CHAPTER - 1

ORIGIN OF THE TAI AHOM PEOPLE
1.00 ORIGIN OF THE TAI AHOM PEOPLE

Assam has been a meeting ground of various ethnic groups with their social structure and cultural heritage from time immemorial and they entered to this part of the country at different intervals by the various routes with their racial origin and have contributed their respective share in forming the physique of the Assamese race, language, religion and culture in the process. The Tai Ahoms are one of them, but this ‘Ahom’ is a local name given to the Tai group who in the early part of thirteenth century entered the Brahmaputra valley by crossing the Patkai range and established the glorious ‘Ahom dynasty’ under the leadership of the Tai prince Chao lung Siu Ka Pha.

The Tai Ahom’s advent to this part of the country is a fact of history. They brought with them a well developed writing system in the form of manuscripts on history, divination, prognostics, astrology and astronomy, stories, various rituals of worship of the gods and goddesses and on religion etc. as well as procedures for performing sacrifice.

According to Dr. J.N Phukan, “Both oral tradition and written literature bear unmistakable evidence that the first Ahom Chao lung Siu Ka Pha and his Tai followers when they came from Moung Mao (at present within the Dehong Dai Singpho Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province of Peoples Republic of China) in 1215 A.D. brought with them a well developed writing system which they carried with them various literary that included Chronicles, book of Divination, Prognostics, calculation of dates, month, years, procedures for performing sacrifice, khwan calling, incantation, Phralung” (Phukan 2006:1).

The Tai Ahom is a branch of the Tai race. The Tai race, in its different branches, is widely spreaded in the Indo-Chinese peninsula and beyond. The Tais are found today, as they have been for hundreds and thousands of years, from Assam to the South China Province of Yunnan, from Bangkok to Vietnam (Gohain 2007:46). They are variously known as Tai, Htai, Pai-i, Moi, Moung, Tho or do, Khamti as well as by their local names such as the Shan, Thai, Siam, Lao, Dai, Nung Bouyei, Dong etc. Tai speaking peoples form the most numerous and most widely spread peoples in
Mainland South East Asia. The Ahoms are the western most of these Tais (Terwiel 2005:52). The Tais are now be found in Northern Vietnam, Chinese Province of Yunnan, Laos, Thailand, Northern Myanmar, North East India etc. The Tai families of North-East India are known as the Tai Ahom, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamti, Tai-Turung, Tai-Aiton and Tai-Kham yang. In Thailand the Tais are known today as the Thai, Lue, Nua, Phuthan, Youon, Ya; in Myanmar as the Shan, Khuen, Nua, Mao; in Laos as the Lao, Lue, Nua, Phutai, Yuon, Dam, Deng, Zang (Giay), Khao, Phuon, Sek; in China (PRC) as Dai, Lue, Nua, Mao, Ya, La, Zhuang, Bui, Kam (Dong), Mulao, Meonam, Shui, Li; in Vietnam as Tay, Dam, Nua, Khao, Lao, Lue, Deng, Giay, Nong, Bouy, Thuy; in Indonesia as Tai Kadai.

1.01 MEANING OF ‘TAI’

The word ‘Tai’ as used in the Tai Ahom chronicles means to ‘an Ahom’, ‘boarder’, ‘near’, ‘a companion’ (Barua & Deodhai Phukan 1964:50). B.J. Terwiel & Ranoo Wichasin have given the meaning of Tai as ‘to die’ in their book ‘Tai Ahoms and the Stars’ (Terwiel & Wichasin 1992:150). To some scholars the anthonym Tai appeared late in history. In the tradition of Thailand or Siam the word ‘Thai’ or ‘Tai’ has its own history. According to Bishop Pallegoix, in the 7th Century A.D. a Tai Prince, named Phra Ruang, who was the ruler of Sangkalok, a principality of Zimme/ (Chiengmai) as well as a tributary Chief under Cambodia, which was at that time in South Indo-China. In 638 A.D. he rebelled against the ruler of Zimme/ and seized that State over throwing the suzerainty of Cambodia. He proclaimed himself the Sovereign of Zimme/… On the basis of this Bishop Pallegoix asserts that after Phra Ruang had freed the country from the Khmers, the Sajan took the name of Thai, which signifies ‘free’ or ‘liberated ones’ (Gogoi 1968:4).

