

TRANSFORMATION OF FOLK CULTURE OF TAI AHOM IN NEW MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In the modern era of fastest growing technologies, gadgets, and digital platforms have led to many changes in society be it food habits, dress, medical treatments, or job profiles, new social customs have evolved, and there has been a shift from traditional work processes to digital modes of working and like. The Ahom community has been patronizing various religious faiths of native people of Assam including Vaishnavism of the Brahmanical order, Saivism, and Saktism. By the early 18th century, all Ahoms except for its three priestly classes had converted to Hinduism. But in the post-colonial period, scholars of the Ahom community are trying to revive their traditional heritage. In order to promote, popularize, and preserve their own culture, they have been using audio-visual media including digital platforms. In the process of cultural communication through such mediums, some changes or transformations have taken place. In this paper the present researcher has tried to bring up such transformation in new media or the internet.

Keywords:

*Tai Ahoms, Folk culture,
media, audio-visual media,
Assam*

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Introduction

Tai Ahom is the largest folk group of Assam. A leader Chaolung Suikapha along with his companions and army, marched to this region in the early 13th century and gradually occupied various parts of this land (Gait, 1926). He and his descendants ruled over Assam, mainly the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of approximately 600 years. According to historical documents, they had arrived in this golden land from upper Burma by crossing the Patkai Ranges. Historians stated that they originally hailed from a village in Yunan Province of Southern China (Basu, 1970). Due to some reasons they had to move from their birthplace in different directions (mainly Asian countries) along the rivers, crossing many states including Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and finally reached Assam. They came, settled, and established their kingdom by building their first capital at Cheraidoi. Gradually, they extended their territory by conquering the native folk groups of Assam who occupied small areas. Over time the Tai Ahom territory extended towards the west and covered the entire Brahmaputra valley as far west as the Manah River. (Gait, 1926)

Tai Ahom rulers had been respectful towards other faiths or traditions. Historical evidence reflects that when a king won a battle, he imposed his culture on the conquered people. Contrary to this, Tai Ahom rulers instead absorbed some practices or culture of conquered people in order to maintain unity and harmony in their kingdom. In course of time, the Tai Ahoms formed a new Assamese culture with the native people of Assam. During the Ahom rule in Assam, acculturation took place. According to chronicles and other records, initially for about two hundred years of their settlement in Assam, Tai Ahom culture remained unchanged. But with time, for socio-political reasons, modifications in their culture had started (Gogoi, Dutta, & Bhuyan, 2023). Intermarriages between Ahoms and other native people had been encouraged; in course of time, Tai Ahom rulers patronised the culture and religion of those groups in order to become one among the local people. Later, they adopted Hinduism fully, the religion followed by the majority of people of the region, so as to form an integrated Assamese society (Gogoi P., 1976). According to the comment by German scholar Eric Seidenfaden, Ahoms are completely Hinduised. There came a period when Tai Ahom culture and traditional practices lessened and were shadowed under the submerged culture of the greater Ahom Kingdom. Also, the society and culture of the Tai Ahoms faced changes during the colonial and post-colonial periods due to the impact of modernism. They had faced identity issues to some extent. The society formed by the Tai Ahoms came from different social groups consisting of tribes and castes incorporating heterogeneous culture and religious belief (Gogoi P., 1976). Some Ahom rulers followed specific religious policies both for the welfare of rulers and their states or people due to increased interactions between religious faiths and customs of folk groups of Assam. In the present era,

many scholars from the community have been trying to revive the culture and tradition of their ancestors. In this revival process a number of folk songs and dances have been recovered to date by taking help from their ancestors, the Shans of Myanmar. Also, the modern generation has composed many modern songs in the Tai Ahom language and redesigned dance steps inspired by their praying style and the dance style of the Shans. The idea behind producing or making such modern songs is to promote the culture and tradition of Tai Ahoms.

In the process of revival of age-old Tai Ahom folk culture, there may be some transformation of its culture or folklore, i.e., it goes through some transformation or a little change of their cultural practices. There are some songs and dances as audio-visual albums available on YouTube that reflect the revived Tai Ahom folk culture, which may have faced slight transformations from its original one. It may be due to filming of folklore for the purpose of entertainment as well as to attract masses; directors or concerned persons modify it in order to fit their content as per the taste of their targeted audience. Music and the tone used to sing their revived folk songs are influenced by the music of other Tai branches.

Objective of The Study

- To observe the transformation of Tai Ahom folk culture in new media during its revival process.
- To Analyse the Impact of Cultural Transformations on The Ethnicity of The Tai Ahom.

Methodology of The Study

The researcher has adopted the content analysis method for systematically identifying specific elements of folk culture within audio-visuals available on the subject. Also, to understand the authentic folk culture of Tai Ahoms, its representation in audio-visual media and to identify changes, secondary sources like chronicles, scholarly articles on the subject have been meticulously studied.

