

whichever category the Ahom language is assigned by scholars, it is a genuine Tai language which was the original language of the Ahom people.

Script : The Mao people to whom the Ahom belonged had already acquired a script while they had been in southern China. However, in recent years, some scholars express certain amount of skepticism regarding the time of acquisition of the script by the Tai Mao in Yunnan. The scholars in Thailand believe that the lithic inscription of Ramkhamhaeng of 1283 A.D. is taken to be the oldest Thai scripts as it mentions that before this date there was no Thai script (*bou mi su Tai*). But the Ahom entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D. and they had a script with them. Recent studies confirm that the Ahom script and the Mong Mao scripts are the same in shape. But from the historical development of events in Yunnan, it is more likely that they had acquired the script from the Pyu in Upper Burma rather than from Pagan at the latest in the early twelfth century if not earlier. However this point now requires separate and more serious study to establish the time of adoption.



Specimen of Ahom script

All Ahom documents and literary works were compiled in this language. They continued to cultivate the Tai Mao dialect for several hundred years after their settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley. The result is that a very large literary treasure was written in it. All these constitute the literary heritage of the Ahom. The following are the main categories of literature inherited by the Ahom today.

Skill of *Buranji* or chronicles writing

Prior to the advent of the Ahom, the system of recording events was not known to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. In other words, chronicle writing was unknown to them. It was the Ahom who had introduced the system of writing chronicle in this part of India. Hence it is an original contribution of

the Ahom to Assam. This system was brought by them from Mong Mao in Yunnan. Important events occurred in the reign of each king were recorded in time sequence. The recording was done by scholar priests called *mo* (meaning learned *pundti*); and they were the custodians of all religious lore. It was a very old tradition that had come to the Tai in Yunnan. This practice was continued in the Ahom kingdom till the end. Hence, there is considerable amount of chronicles in the Ahom language. Much later in the 17th century this system was adopted in the Assamese language, and as a result *Buranjis* in Assamese language were produced. Thus the Assamese language Buranjis are of fairly recent origin. The Ahom were thus the first people to introduce this system. It is from the accounts in the Buranji the history of Assam of the Ahom period can be known. They are very original sources of the history of Assam.

Knowledge of Calendar System

The Tai had their own system of calculation of time that moves from larger unit to smaller unit that is from year to month and from month to day, and again divisions of the day. This time reckoning or calendar system by year, month and day is called *lak-ni* in Ahom and also by others. It was brought to Assam by the Ahom from their homeland and was used by them in all their writings and also in coins and inscriptions. According to this system, two sets of name one is called *me* or mother, the other is called *luk* or child is combined. The ten mothers are combined with twelve children each five time to make sixty times in the following order:

Mothers' name	Children's name
Kap	Chau
Dap	Plow
Rai	Ngi
Mong	Mao
Pluk	Si
Kat	Sao
Khut	Si-nga
Rung	Mut
Tao	San
Ka	Rao
Mit	Keo

The combination goes as below :

Kap+Chau	Kap+Mit	Kap+San	Kap+Si-nga	Kap+Si	Kap+Ngi
Dap+Plao	Dap+Keo	Dap+Rao	Dap+Mut	Dap+Sao	Dap+Mao
Rai+Ngi	Rai+Chau	Rai+Mit	Rai+San	Rai+Si-nga	Rai+Si
Mong+Mao	Mong+Plao	Mong+Keo	Mong+Rao	Mong+Mut	Mong+Sao
Plek+Si	Plek+Ngi	Plek+Chau	Plek+Mit	Plek+San	Plek+Si-nga
Kat+Sao	Kat+Mao	Kat+Plao	Kat+Keo	Kat+Rao	Kat+Mut
Khut+Si-nga	Khut+Si	Khut+Ngi	Khut+Chau	Khut+Mit	Khut+San
Rung+Mut	Rung+Sao	Rung+Mao	Rung+Plao	Rung+Keo	Rung+Rao
Tao+San	Tao+Si-nga	Tao+Si	Tao+Ngi	Tao+Chau	Tao+Mit
Ka+Rao	Ka+Mut	Ka+Sao	Ka+Mao	Ka+Plao	Ka+Rao

In this combination, from the first combined word Kap-Chau to the last combined word Ka-Rao there is a total sixty. This is the sixty or hexagon cycle. After Ka-Rao, again Kap-Chau starts. Thus this cycle moves on.

