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Recreating the Past Revivalism in Northeastern India

Introduction

In this article I would like to introduce the problems of reviving a ritual once it has disappeared without a trace, posing the modern actors an interesting set of dilemmas. The paper centres upon the example of the Ahom, an ethnic group in Northeast India which over the past centuries has lost trace almost completely of the culture of its Southeast Asian forebears.

During the past fifteen years I have witnessed and personally played a minor, essentially indirect, role in the blossoming of a revivalist movement among the people of Ahom descent. It is a movement that has taken root in the face of what seem to be almost overwhelming odds.

Tai-speaking peoples

Tai-speaking peoples form the most numerous and most widely spread peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia. They first became recognizable as such in the first millennium A.D. in what is now Kuangsi Province in Southern China. In the middle of the eleventh century they became embroiled in a long and fierce war with the Chinese, which ended in a resounding defeat of the Tais. Hereupon many Tais suddenly began migrating southwards and south-westwards into the region of Mainland Southeast Asia. They fanned out rapidly, and within a few hundred years had conquered most of the valley regions where they are now found: in northern Vietnam, in Laos, in all of Thailand, in Northern Myanmar, in the Chinese province of Yunnan, and in Northeastern India. At present there are probably a hundred million speakers of Tai languages.

The Ahom

The Ahom are the westernmost of these Tais. They occupy such a special place among the Tai-speaking peoples that all research that throws light upon the Ahom culture has been considered to be particularly relevant for the study of Tai ethnic groups in general (Terwiel 1978a; 1978b; 1980; 1981a; 1981b; 1983; 1988). They are the descendants of a group of Tai

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speakers who, it is generally assumed, at the beginning of the thirteenth century migrated from the Hukawng Valley (located on the upper reaches of the Chindwin River in present-day Myanmar) across the Patkai Range to a location in the upper Brahmaputra River Basin, in Northeastern India. The idea that the Ahom culture remained totally isolated from all other Tais for a period of close on 800 years cannot be sustained, for even the accounts in their own chronicles tell of a series of contacts between Ahom and Tais in upper Myanmar. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the little that is known about the Ahom language and culture reveals a number of archaic features that help understand Tai cultures in general.

After gaining a foothold in Upper Assam, the Ahom extended their control over a number of indigenous peoples and came to dominate the valley area south of the River Brahmaputra and east of the River Dikho. This is a region which at present comprises all of Dibrugarh District and part of Sibsagar District in the Indian State of Assam – the areas where the people who call themselves Ahom at present are most numerous. During the sixteenth, and more so during the seventeenth century, the Ahom people, in a series of spectacular expansionist moves, gained dominance over virtually the entire Brahmaputra Valley. The story of how Ahom-led armies fought against Muslim invaders has gained them a place in international history.

It seems ironical that the very military and political successes that are so proudly remembered by present-day Ahom created the conditions that led to the abandonment of much of the traditional Ahom culture. Historical accounts of the rise and fall of the Ahom seldom take into consideration the degree to which they had to extend their territory in order to retain control of the whole of the Assamese Valley. Before their expansion eastward of the Dikho River, in the relatively quiet and isolated upper regions of the Valley, the Ahom had the necessary numerical strength to maintain their cultural supremacy. When they took possession of the densely populated lower regions, however, they became very much a minority, albeit a ruling one.

When it is further realized that many of the peoples living to the west of the Dikho River already possessed highly developed cultures in the general orbit of the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent, it will be obvious that the scene was set for a rapid assimilation of the Ahom tradition to the more general Assamese one. Not only at the Ahom court, but also among Ahom farmers, the Indian religion gained adherents: Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism spread and largely replaced the old Tai Ahom religion. The Ahom language and Ahom script were relegated to the religious sphere, where they were used only by some members of the traditional priestly clans, while Assamese speech and writing took over in secular life.

