

### 3. Therapeutic Rituals of the Tai Khamyangs of Assam

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#### **Abstract**

*North Eastern India has an identity of its own, quite distinct and separate from the mainstream national identity. The entire region is rich in its history, and culture. One of the basic features and common aspect of the Northeastern societies and communities is the prevalence and practice of indigenous practices. Different clans, tribes and communities practice their native indigenous practices and rituals and they have evolved over the years with them. Assam is no exception either. It is home to people belonging to different groups and ethnicities. One such group is the Tai Khamyang population of Assam. They are a microscopic minority and belong to the Tai race. They are devout Theravada Buddhists. Many of their indigenous rituals are on the verge of extinction, yet they practice certain indigenous rituals particularly the therapeutic ones. The paper aims to find out the traces of indigenous rituals mainly focusing on the therapeutic rituals.*

**Keywords:** *Therapeutic, Rituals, Tai Khamyang.*

#### **Introduction**

North East India is home to people belonging to different races and ethnicities. About one-third of the total number of listed tribes for India is to be found in this region (Kar, 2004). Though most of the tribes have adopted significant religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, they also follow their indigenous religion. Meanwhile, most of the indigenous rituals of tribes are either extinct or on the verge of extinction. The Tai Khamyangs of Assam is no exception either. One of the most important traditions among the Tai Khamyangs of Assam is therapeutic rituals during illness and ward off bad omens. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the indigenous traditions of Tai Khamyang of Assam with particular reference to the Therapeutic rituals.

## Objective

To study the therapeutic rituals of the Tai Khamyangs of Assam and its relevance in the present time.

## Methodology

Empirical data has been collected from Chalapather and Rohon Shyam Gaon (villages) in Assam's Charaideo district. The data is principally collected by the accepted social sciences method like observation, interview, and informal chatting. Secondary data, such as books and magazines, have also been consulted.

## About the studied population

The Tai Khamyangs of Assam belongs to the more significant Tai race. The Tai people are scattered living in different parts in China, Burma, South East Asia and Assam. "The habitat of the Tai-group of people extends from Assam in the West to Kwansi and Hainan in the East, from the interior of Yunan in the north of southernmost extremity of Thailand in the South (Grierson, 1996)." The migration of the Tai Khamyang people to Assam can be traced back to the first Ahom king Sukapha. According to the Buranjis, the Khamyangs are the first among the Man-Tais who had advented to Assam. But initially, they did not come to Assam for permanent settlement. After Chaolung Sukapha's departure from Mung Mao, its king Chaolung Sukanpha (Sukapha's brother) despatched a group of the Khamyangs to Assam to find Sukapha's whereabouts. The Tai Khamyangs was sometimes also referred to as 'Nora' in the past. After crossing the Patkai hills, the Khamyangs met Sukapha in 1236 AD and explained their purpose of coming. Sukapha requested them to settle on the border to maintain cordial relations between the two kingdoms. Hence, from then on, the Khamyangs began to live on the foothills of the Patkai range. After living five centuries at Patkai foothills, the Khamyangs had to migrate permanently to Assam to get rid of the attacks of the Kachins (Singphos). Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha (1751-69 AD) was the Assam king during that period. During the rule of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha(1780-1795), who gave them land grants in Dholi in Jorhat district, the Tai Khamyangs finally started settling in Assam. At present, 10 Tai Khamyang villages are scattered all over Assam in Jorhat, Charaideo, Golaghat and Tinsukia, with a population of about 3500.

Tai Khamyang language is a Tai-Kadai language spoken by only a few speakers in some districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. According to SIL Ethnologue, it is spoken by about 50 speakers in Pawaoimukh village of the Margherita subdivision. However, the number of fluent speakers is less

than ten. The researcher came across only two fluent speakers of Tai- Khamyang language, one each in Chalapather and Rohon Shyam Gaon. Tai Khamyang has been assigned the 'dying 'status on the Ethnologue EGIDS scale. (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption scale). The dominant language spoken by the Tai Khamyang's of Assam is Assamese. (Centre for Endangered Languages, Tezpur University).

