdom) just as they practised ancestor worship in those days too. Although there are no records of burial tombs being constructed for Tai kings in those days, it

can still be assumed that the Ahom burial tomb tradition is old and may have been inherited from a common practice in ancient China.

3. Burial of the living with the dead

The practice of burying the living with the dead (especially for royalty) is said to have been prevalent amongst the Ahom just as it was with the Han Chinese people. It is mentioned in some Ahom *Buranjis* and also in some of the oral traditions of Assam. Gait, a British historian wrote, "When Pratap Singha's (AD 1603-1641) mother died, he entombed with her four elephants, ten horses and seven men" (Gait 1967, Rajkumar 1980:106). Sahabuddin Talish, a historian who accompanied the Mughals during their invasion of Assam and the Ahom kingdom wrote that dead Ahom kings, princes and high officers, were buried along with their living wives and servants (Bhuyan 1932:188). *Arunudoj*, an Assamese magazine states that along with the Ahom kings, both male and female servants, illicit sons and daughters, elephants and horses were also buried too (Neog 1983:5). The *Deodhai Asom Buranji* also records the burial of living men and women along with the king (Bhuyan 1932:144). The burial of living subjects of the king was only abandoned during the 18th century under the rule of King Rudra Singha. This old, well-documented burial tradition was prevalent among the Ahom until the eighteenth century. This tradition was probably prevalent among some Tai also and would have most likely been inherited from the same ancient Chinese tradition too.

4. Belief in Khwan

One of the main ancient traditional Tai beliefs is the belief in Khwan. Khwan may be translated as the 'essence' or 'vitality' of life. Khwan lives in different parts of the body: eyes, nose, legs, hands, head, etc. If the Khwan is weakened in a person, he or she may become ill or die. It is believed that Khwan lives in the body without causing any disturbance. Khwan ceremonies are held among the Ahom and other Tai groups of Assam. The Ahom call it *Rik Khwan* 'calling Khwan' and the Khamti (also Phake, etc.) of Assam call it *Suu Khwan* or *Hong Khwan*. In Thailand it is called *Riak Khwan* (Riak = rik). The word *Khwan* can be found in many different dialects of the Tai groups of Southeast Asia and Yunnan in China. The concept of Khwan is widespread throughout China, India and among the Sino-Tibetan tribes of Northeast India. The words used to describe it vary from tribe to tribe of course. In Assamese it is generally called *atma* or *jiwa* (or *jew*), which means 'essence of life' - and rituals are performed to call back the 'lost soul'. The Assamese and many different tribes of Northeast India, including the Ahom like the Chinese, Myanmarese, Cambodians and Thai, believe that the soul or spirit of a person, when asleep, may wander away from

the body. Such wanderings sometimes causes them to dream, and there is the danger that, if the spirit does not come back, the person may die. The ethnic Assamese, including the Tai, have a custom of keeping a pot full of water near a sleeping person. It is thought that the spirit may leave the body in the form of a lizard and that it will need to quench its thirst by drinking water from the pot and that if no water is available nearby, it may wander too far away in search of it.

The *Rik Khwan* ceremony is recorded in the Ahom *Buranji* (1228-1826). It was normally held several times during the coronation of an Ahom king, in times of danger to the kingdom, after a war or earthquakes, etc. The common people also held (and still hold) the ceremony occasionally. It was recently held in Sibsagar (the old capital of Ahom) to strengthen the Khwan of the Ahom people and to stop them from being dispirited.

Though belief in a spirit-like entity is prevalent among the tribes of Northeast India, the Ahom did not borrow it from them. Khwan is definitely an old Tai cultural tradition that dates to the 6th century originally - and also to the time of Hso Ka Phaa in the 13th century. Today, the priestly Ahom clan still performs *Rik Khwan* in the original Tai way, while other Ahom people performing Khwan in the Tai language do so in a transformed ('Assam-ised') way. It is performed annually (for the whole village) and is called *Panitula hoba* 'bringing spirit of life from water'.

Khwan belief is reflected in rituals related to rice cultivation, horticulture, sericulture, cattle raising, etc. It is believed the Khwan of rice lives in water. Before the start of wet rice cultivation, they call the rice Khwan back by holding a special ritual ceremony (*Aijong-lao Ngijong Kham* in Tai or *Panitula Hoba* or *Lakhimi ana* in Assamese). New rope is given to oxen at Songkran time in the hope of strengthening the Khwan of the animals. Offerings are given at the village shrine in the hope of gaining wellbeing for the whole village, a successful harvest and the warding off of wild animals. Fruiting plants are tied with rope at Songkran and everyone in the village ties a sacred raw thread around their wrist to bind the Khwan. Although the idea of soul or vitality of life is prevalent among other tribes too, the Ahom have not borrowed it from them.