The ‘Tai’ is an ancient Chinese word which ordinarily means ‘great’. Nai Likhit Hoontrakul in his massive work 'The Historical Records of the Siamese-Chinese Relation' gives the meaning of the term ‘Tai’ as a high stage or power or a respectable and independent personage in address (Hoontrakul 1953:16). To him ‘Tai’ is an ancient official title giving certain rights and privileges to its holder, i.e. the title of Tai or Tai-Tai which signifies the meaning of full right to levy duties on the
waterways (Hoontrakul 1953:13). From this, we can assume that the word ‘Tai’ for the first time appeared in Chinese history in Shan-Si and Ho-nan (2515 BC). The Tai-Tai was a hereditary title of rank enjoyed by the highest aristocracy in ancient China and was regarded as ‘the first Tai’, which led to many subsequent Tai titles, without the heritable rights, but accompanied by its meaning of honour, created in subsequent periods, such as – Choung Tai (Minister), Chi-Tai (Viceroy), Tung-Tai (under-Secretary of State), Pu-Tai (Provincial Governor), Git-Tai (Provincial Chancellor), Pan-Tai (Provincial Financier), Tien-Tai (Provincial Commander-in-Chief), and Tao-Tai (Regional Governor) (Hoontrakul 1953:14-15).

The Tai Ahom chronicles maintain another view that the Tais are heavenly or heaven born (Barua 1930:18). Thus ‘Tai’ would have meant ‘heaven-born’ or heavenly. Whatsoever, this term signifies a lot to its holder. The Tais are one of the Mongoloid groups and have been spreading over a vast tract of South-East Asia and North-East India.

1.02 ORIGIN OF THE TAI PEOPLE

Regarding the origin of the Tai people, different chronicles and scholars have maintained different thoughts. The prominent Western Indologist Max Muller holds the view that the original seat of the Tai or Siamese branch of the Indo-Chinese people, called Shan by the Burmese, was in central Asia and it was from that area that these people were the first to migrate towards the South and settled along the rivers Mekong, Menam, Irrawaddy and Brahmaputra (Phayre 1883:6-7). Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi holds that the Tais were the descendants of the Huang-Ti Dynasty and their original homeland probably was in Huang-Ho valley (Gogoi 1968:32). H.G. Quaritch Wales holds that the Tais were the early Mongolian nomads and they gave up their nomadic habits during the period of their stay in Southern China (Wales 1931:17-315). J.N. Cushing holds that the original home of the Tais is Southern China (Cushing 1887:32). Wolfram Eberherd holds that the original homeland of the Tais must be traced in the basins of the Yang-tze river because Tais are always associated with wet rice agriculture with the techniques of transplantation of seedlings (Eberherd 1968). Dr. Grierson viewed that the original home of the Tai people was in North-
Western China between the upper courses of the Yang-tze and the Huang-Ho (Grierson 1966). As per the traditional view, during the ancient prehistoric period China was known as Chung-Kuo (the Middle Kingdom) and was ruled by three kings (San-Hwang), five emperors (Wu-Ti) and their three dynasties (San-Tai) namely Hsia, Shang and Chao respectively (Gogoi 2004:60 & Gohain1999:8). The Tai people are the descendants of the families of San-Hwang, Wu-Ti and their San-Tai in Chung Kuo empire during the prehistoric period of the world... Chung Kuo was a hereditary monarchical Empire. This monarchical system produced three Tai dynasties namely Hsia, Shang and Chao. The fourth emperor Yao named eight clans of the San-Hwang and Wu-Ti as Tai and divided the Chung-Kuo Empire into eight provinces calling each of them also as Tai (Province) and retained the central province in the middle to the emperor in the name of Tien. Prof. Shoot Hill in 'History of China' holds the same view that the descendants of these three dynasties consists of the Tai race. It may be described as the ancient history of Tai race.

