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, Urissa, Andra 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 hotchpotch. 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 Buranjí (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.