Until 1931 the Ahom were classified in the Indian Census as a special subcaste. The first Census figures for the Assamese population, those of

1872 (revised by C.S. Magrath in his District Census Compilation), included some 148,000 Ahom. Further specifications of this Census give an indication of the proportions of Ahom and non-Ahom. In the upper districts, Ahom people constituted between 32 and 36 per cent of the population (Hunter 1975), while in the remainder of Assam, including the region containing the present capital, they came to less than half a per cent of the population (Beverly 1872). While these nineteenth-century figures should not be taken as an unequivocal reflection of the situation in the seventeenth century or earlier, they illustrate the general point that, while conquering the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Ahom people came to be overwhelmingly outnumbered.

Notwithstanding their own formal requests to be recognized as a 'Scheduled Caste', the classification 'Ahom' is no longer used in the modern Indian Census. We therefore lack an accurate count of the people who nowadays style themselves Ahom. Surmising that the Ahom population has experienced a fairly modest growth since 1931, I once estimated their number in 1980 to have been somewhere around 500,000 (out of more than 18 million Assamese). Buragohain and Taher (1993:5), assuming a higher growth rate, arrived at a figure of just over a million Ahom in 1989.

The fact that Ahom is no longer recognized as a category in the Indian Census reflects the official point of view that the Ahom are, for all practical purposes, lowland Hindu Assamese. This kind of view has been hotly contested by various Ahom spokesmen.

Robinson indicated already in 1841 that there were arguments both for and against recognition of a distinct Ahom identity: 'on the one hand, the Ahom remained racially "unmixed", and they retained their ancient habits and institutions; on the other they adopted Hindu customs and had already at that time almost wholly abandoned their original Tai speech for the Assamese vernacular' (Robinson 1975:252-3).

Ahom revivalism and revivalist movements

If we take the term 'revivalism' to mean a concerted attempt by a particular group of people to restore to use or to reawaken interest in a set of old customs in order to counteract the influences of a dominant alien culture, we can see evidence of such attempts in Ahom history particularly in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. These attempts are usually described as efforts of Ahom priests to stop or at least limit Hindu influence. Thus the Deodhai and Bailong priests apparently succeeded in reintroducing an Ahom-style coronation in direct competition with a Hindu ritual. The oldest Ahom coins, which were issued in the mid-seventeenth century, use Assamese script, bear the names of Hindu deities, and mention the date in Saka years. However, in 1663, at the time of the accession of Suea Pueng Mueng, who is also known by the Indian name of Chakradhvaj Singha, some coins were issued in Sanskrit (Allan 1909:314) and others in Ahom (Phukan 1966). Between 1669 and 1681, coronation coins appeared

which feature only Ahom script, using the Ahom language and mentioning exclusively Ahom gods. During this period, the Ahom religion appears to have held its own. Suea Dai Pha, also known as Parvatia Raja (r. 1677-1679), offered sacrifices to Siva as well as to the Ahom gods and had the Ahom state *rik khwan* ceremonies performed (Gait 1967:167). However, under the reign of Suea Khung Pha, also known as Rudra Singha (r. 1696-1714), whose coronation coins only feature the Indian language and references to Indian religion, the Ahom extended their territorial power. At the turn of the century, Indian influences were dominant and aspects of the old Ahom culture were difficult to find. From texts possibly written at the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century it is clear that Ahom priests were still actively engaged in attempts to persuade the king to organize expensive Ahom-style state rituals in order to avert predicted dangers (Terwiel and Ranoo Wichasin 1992), but there is no sign that they were successful. In the first decade of the eighteenth century the Ahom priests took the rather desperate measure of cursing Suea Khung Pha, alias Rudra Singha, for neglecting his ancestral religion and culture (Padmeswar Gogoi 1968:508).