The traditional view about the origin of the Tais is that the Tais are the original monarchs and emperors of China. But the modern view rejects the traditional view as it was based on tribal legends and thin linguistic evidence. The modern view is that the original homeland of the Tais is the South-East coastal of China. Yet from the above speculations of different scholars it can be said that the South-East Asia and Southern China can be the origin homeland of the Tai people. And if the Tai habitats of the present times are followed minutely it will be clearly found that they had spread out like a vast ocean in the Asiatic hemisphere and are not Mongolean. Because of their wet rice agriculture their habitation must be there in the river valleys.

The Tai Ahom chronicles more evidently traces the origin of the Tais. Among the ancient myths of Ahom chronicles the story of Khun Lung and Khun Lai is very much significant for its information towards the origin of the Tais and to the religion of the Tai Ahoms. The places as recorded in the myth are actually found there in South- East Asia. According to this myth, Khun Lung and Khun Lai were two princes of the heavenly kingdom of Thenkhem sent down by Lengdon, the Lord of heaven by a golden ladder along with a body of chiefs and counsellors. Khun Lung and Khun Lai came down by the golden ladder from heaven to the earth and landed up in Mung ri mung ram which literally mean a vast deserted vacant country. Because the country
was found deserted and without any government; so, they called it Mung Ri Mung Ram (Mung Ri – country inhabited, Mung Ram – country deserted). It is called Mong-Hi Mong-Ham by the Shan. Mung Ri Mung Ram according to the legend, lies at the foot hill of the heavenly kingdom. Khun Lung and Khun Lai found to their great satisfaction that the people of the neighbouring districts, probably mostly Tai, assembled there and warmly welcomed them (Barua 1930:15).

The Hsen-Wi Chronicle maintains that the location of Mong-Ri Mong-Ram (Shan: Mong-Hi Mong-Ham) on the bank of the Mekong to the south east of the Northern Shan States (Hsen Wi Chronicle 1900:231) and it was undoubtedly a part of the ancient Tai state of Hsip Hsawng-Pan-Na (Keng-Hung) which was situated on the western bank of the Mekong river and which comprised a part of the southern territory of Yunnan, a part of the eastern Shan States and a part of northern Siam with Chieng-Sen, Chieng-Rai and Muang-Fang (Hoontrakul 1953:99-100). According to W.W. Cochrane, four Shan records agree in fixing the location on the Me-hkawang; two of them say that it was on the border of Chieng-Mai; and one is more explicit and says distinctly that it comprised of Mong-lu, Mong-yon, Mong-Kang and Mong-hpa (Cochrane 1912:487-488).

From the above speculations of the myth it can be assumed that the Tais originally were in the tract comprising of southern territory of Yunnan, Shan States and a part of northern Siam. And the modern view about the origin of the Tais which holds that the South-east coastal of China is the homeland of the Tais is found to be convincing and so is only acceptable.

Agrarian culture particularly rice cultivation is one of the basic features of the Tai habitation. The fertile basins of rivers are suitable for rice cultivation. Hence, Irrawady, Mekong, Shweli, Salween river valleys are important inhabitations of the Tais of South East Asia.

