

Synoptic Note
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Tais of Northeast India and their Cultural Linkage with Southeast Asia

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The Tai is a race of people of Mongoloid origin who inhabits in large tracts of Southeast Asia extending from Northeast India in the west to Hainan Island in the east and from Guangxi of China in the north to Thailand in the South. The Tai people are extremely wide-spread. They live in the plains of Southern China, the valleys of Northern Vietnam; they are dominating people in Laos and Thailand; they inhabit most of the low-lying areas of Northern Myanmar, and a number of Tai groups are also found in northeast India. Thus the Tais are found in innumerable groups and sub-groups under various regional names such as *Shan, Thai, Lao, Dai Nung, Bouyi, Tai Dam, Tai Deng* and so on. In India, the Tai people live in the Northeastern states of Assam, Arunachal and Manipur who are known as *Ahom, Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake, Turung and Kabow*. The people of one culture have become split up into many sub-groups at different periods of time and each of the sub-groups has developed in its own specific setting.

Before their spreading over Southeast Asia the Tai culture appears to have been much more homogeneous than it is to-day. Because of geographical factor and political circumstances, the various Tai groups have effectively lost contact with each other. For instance, there has been no contact, direct or indirect, between the farmers of Southwestern Vietnam, Northern Thailand and Ahom farmers in Assam. Yet they share certain cultural traits which are common in nature to its smallest details. Recent study suggests that there is still a common cultural heritage among the various Tai groups scattered over Southeast Asian countries.

TAI in North-East India

Territorial Location:

In India the Tai people live in the North East. The term North-East includes seven States of India viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

These States border Bhutan and Tibet on the north, Burma and Bangladesh on the east and south-east, and the Indian State of West Bengal. Except Assam, parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Manipur, the other States are almost wholly hilly without any major plain. Hence there live generations of hill people of many ethnic groups – Naga, Mishmi, Adi, Singpho, Mizo, Khasi, Garo and many others.

The valley-dwelling Tai people are found in the three States viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. Altogether seven Tai groups are identified and recorded in these States. They are the Ahom, Aiton, Kabaw or Kabaw Shan, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung. The Ahom who form a dominant group in term of their number are concentrated in the Upper Assam Districts. The Ahoms are the first Tai people to enter the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They are an offshoot of the Shan Branch of the Tai family of Southeast Asia. Originally migrated from Southwestern Yunnan of China and passed through upper Burma(now called Myanmar) where their kinsmen established a group of small kingdoms. **Sukapha**, the founder of Ahom Dynasty, crossed the Patkai hills around 1228 A.D and established his new kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley of present Assam that lasted for six centuries from 1226 to 1826. Eventually they acquired the local name- **Ahom** from which in the course of time the Brahmaputra valley came to be known as Assam. At present majority of Ahom people live in upper Assam districts of Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji with some sprinkling in Sonitpur, Nagaon and Karbi-Anglong. Although the total number of Ahom population has not been computed separately since 1941 census, it is claimed that their number to-day exceeds 2.5 millions. The Khamtis are mainly centered in the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh. But several clusters of villages of them are found in the Narayanpur area of Lakhimpur District and Margherita-Ledo area of Tinsukia District of Assam. They number about 15 thousand in total. The Phake, earlier called Phakial by the Assamese speakers, live in several villages in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia Districts. They number about four thousand. The Aitons live in eight villages of Golaghat and Karbi Anglong Districts, and one in Namsai area of Arunachal Pradesh. They number about three thousand. The Khamyang people are now settled in several villages in the districts of Golaghat, Sivasagar and Jorhat. But one village is found near Margherita of Tinsukia District. They number about five thousand. The Turung live in several villages of Balipathar and Sarupathar areas of Golaghat and Karbi Anglong Districts. They number about four thousand. In Manipur, the Tai people are identified as Kabaw, or Shan Kabaw and their villages are known as Kabaw village. About a hundred years ago, the British authorities identified at least one Shan or Kabaw Shan village that till then spoke Shan language. This village lies about 12 km. from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. Unfortunately, today no one of that village identifies himself as

Shan or Kabaw Shan although the Meities still call them Kabaw. Hence information about Tai in Manipur is very sketchy. It may be noted that except the Ahom and the Kabow of Manipur all other Tai groups of Northeast India are Buddhist by religion.