This same combination is applied to day also. In other words there is no seven days but sixty days. The sixty-day cycle also moves on. Hence in Ahom there are sixty-year cycle and sixty-day cycle.

However in case of months, there are twelve. The month is called *Duen* the names are: (J. N. Phukon & Girin Phukon, 2010:17)

Duen Ching	Month One (the word <i>ching</i> means sacred/bright)
Duen Kam	Month Two (the word <i>kam</i> means not good)
Duen Sam	Month Three
Duen Si	Month Four
Duen Ha	Month Five
Duen Ruk	Month Six
Duen Chet	Month Seven
Duen Pet	Month Eight
Duen Kao	Month Nine
Duen Sip	Month Ten
Duen Sip-et	Month Eleven
Duen Sip-song	Month Twelve

This system was followed by the Ahom throughout their rule of six centuries. Even today the learned *pundits* calculate day, year etc in *lak-ni* system. Other Tai people too followed this system. But those who had become Buddhists like in the Shan States of Burma, Laos and Thailand adopted the *Saka* (*Sakaret*) calendar in addition to the *lak-ni* system due to the influence of Buddhism. For instance, the following passage from the *Chiang Mai*

Chronicle says :

All the royal officers consecrated Prince Sam Fang Kaen, aged thirteen years, to rule, in the Ruang Sai (Sao) year, s(aka) 763, on the full-moon day of the eighth month (Duen Pet), a Friday, Tai Khut Singa day". (tr. by David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, Bangkok, 1995, p. 69).

In the above passage the ancient Tai year Rung Sai, Tai month Duen Pet (Eight Month) and Tai day Khut-Singa are retained. Thus the ancient Tai system of calendar is retained in addition to the *Saka* era. The Ahom, however, never adopted the *Saka* system. All their calculation was done in *lak-ni* system. This may be compared to a passage in the Ahom Buranji -

In *lak-ni* Tao-San in the month of Duen-Ching on the day Kap-San, the Chao-pha (king) left the city of Garhgaon and came to Mesamara. (G. C. Borua, 1930, p.155).

In the above only the *lak-ni* calendar is used; *saka* era is not used.

The day-time was divided according to activities of human being, birds like fowl, or the sun and the moon. Thus : (J. N. Phukon & Girin Phukon : op.cit)

Mid-day	Ban Ting (when the sun is just above the head)
Afternoon	La Ban (when the sun moves to the west)
Midnight	Ting Khen (when the night is at the peak)
Very early Morning	Paw Kai Khan (when the fowl calls)
Morning	Paw Ap Sup (time for washing face)
Food time	Paw Kin Ngai (time for morning food)
Evening Time	Paw Hu Khwai Ma Ban (the time for return of cow and buffalo)

Knowledge Culture of Mantras or Chants

The Ahoms inherited books containing chants or *mantras* for praying gods and ancestors. These are chanted by the Ahom priests on the occasion when *puja* is performed. Such books are still available among the priests who read when worshipping. A passage runs thus:

Chao niu ru chao kao oi! O phi oi phi ya u roi u ra. O chao phu ra ! na chao phura tek pin ba. Sa thu sa thu bu ni koi ta le. Chang ba hao pin bond. Chao seng ju ngao rang mou phu ra. Hao khot jak si khring. Te de phi oi! sang oi! Chao niu ru chao kao oi! Me phi me sang yam mou phika plu lai. Lai su lai sa ap mi dai. Man chao phra tra a long si ki ya ra ni pan rang boi chao kao oi!