According to G.A. Grierson, the Tai or Sham languages all belongs to the Siamese-Chinese family of the Indo-Chinese forms of speech (Grierson 1904:263). But the linguists have interpreted the Tais and their language from a new standpoint. The language spoken by the Tais has been included in the group of Austro Tai by the American linguist Paul K. Benedict. He showed that the Tai language has no genetic
linkage with the Chinese language. Paul K. Benedict for the first time distinguished the Tai language from Chinese language. According to him there is a close linguistic affinity existing between Tai, Kadai and Indonesians. Some Tai words are present in the Chinese language as well as the few Chinese words are still present in the Tai language, but they are just loan words (Benedict 1942:576-601). Mr. Benedict shows that the Tai language as the sub-branch has a genetic linkage with the Tai Kadai group, but not with the Tibeto Burmese as ascribed by other earlier linguistic analysts. To Mr. Benedict the true Indonesian substratum on the Asiatic mainland is represented by four scattered languages in China, Northern Tongking, the boarder region of China and Vietnam and in the Isle of Hainan (Li, Ke-Lao, Laqua, Lati) which represent a single linguistic stock and this is called Kadai group. This term is Mr. Benedict’s own creation. The Kadai stock got recognition in July, 1998 by the Mahidol University of Thailand. And at present this Tai Kadai stock includes the Tai language spoken by the Tais spreading over the vast tract of Asia from Yunnan to Assam. The recognition of Kadai stock which shows numerous points of contact with Tai, opens the way to a new interpretation of the latter as a distant member of an archaic Tai, Kadai, Indonesian complex.

Paul Benedict has shown the genealogy of Austro-Tai as follows:

![Genealogy Diagram](attachment:genealogy_diagram.png)
The latest classification of Tai-Kadai language (Phukan 2006:34-36) is:

![Diagram of Tai-Kadai classification]

Scholars have claimed that the Tai Ahoms had their own language that belonged to the Tai Kadai linguistic group. However, in due course of history they have lost it and accepted Assamese (an Indo-Aryan language) as their mother tongue. But the Tai Ahom priestly clans still have the practice of using Tai language in performing the religious rites and ceremonies. They can even write and speak this language. It should be noted here that the priestly families of the Bakata, Patsaku, Parijat villages etc. are more fluent and expert on this language.

1.03 ORIGIN OF THE TAI AHOM

The period of the Ahom rule that covers long six centuries from 1228 A.D. to 1826 A.D. and constitutes the most significant and glorious chapter in the history of
Assam. Even the original name of the land known earlier as Kamarupa got its name Assam after the Ahom who were called Asam by almost all the tribes inhabiting the vast region that extends from Southern China to India's North-East. This name in its Anglicized form Assam still continues and is well known today. As this name Assam is derived from 'ASAM' (the Ahom), some Brahmanical pundits who find it hard to accept have been trying to trace its root to Sanskrit Asom (uneven or unequal) (Phukan 2006:1). Again in Deodhai Ahom Buranji it is stated that:

‘anara bangaha na-hay, dewa manuha buli yi kay hay, eyehe Aham: aka ane sama haota nai’ - (They do not come from any other race: they are described as God-like men; that is why Aham. There is no one who is equal (sama) to them) (Bhuyan 1932:93)

Apart from this Sanskrit etymology, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee suggested that the name Ahom comes from Rhwan (Rhwan>Yhwam>Hyam>Cyam>Shan>Asama>Ahom), a name by which the Burmese referred to the Shan people (Chatterjee 1979:306). He also commented that the name Assam, which has virtually made obsolete the earlier two names (Kamarupa and Pragjyotisa), is now used for Assam state or province in general and the Brahmaputra valley in particular. It was not in use even in Assam in early times, and could not have been in use there or elsewhere before the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D., when the Ahoms, a Shan tribe from Burma, crossed the Patkai Range and penetrated into Assam, and established themselves as conquerors in Eastern Assam (1228) (Chatterjee 1979:296). Again the term ‘Ahom’ may given by the local habitats and tribes and from the word ‘Shan’ the word Ahom would have originated, Shan>Sam>Asam>Ahom (Gogoi 1982:2). Some scholars assert that ‘Assam’ has been derived from ‘Ha-sam’. Ha-sam is a Bodo word (Ha- earth/land/country, sam-Shan). The meaning is- the land where the Shans are dwelling is called Ha-sam and even today the Bodos the Dimasas call the Ahoms as Ha-Samsa. The scholars have opined that the word ‘Asom’ or Asam has got its place in language during the 13th and 14th century A.D.