Review of Literature

This research is based on the folklore of Tai Ahoms, their change and continuity at the present time as well as their revival phase. For effective research on the subject, the present researcher has studied various historical books or chronicles of Assam including 'History of Assam' by Sir Edward Gait, 'Ahom Din' by Hiteswar Barbaruah, 'Assam in the Ahom Age' by Nirmal Kumar Basu, and 'An Account of Assam' by Francis Hamilton. These books deal with various incidents associated with the Tai Ahoms and give insights into the political, economic, religious, cultural and other information related to them. A book titled 'The Tais of Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual' by B.J. Terwiel helps the researcher to understand ancient Tai rituals and the origin of

Tai Ahom and the like. Apart from these, the researcher has thoroughly studied a book titled 'Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs' written by Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi to understand the religion, faith and culture of Tai-Ahoms. In addition, Gogoi's another book titled 'The Tai and The Tai Kingdoms' is a great source of knowledge for this paper. Furthermore, the researcher of this paper has studied various research articles and documents on the revival of Tai-Ahom culture and its preservation through various means, including new media.

Revival of Folk Culture of Tai Ahoms

Tai Ahom rulers appointed scribes to record major incidents, the life of the king and his people, their socio-economic status, political-religious movements, and related things in the form of historical chronicles (Gait, 1926). It is from historical writings on the Tai Ahom, their culture and tradition are known to people today. As per various sources, the Tai Ahoms are believed to have originated from the Shan group of Myanmar. A group of Tai Shan came to Assam, who were identified by the native people of then Assam as Tai Ahoms. Like any other folk group, the Tai Ahoms had their own folk songs, folk dances, folk practices etc. Since, Tai Ahoms in their way to build a greater Assamese society had merged or amalgamated with native groups of then Assam. As a result, many folk groups had completely submerged to Ahom. Similarly, the Tai Ahoms lost some of their folk cultural and traditional practices in order to adapt others. Acculturation, patronization, and adoption of Hinduism and other cultural faiths of native folk groups resulted in the decline of religious and other Tai Ahom cultural practices, and the use of their language had been gradually reduced to a very high rate. In the Postcolonial period people of the Tai Ahom community have realised the need for their own religious practices and folklore. Many institutions were formed for the purpose of reviving the folk culture of the Tai Ahoms.

Tai Ahoms believe their ancestors were Shans of Myanmar whose culture must have been similar to theirs (Terwiel, 1981). That is the reason why Tai Ahoms in the revival process have taken help from Shan scholars and their cultural or religious practices. Apart from reintegrating traditional aspects from Shans, Tai Ahoms have taken help from their religious practices like their prayers, mantras and like. Recreations of some religious and a few folk songs have been done. Also, many modern songs have been composed in the Tai Ahom language by people belonging to the community. Words of Tai Ahom religious songs have been taken from their religious books or manuscripts. Again, some of those songs have been picturised by some members from the community. The form of dance is also redesigned or revived taking help from

praying motions of their rituals, and the folk dance of the Shans might be their source of inspiration or idea.

According to their chronicles, the Tai Ahoms used to wear cloths black in colour when they entered into this land(Terwiel, 1981). But the colour of their traditional dress changed to golden with red motifs woven on the golden silk base. In present time they are identified with golden dress, and it has become a part of their culture. Today, audio-visual songs published on new media platforms reflect the Ahom people wearing golden-coloured dresses.

Language is the most important factor; it is the base identity of a community. Professor Stephen Morey, a linguist, is one of the revivalists of the Tai language on whose studious effortsthe Tai Ahom script is now available in Unicode 8.0(Sharma, 2020). The Ahom language was at the phase of critical extinction till its revival process got started. Experts or speakers of the Tai Ahom language have been working to teach the language to its people. Apart from priests, certain other members of the community can also read, write and speak the language to some extent.

Religious practices have been followed or practiced by Tai Ahoms from time immemorial. They were originally animist, like the majority of folk groups that exists today. This can be known from their religious sacrificial rituals, traces of which still can be seen in the Ahom Hindu culture of present time (Terwiel, 1981). It is assumed that with time they came in contact with the concept of Buddhism that was followed in the regions they might have crossed before reaching Assam. After the Tai Ahoms reached the Brahmaputra valley, they were introduced to Vaishnavism, Hinduism (mainly Brahmanism), Shaktism, and Saivism in course of time. Idol worship became a part of the new Ahom Hindu religion(Gogoi P. , 1976). After Srimanta Shankardeva introduced Neo-Vaishnavism to the people of Assam, some Tai Ahoms accepted Neo-Vaishnavite traditions, started participating in Naam (praising words to god), and regularly visited Naamghar (a religious assembly with no idol)(Ghosh L.). The majority of Ahoms in present time follow Hinduism, including Saivism or Shaktism, and some animistic rituals like *Me-Dam Me-Phi*, *Rik Khwan*, *Umpha*, and *Saipha*. Modern Ahom people take part in Hindu festivals. In the modern era, the majority of Ahoms, irrespective of their religious faith marry following the *Chaklong* ceremony. Presently, many Hinduised Ahoms are realising their need to revive and retain their folk cultures. In this process Ahoms are revisiting their ethnical identity through chronicles written by their ancestors, manuscripts, and religious scriptures preserved by the priestly classes Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung.