Ahom revivalist movements, in the sense of *organizations* fostering the strengthening and protection of a separate Ahom identity, already span a century. In 1893 the All-Assam Ahom Association was formed, the first of a number of associations to protect the interests of the Ahom. This group was instrumental in obtaining the recognition of a distinct political status from the British, as well as separate representation in the Assamese Legislative Council. By 1919 the Ahom had secured further formal representation, and it had become the declared government policy to reserve a percentage of provincial and district appointments for them. In the 1930s the Ahom lost these privileges, and from that time onward they made attempts to regain recognition as a special minority group.

Various devices were used to deal with the problem of the dominant, hostile Assamese caste Hindus. Thus in 1944 the Ahom Sabha (Ahom Association) took the initiative in uniting all of Assam's ethnic minorities in an All-Assam Tribes and Races Federation. In 1954, at a meeting of Ahom people at Patsaku, Sibsagar District, the Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam was founded (linking the Ahom with Tai groups that had arrived more recently, such as the Khamti, Khamyang, Phakey, and Aiton). This Society succeeded in 1966 in bringing out its own journal, *Lik Phan Tai*. Ahom people also took a lively interest in the Tai Mongol Association, which established its headquarters in Jorhat (Burman 1970:345). In 1964 the All-Assam Ahom Association merged with the All-Assam Tai Sabha, and in 1967 various Associations combined to form the Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad (ATMRP). It was the latter organization which took the bold step of sending a petition to India's Prime Minister demanding a separate Ahom state or a federated unit comprising the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. This petition reflected the idea that Ahom

people would be best able to play a meaningful role in a separately governed Upper Assam.

Not only did the ATMRP send telegrams and a copy of the relevant resolution to India's Prime Minister, but it supported the demand for an autonomous Upper Assam with a lengthy Memorandum (1968). In this Memorandum are enumerated all the arguments which the members of the relevant committee of the ATMRP could muster in favour of recognition of a distinct Tai Ahom identity. Much of the Memorandum is devoted to a survey of the glorious past. One argument that is strongly underlined here is that the Ahom were recognized as a legal party by the British in the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, after Britain had wrested Assam from Burmese occupation. Yet another argument is that India's constitution gives any group having a distinct language, script or culture the right to preserve these (Memorandum 1968:39). Then the authors of the Memorandum proceed to draw attention to studies of the Ahom script and language and to mention that only recently has a Central Tai Academy been established in the village of Patsaku, Sibsagar District. As regards the cultural aspect, they describe the Ahom as one of the tribes of Mongolian origin and observe that these peoples in general still retain their original religious faiths, beliefs, and customs, such as the brewing of rice beer, the wearing of distinctive clothing and the observance of a particular Ahom form of marriage. The existence of many valuable documents in the Ahom language, written in their unique script, is also mentioned.

In 1981 a new organization was founded in Dhemaji (North Lakhimpur District), namely the Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai, or Eastern Tai Literary Organisation. This has proved a highly successful initiative, for this organization has grown, and now comprises a central committee with about fifty members and has also established a large number of branch committees. The Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai has further stimulated a large literary output in the form of language textbooks, popular history books, and publications in the unique Ahom script for use in religious services. Over the past twenty-five years, the Ahom have built various cult buildings where they perform Ahom non-Hindu rites, such as the Amlikhi Doesal in Lakwa (Sibsagar). Many schools in Sibsagar and Dibrugarh Districts, including Dibrugarh University, have been given permission to include the Tai language in their curriculum, and where this permission has been turned into action, a mixture of Ahom, Phakey, Khamti and Central Thai has been introduced. Recently the Ahom have constructed a central representative building, named Chukafa (Suea Ka Pha) Nagar, in the Assamese capital which serves as headquarters for the revivalist movement, and other Chukafa houses are under construction in Barbaruah and Dhemaji. They hold regular conferences and religious and political meetings, which are attended by huge audiences, and have resumed the printing of documents in their own script.