Many evidences are there in the various historical documents from the Moghol period, Dutch chronicles of pre British period that the British did not introduce the
name Assam. In Persian publications of Moghol period, like Akbarnama (1542-1605), Padshah-namah (1627-1647), Alamgir-Namah (1657-1667) and Tarikh-i-Mulk-I-Asham, the name Assam is mentioned. In the treaty of peace in between the Ahom king Jayadhwaja Simha and the Mogul army led by Mir Jumla, 1662, the kingdom of the Ahoms is described as Bilayat Asama kasya, i.e. ‘the Wilayat or State of the Asam or Ahom King’. The Muslim historian Shahabuddin, accompanying Mir Jumla, uses the word ... =Asham, Asam to mean the country and people of Assam, and particularly the Ahoms (Chatterjee 1979:298-299). The British signed the Treaty of Yandaboo on 24th February 1826 and used the word Assam in the treaty, Article 2. (Barua 01.012007)

The name Assam thus came from the Shan (Tai Mao) people who entered to this part of the country and all the Tai Ahom chronicles and scholars are maintaining the same view that Siu Ka Pha, son of Chao Phuchang Khang alias Chao Cheng-nyeu, the grandson of Khun Lung (King of Mung ri Mung ram) entered Mung-Dun-Sun-Kham (Land of golden seeds) or Assam around 1228 A.D. by crossing the Patkai range and founded the Ahom empire in the Brahmaputra Valley. Chao lung Siu-ka-Pha, the founder king of the Tai Ahoms entered into this part of the country as early as in 1228 A.D. with a horde of nearly nine thousand Tai Ahoms including two ministers, three priests and a band of officers. Siu Ka Pha and his descendants ruled Assam for a long period of nearly six hundred years giving stability and integrating the society as a whole and setting up the foundation for the growth of the Assamese race, language, religion and culture in the process. But so far as the origin of the Tai Ahom is concerned different chronicles and scholars have viewed different thoughts. Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi holds the view that, Hsiu-ka-Pha and his followers came to Assam from Mong-Mit, which is a Shan State of Upper Burma (Gogoi 1968:252-255). Ney Elias and Kashinath Tamuli Phukan also hold the same view that they came from Mong Mit (Elias 1876:50 & Tamuli Phukan 1906). According to Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, the origin of the Tai Ahom is Mao-Lung, a Shan State of Upper Burma in the Kingdom of Mong-Mao (Bhuyan 1949:2). According to H.R. Davies, Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers came from the state of Mao-Lung which was in Yunnan (Davies 1909:23). The Tai Ahom chronicles (Barua 1985:4,42,43) more evidently shows that Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers came from the State ‘Moung Mao Lung’ (Moung:
Land, Lung: Big) or the land of the (Big) Mao or Shans. Significantly the script used by the Tai people of Moung Mao Lung is same with that of the Tai Ahoms till it was modified under the present Chinese Government. And this area is at present included in the Dehong Dai Singpho Autonomous Prefecture of China (PRC) found in July, 1953 (Buragohain 1994:29). The location of Moung Mao is in the modern territory of Yunnan and on the right bank of the river Shweli (Nam Mao).

The Tai Ahom chronicles have recorded the historical advent of Siu Ka Pha and his companions with exact date and places as per the Tai calendar. According to the Tai Ahom chronicles Chao lung Siu Ka Pha was born at Keng-Sen Mao-Lung. His father was Chao Chang-Nyeu who belonged to the royal family of Mong-ri Mong-ram, and his mother Nang Mong Blok-Kham-Sen was the daughter of Chao Tai-Pong, and younger sister of Pa-Meo-Pong, who was the King of Mong-Mao-Lung (Phukan et al.1998:Introduction). The above account is clearly found in almost all the old Ahom chronicles.