5. Chinese cultural rudiments

Many Chinese cultural elements are to be seen in Ahom culture. In other words, characteristics found in Chinese culture are also found in Ahom culture. This may indicate that before the Ahom group left their original homeland in Muang Mao, they maintained a close relationship with China or, that at one time the same cultural traits were predominant among the Chinese, Chinese ethnic minorities, and Tai

cultures. For example, the Ahom royal insignia (now the Ahom national symbol) is a winged lion similar to that of the Zhou period of old China. Of course such types of creature are also the national symbols of Bhutan, Sikkim, and some other countries of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Having said this, the Ahom lion is very similar to the Chinese one. Such a creature (with an elongated body) is also a symbol of the Shan and the Lanna Tai of Northern Thailand. The Chinese dragon, Tao-ti, was often used by the Tai Ahom in some of their royal attire, on the royal throne and on boxes. The winged lion was carved into the royal throne, furniture, religious halls, and book stands. These carvings were common in the temples and royal palaces.

Round bamboo and palm leaves (*Livistonia jenkinsia*) are used for protection from rain. Decorated bamboo hats are woven by the Ahom and also by some ethnic groups in China. The Kam-Sui and Tai women of Central China wear this type of hat (with a pointed top). The Shan also wear a similar hat made of bamboo (palm leaves are also used occasionally). The Ahom also used such decorated hats in their marriage ceremonies (and still use them till this day). During the *Bihu* (*Songkran* /*Sangkien* /water splashing) festival the Ahom use it while performing traditional dances. Today it has become a national symbol of the state of Assam.

Various kinds of Ahom bamboo and cane artifacts are similar to those of other Tai groups from Southeast Asia and China. Even the artifacts used in paddy cultivation by the Ahom are the same as those used by other Tai. The basic Tai characteristics of material culture have not changed and the original Tai cultural characteristics are still maintained by the Ahom. The three-legged tray called *Mai hang* (or *Pan* or *Pan bera*) - which was used as a raised plate for nobles to eat from can also be seen in China, where they are known as *Pan-Shan*. The Ahom raised tray with conical cover (called *Pan* or *Sorai*) is also used by the Shan and the Chinese. This certainly seems to indicate a common origin, this being the traditions and culture of the ancient Tai people. Some such artifacts have even been found in excavated burial vaults in China proper.

Ahom architecture bears a resemblance to Chinese architecture that is common to that of the Tai people and Northern Indian, old Mon-Khmer, and Islamic cultures. In some royal architecture, this traditional design is strongly reflected. Ahom houses consist of oval roofs with an elongated octagonal shape. This type of house is seen among other Tai groups including the Tai Yai of Myanmar, Yunnan and Northern Thailand. The roof gables are incrustated with a rising projection of a snake or dragon head and the central elongated projections form a structure like a pagoda or small house. The *Rong Ghar* of Sibsagar is the best example of such a building still in existence.

There were wooden buildings used by Ahom royalty called *Kareng* (*Karong*) and *Haw lung*. From the descriptions of Ahom architecture by Sihabuddin Talis--no examples of such buildings still exist--we can imagine that building design was similar to Tai or Thai patterns of architecture. These can be found in the halls of Northern Thailand and Chinese possessing fish scale-like roofs, tall decorated posts and walls with many tiered roofs. The style and method of brick preparation prevalent among the Tai-Ahom is traditional Tai, still prevalent among the Tai of Sipsongpanna in Yunnan.

The octagonal pagoda type of house used as a religious shrine is very similar to the Taoist shrines and Buddhist pagodas of China, rather than those of the other Tais of Southeast Asia. The Ahom might have possibly brought this style from Muang Mao where, at that time, it was a common design for religious shrines. With the introduction of Buddhism, the Tai of Southeast Asia have become increasingly influenced by Buddhist architectural models rather than by their traditional ones. Today, Ahom shrines for *phii* worship (known as *Deoghar*) are popularly used by Vaishnavite Hindus - as well as other sects and by the Ahom themselves.

It could be said that such open-spaced, bare, and oval-roofed houses are representative of the original architectural style used by the Ahom, although such buildings are also used as dormitory houses by the Tibeto-Burman tribes in North East India.

6. Rituals and rites

Various rituals and rites prevalent among the Ahom may be of ancient origin. The ritual use of betel vine and areca nut by the Ahom dates back to the 6th century. Many scholars note that the use of areca nut, turmeric and eggs, originated in the Austric culture throughout Southeast Asia (up to, and including, Yunnan), prior to the Christian. It may well be an Austric influence, but it was adopted by Tais well before the 6th century. During the water splashing festival, the Ahom (along with other ethnic groups in Assam) smear turmeric and black gram paste on the body before bathing ceremonially. The ritual use of eggs, coins, special leaves, the sacrificing of blood and offerings of rice wine are all probably much older. Naturally, areca nuts and betel vine are also used by other ethnic groups in Northeast India. For the Khasi people it is customary to use these as well. The Tibeto-Burman peoples also make ritual use of areca nuts in their culture (and also chew them). Various kinds of blood sacrifice: pig, oxen, buffalo, yak, fowl and duck - accompany the rituals of these tribes.