Ahom Hinduism

It is not clear when Brahminical influence first began to make an impact. When Sankardeva preached his devotional Vaisnavite faith in the mid-sixteenth century, he did not gain many adherents among the Ahom. His disciples were much more successful, however. In the mid-seventeenth century the Ahom kings formally embraced Hinduism.

At present the great majority of Ahom are Hindus, being adherents of a variety of mutually exclusive religious sects. So there are Saktas, Saivites, Vaisnavites, Mahapurushas (followers of Sankardeva), Damodarias (followers of Damodardeva) and Moamaras (followers of Aniruddhadeva), each with their own prayer houses. The largest sect is named Barkhelia (Assamese, 'the Great Sect') and has been described by Padmeswar Gogoi (1976:42-53) as a Tantric form of Hinduism with Sankara or Siva as the highest god. It involves esoteric devotional worship in the course of which animals are sacrificed, alcohol is consumed and – at the higher levels of worship – ritual sexual contact between men and women is used as a means of stimulating religious feelings and performing communal religious worship. This Tantric cult, popularly called Ratikhowa (Assamese, 'Night worship'), has followers not only among the Ahom but also among the Miri and Kachari of Upper Assam. According to Gogoi, the Ahom people abandoned their original religion and adopted the above-mentioned forms of Hindu religion instead. '(T)he life of the rural Tai-Ahom population today is fully controlled by the rules and practices of these non-Ahom cults' (Padmeswar Gogoi 1976:53). Only in a few priestly families was the original Ahom religion not wholly forgotten.

Old Ahom rituals

In the course of fieldwork in Assam I personally witnessed three Ahom rituals, namely a rather intimate Ahom family ritual in the form of a traditional Chaklong marriage, a medium-sized community service for the Goddess Ja Sing Phra in an Ahom temple, and, finally, a large-scale Ahom state ritual called Medam Mephi.¹ In addition I discussed these as well as various other Ahom rituals with leading Ahom priests. A fairly detailed description of what I discovered about Ahom ritual in 1979 and 1980 has already been published (Terwiel 1980 and 1981a).

For the purposes of the present paper suffice it to say that initially I took my informants' statements about their age-old tradition at face value. At the time I was operating under the belief that I was witnessing extremely rare manifestations of the pre-Buddhist Tai religion that had survived in a Hindu environment. Since then, however, after having taken note of the

¹ The Chaklong ritual was witnessed in Dibrugarh on 24 February 1980, the ritual for Ja Sing Phra in Dhemaji (North Lakhimpur) on 14 February 1980, and the Medam Mephi at Soraidaew (Sibsagar) on 6 March 1980.

manner in which Ahom revivalism functions, I have considerably changed my mind about what I recorded then.

Even before I was beset by doubts as to whether I was witnessing authentic elements of the old Ahom tradition, I was struck by a series of puzzling features, notably in the way Chaklong was performed, in the manner Ahom temples were built, and in the way the ritual for Ja Sing Phra was conducted. These puzzling features were:

a. In relation to the Ahom marriage ceremony

1. The central ritual object: a huge circle of multicoloured rice powder – a gigantic round *mandala* – constructed on the floor, around which the parties celebrate the union, whereas there is no trace of such a *mandala* in any of the marriage customs, or indeed in any ethnographic description, of other Tai peoples. I suspect that the use of such a *mandala* is an element of the Hindu religion that the Ahom adopted centuries ago.²
2. The fact that the meaning of the word Chaklong was not known to those performing the ritual. It was also unknown to the Ahom chief priests with whom I subsequently discussed this point. Even more surprising was the fact that, when I interviewed the leading Ahom scholar Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, who published the most extensive record of this ritual, even he could not suggest an etymology.³
3. The absence of any trace of the recitation of the ancestors' feats and triumphs, going back at least seven generations, by Ahom priests in the Tai language in the ceremony where I was present, despite the Ahom claim that this is an essential part of the Chaklong ceremony.
4. The absence of the series of Ahom phrases and prayers mentioned in the most detailed published description of the Chaklong ceremony (Padmeswar Gogoi 1976:63-87) from the Chaklong ceremony that I witnessed in February 1980, which in fact was performed wholly in Assamese. More will be said about these prayers below.