1.04 THE MYTH OF ORIGIN OF THE TAI AHOMS

The origin myth of the Tai Ahoms is found in Tai Ahom chronicles and in Lit Lai Peyn-Ka ka. According to this myth the Tai Ahoms are the heaven-born people. Lengdon, the Lord of heaven was ruling in the wide country of Gods. There eight lakhs of Gods paid him homage and his country was full of riches. All the countries in heaven were under his rule. But no one of his family was ruling on the earth. It appears that among the counsellors of Lengdon the most trusted were Jashing Pha (Goddess of Learning), Laokhri (oldest of the Gods and Chief Minister) and Then-Kham, the most powerful ally and nephew of Lengdon. With the object of selecting princes of his divine House to rule over the territories in the lower countries, Lengdon particularly called them to his palace for consultation and decided to sent Khun Lung and Khun Lai as the rulers of those countries. Khun Lung and Khun Lai were advised by the Lord of heaven to rule over the new countries, so long torn by lawlessness, with a firm hand but following moral rules and doing justice to everybody (Barua 1985:5).
According to this myth these two heavenly princes of the Kingdom of Then Kham were sent down to earth by Lengdon, the Lord of heaven by a golden ladder along with a retinue of wise men, ministers and counsellors. They came down and landed up in Mung Ri Mung Ram. Both the princes found to their great satisfaction that the people of the neighbouring districts, probably, mostly Tai assembled there and warmly welcomed them. And from the above account in the old Tai Ahom original chronicles it is clearly found that Chao Chang-Nyeu was the grandson of Khun Lung and Siu Ka Pha was the son of Chao-Chang-Nyeu, who entered Assam in 1228 A.D. from that Yunnan Province of China.

And from all the above accounts it can be said that places namely, Mung Ri Mung Ram and Moung Mau Lung were situated in the Yunnan Province of China from where Siu Ka Pha and his companions entered Assam in 1228 A.D. Thus the Tai Ahoms were one of the Tai Mao groups of Moung Mao Lung and their script is Tai Nua script.

The state Assam lies in the foothills of the Himalayas with an area of 78,438 Sq.Km. The State has 23 Districts with population of 26,638,407 persons including 13,787,799 Males and 12,850,608 Females, according to the Census of 2001 (Sarma 2004:4-6). The 1931 Census report of Assam recorded 249,434 Ahoms in Assam spread over in various districts and they all were returned as Hindus. After the settlement of Tai Ahom Dynasty in Assam (24°03′ N-28° N Latitude, 89°05′ E-96°01′ E Longitude) the Tai Ahoms became one of the major communities and are found in large numbers in the districts of Upper Assam, namely Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur etc.

Among the districts of Assam the Sivasagar district (26°43′N–27°14′ N Latitude, 94°22′E–95°26′E Longitude) has the highest proportion of Ahom population (38.38%) (Buragohain 1994:59). The Tai Ahom people are still practicing their ancient Tai rituals and ceremonies in Sivasagar and Jorhat districts. The places under these two districts are: Bakata, Patsaku, Parijat, 4 No. Nabajyoti, Japihajia, Akhoia, Purani pam, Bor gaon, Bor Deodhai gaon, Bagariting, Na gaon, Chotou khua, Laiseng, Moranjan, Dakhinjan, Disangpani, Rukang, Tiphuk, Hologuri, Nahartali,
Hatiborua, Cholapothar, Nemuguri, Nangalamora, Mahmora Konwar gaon, Lesaihabi, Bailung gaon, Angera, Hagarbera, Lakua, Laipeleng, Maniki, Mazgaon, Duarah gaon, Karonga, Bisrampur, Na khat, Chun pura, Simaluguri, Lakhimi Pothar, Satimora, Ghilaguri, Kasumari, Bor sahaki, Doba, Amguri deodhai gaon, Hapekhati, and Jhanji Hanhehara Bailung gaon, Amguri Deodhai gaon, Chira khunda, Pani tula etc. where the Tai Ahoms practise their traditional religion and observe their rituals and ceremonies in the ancient Tai style which is unique and rare.

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