In such a process of revival of Tai Ahom folk culture, people from the community have been documenting their sacred traditional rituals and their practices. Some songs were recreated as community songs, religious songs, state songs, and other songs on various themes. Also, they have regenerated the folk dance of the Tai Ahoms on these songs, recorded in audio-visual form. Such revived folk performances are available on the internet today either as albums or individual folk songs or dances. There are many Tai Ahom songs available on new media platforms including YouTube, where the picturisations of those songs contains some elements which cannot be considered as folk elements of Tai Ahoms. For example-the use of drums, the wind instrument *bin*, and the use of umbrella by female artists in a few music videos available on a new media platform that is similar to the traditional umbrella of the Tais or Shans etc. These can be considered as transformation parts of Tai Ahom folk culture in new media.

Findings and Analysis

The Tai Ahoms brought with them their religious practices to Assam but gradually became inclined towards the religion of the native people of Assam. Their religion and culture became obsolete at some point, mainly after the 17th century as a result of acculturation. In the Postcolonial period, Tai Ahom scholars have been working on the revival of their ethnic identity, which is critically endangered today. It is very difficult to revisit their ethnic identity before they advanced to Assam, as their chronicles or manuscripts consist of information on almost every historical incident that occurred after their arrival in Assam and the creation of their own truth, and in between there is no documentation on their life found or available. Many historians claim the Tai Ahom clan originated from the Shans of Myanmar. Therefore, it can be assumed that both Tai branches share cultural similarities between them, and hence, revivalists of Tai Ahom culture might have been borrowing some cultural traits from Shans. All Tai branches share some commonality, with little or no changes. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that the Tai Ahoms were earlier Shans or that they formed from the Shans.

As of the present date, songs in the Tai Ahom language have been recorded for the purpose of reviving Tai Ahom ethnic culture. Some special songs, some folk songs, and various modern Tai Ahom songs have been recorded and picturised for the purpose of popularising or commonalising the Tai Ahom language to its people. The ancestor who had composed songs and introduced instruments, rhythm, tone, music, etc. inspired by nature and shared it with the Tai Ahom people; a religious song named *Lai Lung Khamis* dedicated to that ancestor. But Tai Ahom songs available today may not be the same as the original ones that might have existed in the past. Words and contents of newly revived songs may differ from the ancient folksongs, if they

existed. Picturisation of those songs in audio-visual format cannot be regarded as completely authentic. Some transformations have been given to those new compositions while producing or making them for the modern Ahom people, who are far from folk knowledge and cinematographed based on their modern understanding. Singers or dancers wearing Tai Ahom folk dress (headgear) that is stitched and golden in colour. The researcher of this paper has found during her fieldwork that Tai Ahoms never wore stitched headgear; instead, they tied it over the head and tucked its end(s) inside the turban. But for easy dressing and suitability while wearing for dance performance, stitched headgear is being largely used by Tai Ahoms, which is reflected in audio-visuals available in new media. People from other religions or folk groups will be introduced to this new style of ready-to-wear headgear, rather than the unstitched turban.

The style of propitiating ancestors and god is now transformed or being adopted to greet elders or respect people. The style of greeting in audio-visual songs has been taken from the praying style of Tai Ahoms. Me-Dam Me-Phi is one of the rituals to propitiate ancestors of the village or society. It has never been a large affair that is being celebrated today. It became a social festival of the state and is largely celebrated in different parts of Assam.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to identify traces of the ancient folk culture of the Tai Ahoms as in the course of time they gradually accepted the religion of other native people. The Tai Ahoms maintained marriage relations with native folk groups, which led to a cultural and traditional shift to some extent. The Tai Ahoms, when married to a girl of Brahmin, Kachari, Chutia, Moran, or any other folk group, the bride carries her parent's religion or cultural traits along with her, which leads to acculturation. Therefore, Tai Ahoms have different cultural practices within themselves. Some Tai Ahoms follow Neo-Vaishnavism, some may be idol worshippers, and some are still animists. So, it is very difficult to find out about the ancient Tai Ahom folk culture. In present time, many Ahom people have been adapting various techniques to regenerate their folklore, mainly folk performances, and working for its reintroduction as well as promotion within and outside the community. In the modern era of the internet, it is the easiest, most suitable, fastest and most reachable medium for communicating anything and everything. Therefore, many artists are using this platform to share their part of the work. Tai Ahom songs and dance performances are picturised and those albums or single pieces are uploaded to various platforms on the internet such as YouTube, Facebook, etc. The reason behind choosing various platforms on the internet is to easily reach diversified as well as large masses and reintroduce and promote the revived folk culture of Tai Ahoms in a cost-effective way.

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