b. In relation to Ahom temples

1. The fact that these cult buildings were constructed of cheap plant material that is not very durable, especially in the Assamese climate, in contrast to the stone Hindu shrines surrounding them. In 1980 there were only two buildings that were wholly devoted to the practice of the 'Old Ahom religion', one in Akhoya, a village which is the domicile of various leading Ahom priestly families, and one not far outside the town of

² This is confirmed in the *Hastividyarnava*, an early-eighteenth-century illustrated text (Choudhury 1976:184-7).

³ At present I have arrived at the conclusion that Chaklong derives from two Ahom words, namely *chak*, the Tai form of the Indian word *chakra*, 'wheel', and *long*, Tai Ahom for 'big' or 'great' (*luang* in central Thai).

Dhemaji, in North Lakhimpur, which is another centre of Ahom activities.⁴ Both were octagonal buildings consisting of a bamboo frame with a cone-shaped, leaf-covered roof and sides of woven matting.

2. The fact that the interior of both temples was totally different from what one would expect in Southeast Asia. In 1979 and 1980 these temples were basically empty. The Akhoya one contained no shrine, no image of any deity, no pictures along the walls, no bookcases, no furniture whatsoever, and no embellishments. In the Dhemaji building only a few musical instruments adorned one of the walls.

3. The prominent role of a huge oil-lamp candelabra, for which my studies of Tai ritual had not prepared me, while fire was not central to any other Tai rituals. In both temples there was a central elevation of about a foot high containing a hole in the middle. It was explained to me that this elevation was a kind of pedestal, serving during religious ceremonies as a slot into which to fit the *sao sang* or 'holy pole', a thick pole in which sticks were inserted horizontally at regular intervals, like branches, each provided with a small oil lamp at the end, the whole thing serving as a complex 'wooden candelabra'. In Akhoya one such pole was lying discarded and partially dismantled behind the building.

c. In relation to the Ja Sing Phra ceremony

1. The fact that the ritual basically consisted of the careful ordering of objects with a symbolic significance. While rice, eggs, sugar-cane, incense, betel leaves and areca nuts were all consistent with Southeast Asian ritual practices, the way in which the ceremony was conducted reminded one more of a Hindu *pūja*.

At a ceremony in honour of the Goddess Ja Sing Phra held in the Dhemaji Ahom temple in the evening of Thursday, 14 February 1980, about fifty men and women were seated along the walls, the women to the right of the entrance, the men to the left. The central pedestal was not in use here, but nearby, in the middle of the building, there was an officiating priest flanked by two helpers, as well as three small double-level tables made of bamboo and pieces of plantain trunk. The ceremony started with the blessing of a container of water, followed by an elaborate sprinkling. Then the top surface of each of the three tables was covered with pieces of banana leaf and small pieces of hollowed-out plantain trunk. Then a small oil lamp was placed on each table and lit. On the lower surfaces of each of the tables were placed a betel leaf, a whole areca nut and a coin, while on the top were now added three cups of alcohol and three piles of uncooked rice mixed with ginger, each with a duck's egg as well as a piece of sugar-cane on top. Incense sticks were stuck onto two of the four corners of each table. Finally, three betel leaves and a piece of cut areca nut were placed on the upper surface. At various stages of these proceedings short

⁴ Much has changed since then.

chants were intoned, all in Ahom, with not a single word of Assamese being used. When the tables were arranged to the priest's satisfaction, a short Ahom prayer was uttered three times, after each of which one of the tables was sprinkled.

The ceremony ended with the distribution of the food offerings and bowls of alcohol to the most important members of the community. The remainder of the sacred water was drunk by the priest himself, and the community dispersed.