The Tai Khamyangs wear neat and straightforward dresses. Coarse white cotton garments are more familiar with them. Tai Khamyang people wear white colored long sleeve shirts. As a bottom garment, men have once borrowed the Assamese white loincloth but coming back in contact with their brethren; they again started wearing the sarong of the chequered pattern. The women wear a full black-coloured sarong on their chest called 'Pha-Sin' and a red belt called 'Sai-Kap' is worn over it. Perhaps they were influenced by Buddhist culture and both men and women began to cover their bodies with a white shawl called 'Pha-Mai'. Additionally, the women wear a white or green piece of cloth over the 'Pha-Sin' called 'Lang-Wat'. Some Tais in Assam considers 'langwat' as non-indigenous to Tai people. Both Tai Khamyang men and women carry a handbag called 'Thoong'. The women folk used a silver hairpin made in beautiful flower designs called 'kat kaw'. Terweil mentioned that Khamyangs also used a wooden hairpin. As an earring, Khamyang women used to wear cylindrical ear logs of bright amber pieces and massive silver bangles.

Though the Khamyangs profess Buddhism, religion does not stand in their way of consumption of non-vegetarian food. Drinking is not prohibited though it is not considered good also. Domestication of cattle for milk is seen though not to a great extent. Fish is a delicacy and they consume pork as well. Rice is the staple food of the Khamyangs. Traditional food items include steamed rice(Khao Hai), Sour Fish(Pa Som), Sour Meat(Lo Som), Smoked Fermented fish(Pa Nao) and smoked meat(Lo Heng). The specialty of all the meat and fish dishes mentioned above is that they can be preserved for many days. Besides the items as mentioned above, the Khamyangs also take different types of vegetables and herbs. They generally prefer to have a boiled or steamed preparation with locally available spices and herbs.

A traditional Tai Khamyang house is a wooden or bamboo structure that rose on strong pillars. The floors and walls are made of bamboo, or wooden planks depended on the people's economic conditions. The traditional houses are characterized by thatched roofs, which are made of locally

available leaves. The house is divided as 'huen yong' or 'the main house' and the 'huen tang khao' or 'the kitchen'.

The Khamyang society is patriarchal, where the eldest male member is the head of the family and commands respect from them. Women are given due respect in society, and they play an important role in social and religious life. Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Tai Khamyangs of Assam yet many people are engaged in government and private jobs and business.

### **Religion**

Buddhism- The Tai Khamyangs practice Theravada Buddhism. Sources suggest that Buddhism links to Tai people of 7th and 8th centuries in the upper southern part of Yunnan. Puspa Gogoi suggests that in medieval time, the Tai kingdom of Nanchao in Yunnan province of China was influenced by a kind of old Buddhism. Mung Mao Long kingdom also had political and cultural relationships with Nanchao kingdom (Gogoi, 2010). But, it was after king Anawratha's conquest of the old Mon capital of Thaton in 1057 that Theravada Buddhism grew in Myanmar. Harvey (1925) suggests that King Anawratha marched to Thaton and brought back Buddhist scriptures to Pagan along with monks and artisans. Sai Kam Mong (2004: 67) further states that since the 11th century Burmese adopted Buddhism, the Tai's also must have been influenced by Buddhism. Burmese king Bayinnaung sent Buddhist monks to Tai states and the Tai rulers were ordered to follow these monks. From these sources, we can come to the point that Tai people adopted Buddhism many centuries ago. They celebrate all the major Buddhist festivals like Buddha Purnima, Poi Sangken, Civara Dana festival etc.

### **Indigenous Religion of the Tai Khamyangs of Assam**

The indigenous religion is a Tai folk religion where spirits of natural phenomena and ancestors are worshipped. They believe that every human being after death becomes Phi or spirit and thus protect their family and house from misfortunes and calamities. They believe in the existence of 'Mung Phi' or the place of spirits and Lenglon is considered to be the lord of this place. Along with this they believe in the spirits of natural phenomena like earth, hills, rivers, forests as well as cities, villages, house, paddy fields etc. They believe that every human being possesses 'Khon' or a unit of vitality and the country, town, village, etc. This folk religion is pantheistic and polytheistic, and their practice involves Shamans or Chow Mo. It is, however, difficult to trace back the initial time of development of this belief system. But numerous sources throw lights to this religion and its antiquity could be

pushed back at least 80 years back to Christian era when Tai people were establishing their famous Moung Mao Long kingdom in Yunan Province of China. The history book of Assamese Tai mentions that Khunlung and Khunlai were sent down to earth by the celestial being Lenglon. Since that time, Lenglon was known to Tai people as a lord of Moung Phi and still he is worshipped by Assamese Tai people.