Rules and Procedures for Worship

The Ahom priests also possess books containing rules and procedures for worshipping gods and spirits. In all worship these are being followed by the priests. Some such books are – Lik Tham Kai, Doi Lai, Charaideo Bar Bidhi, Um Pha, Lik Rik Khwan, Lik Chum Pha, Lik Phe. For instance, Charaideo Bar Bidhi (meaning the rules containing procedures for the great worship at Charaideo) contains the different spots of the shrines of gods in Charaideo, the period of time, months and days as well as other details such as the number of animals and birds, their colour, to be offered to each god. Even today the officiating priests observe these rules while worshipping Ahom gods.

Chicken-Bone Divination

The Ahom also possess certain books containing procedures for divination. There are several types of divination such as Ban Cheng Lung, Ban Cheng On, Phe Lung, Phe Ban, Lik Tham Kai, Lik Tin Kai Lung. The last one i.e. Lik Tin Kai Lung which means Examining of Chicken-Bone is an important method of divination. This is a very proven method of telling the outcome of action in advance. Only expert priests could examine the chicken bone by reading the particular writing given by the side of the bone sketch. In the olden days the Ahom kings almost always relied on the result of chicken-bone divination in appointing an army general in the battlefield or in attacking or declaring war against the enemy. Today only a few priests had the knowledge of examining the chicken-bone.

The chicken-bone divination is an ancient method of divining or forecasting the result of events, and once it was universal with the Tai people. Reference are found of its prevalence among the Tai groups like the Tai Lue and the Tai Mao of Yunnan's southern frontier, the Black Tai of southwestern Vietnam, the Shans of Burma, the Thai of Thailand, the Lao of Laos. (David K. Wyatt and Aroonrat Waichaneko, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Bangkok, 1994; Sao Sai Mong Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle Translated*, 1984) After the adoption of Hinayana Buddhism by the Tai of Laos, Thailand and the Shan States, they gradually gave up divination by chicken-bone. It is because there is no scope for divination by killing animals and birds. Many of these Tai have almost totally forgotten such method of divination. Further there is no separate class of priest in Hinayana Buddhist society to conduct such ceremonies. However, their neighbouring hill peoples such as the Kachin, Pale, Khamu, Palaung, Karen who have not yet turned Buddhists or Christians, still practice the method. (Leslie Milne, *The Home of an Eastern Clan*, London, 1914)

Below is given a sketch of chicken-bone by the side of which the result is predicted in writing.

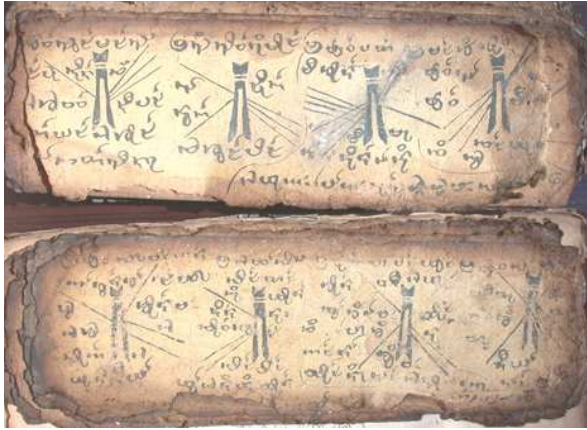


Photo showing chicken-bone divination in a Tai Ahom Manuscript



Ahom Priest Examines the chicken-bone divination

P. R. Gurdon, a British Census Commissioner witnessed a divination by chicken-bone and he gives a description of it. ‘Some Deodhai near Luckwa (in Sibsagar district) once performed the divination ceremony for the writer’s benefit. It was as follows. An altar of plantain trees and bamboos was set up (*mehenga*); plantain leaves and fruit, rice, sugar-cane, and liquor (*lau*) were brought, and a lamp. Three fowls and three fowls’ eggs were placed upon the altar. The officiating priest sprinkled holy water on the spectators with a spring