2. The fact that when, during the subsequent interview, the priest mentioned some of the ingredients, he arranged the Ahom words in Assamese fashion. For example, 'three ducks' eggs' were designated as *sam khai pit*, whereas any Ahom speaker or person familiar with Ahom ritual texts would have said *khai pit sam bai*, or *khai pit sam luk*. This was in spite of the fact that, when explaining that the three tables were intended for Lengdon, Langkuri and Ja Sing Phra, he volunteered to name all the ritual ingredients in Ahom. The tables were in fact designated *mai hang*, and the holy water *nam tong*, which two terms can be related to fairly convincing Ahom constructions, *mai* standing for 'wood', *hang* for 'platform', *nam* for 'water', and *tong* for 'water jar'.

The origin of a pseudo-Ahom language

Linguists and historians are generally united in the view that the Ahom language has been dead for about two hundred years, and that all Ahom use Assamese as their mother tongue. This view is hotly contested by the traditional Ahom priests and spokesmen of the revivalist movement, who have staunchly maintained that the Ahom language did not die out and that the traditional priests can decipher the Ahom script and always have been able to chant from ancient Ahom documents. The Memorandum goes so far as to claim that 'the priestly classes use it [Ahom] as their mother tongue' (Memorandum 1968:40).

Fifteen years ago, when I was in Assam for the first time and tape-recorded the chanting of Ahom priests as they were reciting Ahom texts, I was impressed by their zeal and fervour and by the mysterious, sonorous manner in which they performed their chanting. I was somewhat overawed when confronted with this proof that Ahom had indeed survived in a few priestly families. The Ahom priests apparently were able to provide the key with which to unlock the multitude of unpublished Ahom documents, thus providing an important new, hitherto unused, tool in comparative Tai studies.

In the belief that the knowledge of the old Ahom tradition of the last living representatives of this tradition should be recorded, I led an expedition to India in 1980 with the simple objective of bringing together the few people who could read Ahom and getting them to translate a single text of 27 pages which I had selected for that purpose. Six leading Ahom readers spent two weeks reading and re-reading the ancient text.

The disappointing result was that, whereas they could readily decipher the script and read the words aloud, they did so without assigning tones, as soon became obvious, and without any idea of the meaning of the words except for a few of the simplest expressions. I reluctantly drew the conclusion that the priests' knowledge of Ahom was virtually nil and that Ahom really was a dead language (Terwiel 1989).

The discovery of the strong limitations of the Ahom priests' knowledge opened my eyes to the fact that many of the puzzling aspects of my fieldwork findings might be due to contemporary factors, rather than to the assimilation process of 800 years. I therefore went through a series of reappraisals.

There are marked differences between the Ahom of old documents, which is easily recognizable on the points of grammar and vocabulary as a language belonging to the Shan group of Tai languages, and what the revivalists call Ahom, which has totally abandoned the rules of Tai grammar and often uses Ahom words in a non-idiomatic sense. It could be argued that these differences have evolved gradually over the last two hundred years, in other words, that the priests' 'mother tongue' simply became separated from its original grammatical principles and underwent an astonishingly massive change as regards semantics.

The evidence suggests that we are dealing here with a different linguistic phenomenon altogether, however, namely with the construct of a people who for political reasons deny that their language has died. These people have not given themselves time to internalize a Tai-style grammar and vocabulary and have created sentences primarily with the aid of dictionaries.

For political reasons it was deemed necessary to go ahead and create documents and prayers in a kind of quasi-language, which I would like to style 'pseudo-Ahom'. This is a language that bears little or no resemblance to Ahom as it was once spoken and as it has been preserved in old manuscripts. The Chaklong marriage ceremony as described by Padmeswar Gogoi is full of this pseudo-Ahom. Deconstructing this quasi-language is a time-consuming and thankless task.