Geographical Distribution:

In conformity with their ecological heritage and geographical background, all the Tai people in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are occupying the valleys of the tributaries of the upper course of the Brahmaputra River. They are found on the Buri Dihing, Na- Dihing, Tengapani, Lohit, Disang, Dikhow, Jahnji, Disoi and their smaller tributaries on the south bank, those of the Ranga Nadi, Subansiri, Dhal, Dikrong on the north bank. All of them are farmers cultivating flooded fields. Rice cultivation is their main profession. During the rainy season heavy rains sometimes destroy their crops. As their villages are on low-lying areas, they protect their house-compound by wide ditch all around and they cultivate banana, bamboo, and betel nut plants in plenty. This is common scenery throughout the Tai land in Southeast Asia, Vietnam and China. The Tai culture is basically an agrarian culture. The root of Tai culture is agriculture. In view of this while dealing with the cultural linkage between the Tais of Southeast and Northeast India, we will mainly deal with agricultural based traditional culture of both the Tais of Northeast India and Southeast Asia.

Cultural Linkage

1. Common Inherited Pantheon:

All the Tai people irrespective of their present place of living share a common pantheon and a common belief system even though their diffusion is very widespread in many parts of China and South East Asia and India without having even occasional contact between two groups for the last many hundred years. The common pantheon they inherit is that they came down from the Heaven long ago to a valley called Mong Ri Mong Ram (or Mong Hi Mong Ham), and were led by two royal brothers named Khun Lung and Khun Lai, who were sent down by the heavenly grandfather. It is remarkable that many gods and deities believed by the Ahom of Assam are very similar to those of the Tai Dam (Black Tai) and the Tai Deng (Red Tai), and the Tai Khao (White Tai) of Vietnam even though there has been no contact whatsoever of the Ahom with the Tai of Vietnam for several centuries and they do not know each other. The notable point is that all these Tai groups are non-Buddhists (non-Theravada), and their religious

and sacred ceremonies are performed by a class of priests uniformly called Mo' in Tai languages both in Assam and in Vietnam.

2. Khwan and Dam Belief :

Another common criterion is that all the Tai people whether they are Buddhists or non-Buddhists believe in certain vital essence they call *khwan* that resides in the body. It is believed that when the *khwan* leaves a person for some reason, the person falls ill. Therefore it should be called back by performing a ceremony called *Rik Khwan* (meaning 'the Calling back the *khwan*'). In the same way all the Tai people believe that their ancestors in the form of *dam* and *phii* live above in the sky and keep watch over them. The worship of their ancestors is an essential part of the religious life of the all the Tai people. However, the manner of propitiation of the ancestors differs from group to group due to adoption of different religions.

3. Common Language:

There is a remarkable homogeneity in the languages of the Tai groups throughout the region; and in fact, originally they had one common language, which took different appearance due to different places of habitat, contact with other non-Tai speaking people where they settled, and such other reasons. Even today, the grammatical structure, syntax and morphological characteristics remain common in all the Tai language throughout the region where they are living. No change of meaning in the basic words and word-formation is noticed by scholars except that of mutual borrowings and incorporation of local terminology. About the common Tai language as bond of *Tainess* on paper on the Ethnicity among the Tai Lue in the Sipsong Panna, Heather Peters of the University Museum of University of Pennsylvania, USA, writes "That is to say that the Tai Lue in the Sipsongpanna recognize their relationship with the Shan in Burma, with the Thai in Thailand, and with the Lao in Laos. They are aware of the similarity of their languages and that they share many cultural traits (*Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Thai Studies*, 11-13 May, 1990, Vol. II, Kunming, China).

4. Material Culture

a. Wet-Rice culture

The material cultural elements include wet-rice cultivation, Na culture (or economy) weaving and Textile, Housing Technique, food habit, a homogenous Mong-Ban organization based on their valley dwelling nature and other elements of material culture. The material culture

and life style of the different Tai groups are remarkably homogenous in character. All of them live in river valleys throughout the regions where they live. They pursue wet-rice cultivation by using single male buffalo in rain-fed low lying areas in river valleys and produce enough rice for their consumption. Thus traditional Tai-culture is intimately connected with rice-growing low land. In fact the Tai derived their culture from the rural agro-based culture. Wherever the Tai people dominate, there appears to be the cultivation of glutinous (sticky) rice. The Tai people thus appear to have spread this type of rice over mainland Southeast Asia and Northeast India.