of *blak singpha* (the King flower). Prayers were then offered up to Jasingpha (the god of learning), and the fowls' necks were wrung. The flesh was scraped off the fowls' legs until the latter were quite clean, and then search was made for any small holes that existed in the bones. When the holes were found, small splinters of bamboo were inserted in them; and the bones were held up, with the bamboo splinters sticking in them, and closely compared with diagrams in a holy book which the priest had ready at hand. This book contained diagrams of all sorts of combinations of positions of splinters stuck in fowls' legs, and each meant something, the meaning appearing in verses written in the Ahom character, which were duly droned out by the Deodhai.' (*Encyclopaedia of Religion & Ethics*, Vol. I, 1959, p. 236). Such divination is till prevalent among them.

Phura-Long

Another Ahom literary knowledge is Phura-long. The Phura-long manuscripts contain the life story of certain persons. These are in fact the Jataka or stories of Buddha's previous births presented in a fascinating or attractive manner to the readers. Through these tales moral lessons are imparted on the merit of good work done in life in order to earn merit for attaining a better birth in the next life. One of the books now available with the Ahom priests is *Nemimang Phura*. It contains the life of king Nami of Varanasi long ago. During his lifetime he did many meritorious work for the benefit of human beings and animals for



which he earned merit to have been reborn in a better state. In any case, the Ahom believe that Phura or Phura has no physical structure but an invincible power that has created the great universe. So, many scholars try to establish the relation between the *Big-bang theory* of astrophysics with that of Ahom Cosmogony. The ritual of Phura-lung is mainly based on the manuscript known

as Phura-lung. There are lots of manuscripts found which are related to Phura-lung. In a very important manuscript of Tai Ahom, which is known as *Lit-lai-pein-ka-ka*, the origin of Phura-lung is given. Some other complementary manuscripts for the above mentioned manuscript are- *Lit-lai-ka-muang*, *Lit-pun-ka-muang*, *Lit-Phura-lung*, *Lit-khen-lung*. The *Lit-phura-lung* explains about the ritual of Phura-lung. Along with this manuscript two other important manuscripts based on Phura lung are- *Doi-phura* and *Ne-mi-mang-phura-ngao-cheng-bong-phra* (popular as *Ne-mi-mang-phura*). These manuscripts have been copied by more than one writer in different times. The Phra-long tradition still exists among the Ahom people particularly among the Ahom priests. It has since been turned into a form of cult, and many Ahom have become followers of this cult. The worship of Phra-long is done publicly on different occasions and even shrines are being constructed for the worship of Phra-long. A good number of Ahom identify themselves as the followers of Phra-long. (J. N. Phukon & Girin Phukon : op.cit)

Omens

The Ahom possess several different types of books on Omens. Such works speak of telling the results of dream, earthquake or unnatural events. For instance if a jackal enters the living house, it is not good for the head of the household. One such book of omen says thus:

*Sang siu lung siu phuk cham ma khao khao ban ti
mong ban bou di. Sang siu ma khao ruen ju cham
pin si mong bou di*

(If a white Tiger comes and enters the village, it is not good.

If a tiger enters the house and stays there it is not good)

All these eminently prove the literary richness of Ahom language. Although the Ahom in general do not cultivate the Ahom language, their priests or *mo'* do cultivate it both in writing and reading. Even today the priests regularly read and write the language. As a result the Ahom script that was brought by the first Ahoms still not lost. Rather it remains the same with those of Mong Mao in Yunnan.