Frog worship (to summon the rain) is prevalent among the Zhuang and Ahom and also some other Assamese ethnic groups too. Frogs are caught and ceremonially 'married' by drum beating and then freed into the river or buried in the soil. Bamboo stick fortune telling systems are also common among other Tais and ethnic groups - and used to be quite popular among the Ahom (and is still used among the priestly Ahom clan). Auguring fowl are used in sacrifice rituals by utilizing the fowl's leg bones for fortune telling. This practice is not seen among other tribes of the northeast, but it was used by the Ahom in the past. This method of fortune telling is evident among some ethnic groups in Yunnan and Myanmar and other Tai groups. It can be easily classified as part of the old Tai tradition.

Birth, death and marriage rituals among the Ahom also derive from their ancient Tai heritage. Birth and death rituals of the Ahom are almost identical to those of many Tai groups of SE Asia. These include; handing over arrow and bow to the male child, handing sickle and baskets to the female child, cutting the umbilical cord with bamboo and drying mothers at a fire place are all examples of ancient Tai cultural practices that can be found among the Ahom of today. Of course, among the different tribes of Assam and other states of Northeast India, similar customs can be seen. The Khasis also cut the umbilical cord with bamboo as do the Singpho people.

7. Kinship relations

A special pattern of kinship relation is seen among the Ahom. There were hierarchies in the past in which higher or lower status depended on the post or position someone was entrusted to: *Thao mung*, *Chao thao lung*, and *Chao frang mung*, etc. were ministerial posts while *Phukan*, *Phuke*, *Ruring*, and *Ru pak* were lower positions. This hierarchy fell into disuse when Ahom rule came to an end, although the people were still conscious of this aspect of their past heritage. There were also classifications for higher and lower families of the same (or different) clans. The older families were treated as higher families and even the youngest child from such families was to be addressed as an older family member. This system cannot be seen among any of the ethnic groups of Northeast India. It may also originate in a past Tai hierarchy that was also followed by the Ahom.

8. Ethno-biological traditions

Some Ahom traditions of using plants can easily be identified as being of Tai origin. Although similar uses are often found among the different ethnic groups of Northeast India, and even Tai groups of Yunnan and Southeast Asia, their authenticity as being part of an older tradition can be proved. The use of vegetables such as Indian Penny Wort (*Phak om noi* - *Centella asiatica*), the Colocasia species, Sacred Basil (*Im Khim* - *Ocimum* sp.), the fruit of *Solanum indicum*, black night shade (*Solanum nigrum*), *Solanum torvum*, *Spilanthes clava* (*nya blok phuk*), *Zanthoxylum nitidum* (*nam hong*) are seen not only among the Ahom, but also among other Tai groups. The planting of some plants like jack fruit, bamboo, banana, and some other fruit plants and some medicinal vegetables, some *Dioscorea* sp. - as well as the maintaining of a kitchen garden of betel nut, betel vine, palm in a homestead, is a common Tai characteristic. This practice is evident almost among all of the Tais.

The cultivation of the sticky variety of rice by all families is common and is also an old Tai tradition. The folk stories of the Tais mention the use of sticky rice. In almost every ritual steamed sticky rice is a must. The Ahom also use a herb (*Eupatorium wallichii*) as a sacred plant just as the Hindus use basil. They use its shoot to sprinkle sacred water over offerings, and at gatherings for rites and rituals. Water (and other ingredients) stirred by its shoot is considered a kind of ambrosia or medicine (*Nya plok*). It is cultivated only by the Ahom and Khamti of Assam, although there is no evidence of its cultivation by other tribes in the region; it is available in Yunnan.

Besides using plants, the Ahom are accustomed to eating pig, cow, tiger, fox, buffalo, frog and different kinds of ants and insects. This diet is also typical of other Tai groups.

9. Summary

In summary, it can be said that although the Ahom had been thought to have lost their original Tai characteristics and culture due to the influence of (and pressure from) a more dominant Hindu culture, in actuality this is not the case. The Ahom group is one of the oldest Tai groups. And they have preserved (despite geographical isolation from their original homeland) a culture/way of life consisting of some of the oldest Tai cultural practices and customs, some of which can even be traced back to ancient China. A few of these have been briefly discussed in this paper, but there are many other original Tai elements that could also be discussed. These include religious beliefs, philosophy, manners and customs, dress, sericulture, superstitions,

folklore, folk songs, music, language (many Ahom words are similar to Chinese), mythology, town planning, and food habits. There are also original hand-written manuscripts that could aid in making a more comprehensive comparative study which will help us to identify the oldest original Tai characteristics of the Ahom.

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