b. Na culture and Mong- Ban organization

Though the term Na means field, it specifically applies to paddy field reclaimed from low lying marshy land to which the Ahom were well adjusted. Like any other Tais of Southeast Asia the Ahoms are valley dwelling peasantry and the cultivators of muddy soil. They therefore selected and settle on low-lying river valleys right from the beginning. Soon these were turned into flourishing settlements of the Ahom villages. Thus there grew up Ahom ethnic settlement(ban) centering paddy field(Na). Their root of culture lies in the wet-rice cultivation and valley type economy that moulded their administrative division in Mong and Ban organizations. The two units of political organizations – the Mong and Ban are the basic on which the Tai developed their state systems. The *Ban* usually means a village. In it the Na(field) points to specific life style and economy where water play the key elements.

c. Textile and Weaving Technology

Like all other Tai groups in the mainland Southeast Asian countries, Southern China, Vietnam, the Ahom and other Tai women of northeast India enjoy the proud privilege of having a very old and long tradition of weaving. The excellence and special character of textiles such as the woven dresses made from cotton, muga silk bears the imprint of Tai's textile culture among the Tais of Northeast India. Like other Tais of Southeast Asia the Tais of Northeast India are adept in making thread from muga and endi-worms. The practice of sericulture and rearing endi-worms is quite similar to the traditional Tai agricultural societies of other countries.

d. Food Habits

As is well known, the food habits are an important variable of culture. The Ahom and other Tais of Northeast India particularly in the rural areas still maintain a traditional menu of their own food like other Tais of Southeast Asia. Rice is the staple food and Nam hao (home

made rice beer) is the traditional drink. They prefer to take boiled food having no spices and directly burnt fish meat and vegetables. Sticky rice cooked in the unmatured bamboo pipe, bamboo sauce, pork, chicken, duck, fork, cocoon seeds of Endi and Muga worms, eggs of red ant are some of their typical favourite dish like other Tais of the Southeast Asian countries.

5. Pi-Nong Bond

The Pi-Nong system is prevalent universally among the Tai. Pi-Nong which means elder brother of the same blood always recognize the elder as superior to the younger in the successive generations. This is one of the basic cultural traits that has not undergone change throughout history. The Ahom like other Tai cling to their clannish behaviour based on primogeniture system in identifying the family relation where seniority and respect to elders are based not on age consideration but on familial lineage consideration.

6. Impact on Globalization and Western Culture on the Tais

There has been the influence of industrialized western culture on the Tais of both Northeast India and Southeast Asia. The global media and economy carry western clothing, music, food and ideology to Tais like any other section of the society. Many aspect of the traditional Tai culture have been heavily influenced by interaction with global culture. Naturally therefore, imported technology, trade and foreign values have radically altered the traditional way of life of the Tai. However, despite all these there is still a distinctive **Tai Stamp** to much of their traditional culture. A bulk of the rural Tai cultivators continue to use traditional values, ideas and morals to make sense of the rapidly changing circumstances that effect the setting of their way of life.

The basic traditional traits of Tai culture have survived among different Tai groups who now inhabit the South Asian countries. As they lost contact with each other since the days of their migration, there is however no longer homogeneity in the Tai culture maintained by them. Despite this fact, it may confidently be observed that there is no direct or indirect contact between the rural Tai farmers of Southeast Asia and the Northeast India. Yet, they share certain common cultural values and in many cases these are identical even to the smallest details. Agricultural ceremony, ploughing, fishing equipment, tools of handlooms, textile culture, way of life, food habits reflecting the common ancient faith of the Tais are eloquent testimony of common cultural linkage among the Tais.

Epilouge

Since the late sixties of the last century, a special kind of relationship has been developed at cultural and academic levels between the Tais of Northeast India and the Thais of Thailand. This trend has developed because of keen interest shown by the Thai scholars to undertake research project on various aspects of the Ahom and other Tais of the region and their visit to Northeast India. In this connection the names of some of the pioneering scholars like Ms. Banchab Bandhav Medha, Prof. Renno Wichasin, Chiangmai University, Prof. Chatthip Nartsupha, Chulalongkorn University, Prof. Sumitra Pitiphat, Thammasat University, Prof. Sophana Srichampa, Mahidol University, Prof. Sompong Wittayasakpan, Chiangmai University, are worth mentioning. Besides a galaxy of young Thai scholars very often make trip to the Tai inhabited areas of Northeast India in search of research materials. In fact these scholars have been working as catalytic agents of revitalization relationship between the Thai and the Tais of Northeast India. The establishment of the **Institute of Tai Studies and Research** in Upper Assam and its publication of *Indian Journal of Tai Studies* have also been contributing towards this direction in recent times. The recent visit of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to Tai inhabited areas of Upper Assam has further reinforced the cultural relationship between the Thais and the Tais of Northeast India.