Traditional Burial Culture

The burial mound is called *moi-dam* where the *dam* of the dead resides for eternity. Hence the burial place of the dead (*moi-dam*) is sacred to the Ahom and therefore carefully maintained. In Upper Assam one can see at some places rows of raised mound, or *moi-dam* even today. Shihabuddin Talish,

the Persian *Waqia Navis* of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb who accompanied Nawab Mir Jumla to Garhgaon, the Ahom capital in 1662 A.D saw the royal burial mounds at Charaideo, the center of Ahom royal burial. Shihab-ud-din noted the digging up of the *moi-dam* by the Mughal army thus

They bury their dead with the head towards the East and feet towards the West. The chiefs erect funeral vaults for their dead, kill the women and servants of the deceased, and put necessities, etc., for several years, viz. elephants, gold and silver vessels, carpets, clothes, and food, into the vaults. They fix the head of the corpse rigidly with poles, and put a lamp with plenty of oil and a *mash'allchi* [torchbearer] alive into the vault, to look after the lamp. Ten such vaults were opened by order of the Nawab, and property worth about 90,000 Rupees was recovered. In one vault in which the wife of a Rajah about 80 years ago had been buried, a golden *pandan* was found, and the *pan* in it was still fresh." (*Fathiya-I-Ibriya*, translated by H. Blochmann and published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1872, p. 82).

The royal graves were carefully maintained and were considered sacred. 'It was the custom of my ancestors', says Purandar Singh, the last Ahom king, 'from the time of Chukapha Rajah not to burn their dead but to bury them, and when any royal person died all the ornaments and golden plates to the value of from 20,000 to 25,000 rupees were buried with him, and the body was buried at Churry Deo and mound raised over it. It was called a moidam', (Swargadeo Purandar Singha's complaint against the Assam Company for cultivating tea over the moidams at Charaideo in February, 1840. Vide Letter No 67 of April 1840 to the Political Secretary to the Governor-General by Francis Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor-General in the Northeast at Guwahati). After Hinduisation the ashes and bones were buried and mound was raised over it. King Kamaleswar Singha (1810-15) was buried at Charaideo which is recorded in the chronicle thus :

The dead body of the deceased king was conveyed to Mulberry garden (Charaideo) where it was burnt there. A mound was raised upon the grave. All the Ahom including the Deodhai, Mohan and Bailing priests were entertained with a grand feast by killing buffaloes and dogs.' (*Ahom Buranji*, p. 374-75).

However even today there are many Ahom families in Upper Assam who bury their dead instead of cremation. As the burial of the dead is an ancient Tai custom and was uniformly followed by all the Tai in ancient time before many of them became Buddhist, the Ahom followed the customs. But no one knows exactly when and from where this custom was acquired by the ancient Tai. Some might think that this was adopted from the Chinese as the Chinese burial method and the raising of the tumuli over the grave was similar to that of the Ahom as can be seen at Charaideo, the burial centre of the Ahom royalty. But this custom was in vogue among them before their migration to the Brahmaputra Valley in the early thirteenth century. In other words, they brought this custom with them from China's southwestern Yunnan which was their homeland from where they came. In their new land too they continued this custom of burial as per tradition. Their burial custom was associated with their belief in life after death. The Tai belief is that every human being possesses two main souls. After death, one remains with the body; the other goes to the sky above and becomes a god or spirit. As such the dead is not cremated but buried in such a way so that the soul that goes with the body should live in it. Hence the dead body was put in a coffin and the coffin was placed inside a strong structure of most durable wood in such a way that it does not decay. For this purpose a mound is raised over the structure that acts like a deep freezer for a long time. The mound is called moidam and the royal burial mounds are called Charaideo and the royal moidams are seen at Charaideo today.



Royal moidam at Charaideo

These are original Ahom heritage that are still revered by the people and arouse curiosity of the onlookers. About three years back, a big *moidam* was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India and discovered 30 feet below earth a dome built of brick and mortar supported by stone. Inside the dome there is a square chamber where the dead body of the king was kept.