Within the Tai folk religion, spirits can be regarded as tutelary deities. Specific deities like Lenglon, Yachingpha, Puchingpha, Chow Laam etc. are worshipped. Image or idol worshipped are absent in their belief system and certain animist practices like blood sacrifices are part of the rituals. Singh (2013) mentioned that while performing their traditional ceremonies, the Tai people never involve the Buddhist monk. Chow Mo, the conventional priest, performs such ceremony in presence of the villagers. The traditional Tai chants, mostly of pre-Buddhist age, are available in manuscripts. These manuscripts are not kept in the monastery. They are kept by the village priests or Chow Mo in their respective houses.

House and ancestor spirits- The Tai Khamyang believe that every house has spirits and called it 'Phi Houn'. The house spirit resides in Sao Phi Lam or the most important post of the house. They believe that when elderly members die, they become spirits and protect the home from calamities and misfortunes. Tai people think that the house spirits are the same as their ancestors. Terwiel (1981) mentions that Tai Khamyang sacrifice for the Phi Houn usually consisted of fowls and these were presented to the house gods at the Sao Phi Lam. There was no fixed time for such offerings. The householder himself could hold the ceremony and no outside ritual specialist would have to be invited.

Till date Tai Khamyang believe in ancestral spirits in houses. They worship the house and ancestor spirits during 'Kin Khao Mau' or 'ceremony of eating new rice', after the Sangken festival (a Tai Buddhist festival) and whenever necessary. But vast changes and modifications took place in their rituals. At present, they make an offering of eatable items but they totally abandon animal slaughter. Cooked food basically vegetarian, fruits, flowers are offered. The Tai Khamyang, after the Sangken festival in their respective houses with their all family members, clean the house post by pouring water on it and offer prayers with cooked food, flowers and incense sticks.

**Khon-** Tai Khamyang people believe that every human being has 120 khwans in their body and when a khon leaves the body the person may fall sick. Depending on a patient's case, one of two ceremonies, 'Soon Khon' (when khon is sought out and placated) and 'Hong Khon' (calling back the Khwan) is performed. The later one is an elaborate ritual involving killing a fowl, the involvement of a shaman, reading of Khon ceremony book and prayer of a spirit called 'Pu Ching Pha'. However, many villages have abandoned this ceremony and only 'Soon Khon' ceremony is still practiced.

According to Buragohain (2014), besides Khon for human there also exist Khon for objects and animals. The most important and common in Tai cultures is 'Khon Khao' or the 'Khon of rice'. In the astrological Sangken calendar which is a Tai Buddhist culture, information of rituals and worshipping of Nang Khon Khao or Spirit of rice are provided. In olden days Nang Khon Khao was worshipped by offering traditional rice wine and raw rice cakes. Due to influence of Buddhism, rice wine is not offered anymore. Buddhist teachings have influenced and changed the beliefs and practices of this ceremony.

This soul is ceremoniously propitiated by the people in Paush or Magh (Dec-Jan or Jan -Feb). The female family member always invites the rice's soul because they believe that the Khon that resides in rice is a female deity. All of them think that the soul of the rice dwells in the last sheaf of the paddy. So, the last sheaf of the paddy is brought from the field to the granary in a manner their custom requires it. According to this custom, the last sheaf of paddy is left in the field and tied in a bundle. On an auspicious day, an elderly lady of the family goes to the field with a sickle and a new handwoven towel. Meanwhile, two plantain saplings are erected near the door of the granary. Inside the granary, a large bamboo plate is kept with such articles as powdered rice cakes and a pot of water for welcoming the Khon of rice.