The Ahoms who have not become Hindu, and who still follow their traditional beliefs and practices, bury their dead and raise earthen tumuli over it. This definitely is an Ahom Traditional Culture still persisting among them.

Manners and Etiquettes : The Ahom have possessed from their ancestors many good manners, behaviour and other protocols that lead to create balanced and harmonious life both in the family and in the society. These are being taught through action rather than words. Right from the time a person, whether a boy or a girl attains the age of understanding, he or she learns such conduct from the elders, father, mother, brothers, sisters or others, and try to imitate such etiquettes. As a result, such manners become a part of their daily life. When one visits an Ahom family, one can easily notice it.

In olden days such manners were meticulously observed as these were considered as hall mark of a family of good standing and reputation. During the time of the Ahom kings such manners were strictly observed as a part of the court etiquettes, and any negligence was considered disobedience. All forms of protocols, some were royal proclamations, had been observed with great care. This created an orderly way of social behaviour in the upper level of society particularly among the nobles and officials of all ranks. In course of time such manners percolated to the lower order of the society.

Thus the long six hundred years of Ahom rule left a legacy of mannerism that still persists in the Assamese society more so in the Ahom society. Such manners may include manners observed by members of the family, members of a clan, manners observed towards other people, manners observed by the villagers towards each other, and protocol observed towards dignitaries, etc.

A few instances may be cited. In the family, a senior member must receive priority over a junior member. The junior should always address the senior using the appropriate term and with due respect. The junior should not sit at a higher level than the senior; rather the junior should take his seat at a lower level than the senior one. While sitting in groups, the seniormost would get the first place, followed by his immediate junior. While taking food, the juniors should not start eating before the senior starts. In case of clan members, the seniority is counted not by age but by family lineage. The members of the senior branch would receive respect from the members of the junior branch.

Even though a member of the junior branch might be older in age he must address the member of the senior branch with respect using appropriate terms. The junior members must not interfere in any way while talking or in conversation. While serving food the ladies must observe certain etiquettes. At the village level, villagers also follow the same seniority and juniority status. The eldest member of the village must get preference to others, and the seniority order is followed. People should not point their feet towards others, rather the feet should be kept towards back or concealed while sitting. While in rows the seniors take front space, while juniors back space. All these still form part of the daily life of the Ahom people.

Ahom custom and etiquettes are better exhibited in their day to day relationship within the family and with the fellow members of the community. A visiting guest is always given due respect and honour. This is noticed right from the time of arrival at the gate. A guest who comes announced is received at the gate by the head of the family or by an elderly lady and is escorted to the sitting room.

In Lesaihabi, Laicheng and Japihojia, Chuwaria, Jurkata Chomuah and Dhenukhana Hilaidari villages, guests are invariably offered at first with areca nut and betel leaves and other condiments on a tray called *Bota*. Thereafter tea is offered not in a cup but on a bell metal bowl called *Bati*. If the guest happens to be more respectable then tea is offered in *Ban Bati* (a kind of *bowl* with a stand). However, in some families, if the guest happens to be an Ahom, he is offered *Nam-lao* or rice beer. All etiquettes are observed while offering the drink. Some items of food like meat or egg or bamboo shoots fried with fish is given with *Nam-lao*. These are therefore part of traditional knowledge culture of the Ahom.

From the above discussion it may be observed that during the pre-colonial days the Tai Ahom developed and maintained its socio-religious culture in a variety of ways, and acquired certain knowledge of its own which had been transmitted to their descendants and successors. These colourful knowledge culture of the Ahom may also be considered as a powerful instrument for maintaining their distinct identity. It is needless to mention that under the pressure of modernization and technological development many such traditional knowledge culture is on the wane and some of them are even on the way to extinction. The disappearance of any such rare knowledge culture is to be considered unfortunate for the society at large. The knowledge system of the Tai Ahom should be accompanied by scientific experiments to make them relevant to the present time. It needs serious research exercise on these knowledge cultures.

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