### **Therapeutic Rituals**

Therapeutic rituals are common among the different tribes and indigenous groups of North East India. Therapeutic rituals are healing rituals. Therapy rituals are quite varied because of the various causes of illness. They may include removal of objects from the body, exorcism, soul retrieval and so forth. The Tai Khamyangs also practice many therapeutic rituals during illness and ward off bad omens. However, many of such rituals are either extinct or on the verge of extinction. The following are some of the therapeutic rituals generally performed by the Tai Khamyangs of Assam.

**'Aang'** - One of the least known practices amongst the Tai Khamyang was the making of therapeutic tattoos. Tai people are generally known in South East Asia for the art of making tattoos on their bodies. This tradition was carried by the Tai Khamyangs and was made for healing illness. The Tai people called it 'Aang' and in olden days these were made for victory in war and to cure illness. Specialists were called from Burma for this practice. However, the practice of making tattoos has become extinct. The researcher could not find a single person with a therapeutic tattoo in the two surveyed villages, i.e. Chalapather and Rohon Shyam Gaon of Charaideo district of Assam.

**'Khonlik' or 'Ayush Tula' ritual-**The position of women is held in high esteem in the Tai Khamyang society. They play a major role in religious as well as social life. There are some rituals and ceremonies specifically attached to the womenfolk. One of such rituals is 'Khonlik' (Ayush Tula). If a person falls sick for a long time without any specific reason, then the elderly women are invited to perform the ritual and ward off any bad omen. They also play a major role in the child purification rituals after a child is born. There are not many restrictions bestowed upon the Tai Khamyang women, and they enjoy considerable freedom and liberty. The ritual is performed with the help of a loom, thread, a 'Jakoi' or an instrument for catching fish, a boiled egg and boiled rice wrapped in leaf. As mentioned earlier, the ritual is performed by elderly women of the village. Dew people are sent with the 'Jakoi' to catch fish or a prey. When the people return, the women ask them what have they brought, to which they reply thrice that they have brought some fish or fowl. After that all the elderly women pray to the deity 'Phi Lam'. The thread from the loom is taken and tied on the wrists of everybody present in the ritual. After that, the egg yolk is taken from the boiled egg and smeared on the sick person's body from forehead to arms, knees, etc. Finally, the cooked rice wrapped in the leaf is taken out and fed to the patient. The ritual ends with gifts being given to the elderly women. The women leave giving blessings to the patient. Though this practice is also going into oblivion yet it is been practiced now and then.

### **Sacrificial practices-**

There were several sacrificial rituals amongst Tai Khamyangs and such practices were held to pay homage to the spirits in case of any illness or ward off any bad omen. The most important sacrificial ritual about which information could be obtained was held for Phi Moug or the nation's spirit. This ceremony was the most elaborate Tai sacrifice during which buffalo, a pig, and fowls were sacrificed.



The Tai Khamyang people practiced it on April or sometimes twice in a year. Restrictions of women in this ceremony and declaration of 'Wan Kam' (villagers could not go out and outsiders could not come in) were common amongst Assamese Tai. However, regarding the time when a sacrificial ritual for 'Phii Mueang' was last performed, there are variations amongst different villages. One of the main reasons for its discontinuation is the strong influence of Buddhism in the Tai Khamyang society as Buddhism preaches non-violence. In place of sacrificing animals, flowers and candles are presented to the spirits these days.

### Conclusion

The indigenous rituals and practices of the Tai Khamyangs of Assam slowly went into oblivion due to the influence in due course of time after they left their homeland and started settling permanently in Assam in and around the 18th century. One of the important factors responsible for it was the strong influence of Buddhism in their socio-religious life. Besides, assimilation with the native populace, modernization, and acculturation is also some of the factors leading to the weakening of indigenous beliefs and practices. However, certain traits of the indigenous religion, beliefs and practices are still visible in some of the customs and rituals of the Tai Khamyangs related to birth, housing and ancestor worship. Some of the therapeutic traditions like the 'Sacrificial rituals' and tattoo making or 'Aang' are already extinct. Sacrificial practices were abandoned gradually as the Tai Khamyangs adopted Buddhism. 'Aang' or tattoo making became extinct because of assimilation. Most of the Tai Khamyang people started residing with the Assamese caste Hindus and tattoo making is not prevalent among them. However, the ritual of 'Khonlik' or Ayush Tula is still prevalent in some of the Tai Khamyang villages of Assam.

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