A few examples should suffice to show that the religious chants used in Chaklong are no more than a series of Ahom-sounding words strung together by people who have no idea about Tai grammar and who have simply used dictionaries in an attempt at word-for-word translation. On p. 81 of Gogoi's description (1976) we come across the sentence *khung lu mao cao kao di di si hap ao jao*, which is translated as 'I respectfully accept your offer'. The most probable dictionary equivalents of these words are: *khrueng lu* 'offering'; *mo chao* 'priest'; *kao* 'I'; *di di* 'very good'; *sia* a suffix; *hap* 'to accept'; *ao* 'to take'; and *jao* 'finished'. These words can all be found in *Ahom Lexicons* (Barua and Phukan 1964). To any Tai speaker, however, it is gibberish.

The sentence 'Lady, please accept this garland of flowers' is given in

pseudo-Ahom as *nang cao* (lady) *blok* (flowers) *khwan ru* (garland?) *heu di* (to accept). To anyone familiar with Tai languages it is clear that this combination of Tai words is meaningless and represents a word-for-word dictionary translation.

Often the thought processes of the creators of this pseudo-Ahom cannot be easily reconstructed. For example, the English sentence 'Husband, I adore you with this garland of 101 flowers of 101 ideas and choose you [to be] my husband' is rendered as *Phu cao pak pak blok khan khup tang jan heu* (Padmeswar Gogoi 1976:81). The words *phu cao* 'husband', *pak* 'hundred', *blok* 'flowers', and *heu* 'to give' are easily identifiable. However, the words *khan khup tang jan* remain puzzling, even with English clues provided and a dictionary at hand. My best guess would be that the creators of the ritual words here have used *khan* for 'to speak' (Barua and Phukan 1964:19), *khup* for 'to kneel down' (Barua and Phukan 1964:25), *tang* for 'to offer as a sacrifice' (Barua and Phukan 1964:42)⁵ and *jan* for 'to glitter' (Barua and Phukan 1964:95).

The demands of a full-scale ritual life have placed the linguistic inventiveness of the leaders of the revivalist movement under tremendous pressure. The old dictionaries are not adapted to the needs of the modern world. For instance, the very name of the Eastern Tai Literary Organisation, Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai, is indicative of the way Ahom words are used in new ways. Here *ban ok* stands for 'East', *pup lik* for 'book' and 'to write' respectively (an inventive neologism for 'literary'), and *mioung Tai* for 'country Tai'. A word for 'organization' apparently was too difficult at the time and was left out.

The revivalists have adopted this pseudo-Ahom language with zeal. Many of them have internalized the Ahom script and practise writing short messages to one another. The lack of a word for 'hurray!' apparently posed a practical problem during the mid-1980s. Somebody, probably a person familiar with Burmese, suggested using the expression '*pe ong le*', and this has rapidly found its way into the new ritual Ahom, besides being shouted in welcome of guests from abroad. For 'flag' the Ahom word *khiring* for 'canopy' (Barua and Phukan 1964:21) was combined with *fra* (inspired by *phra*), the word for 'God' (Barua and Phukan 1964:66). The leaders of the revivalist movement have moreover composed rousing nationalist songs, such as Kuptang (which means 'Kneeling to pay homage') and Pun Tai ('Whatever tribe you belong to, you are Tai'). These songs are memorized by young Ahom.

In order to cope with the demand for word-for-word translations of Assamese into Tai using the Ahom script, one of the leaders of the revivalist movement in 1987 published an *Assamese English Tai Dictionary*, in

⁵ In the process of the creation of pseudo-Ahom the words *khup tang*, or *khruup tang*, have come to be taken as a form of address, something like 'respectful greetings'.

which a large number of modern Assamese words are found, together with their equivalents in Ahom script. The compiler, Nomal Chandra Gogoi, has described the procedure by which he set about collecting his information. He commenced in 1984 by asking Aiton speakers to provide Tai-Aiton translations for a large number of Assamese words. Then a Tai-Khamti speaker over the years added to this list, which in 1986 was greatly extended with the aid of a Central Thai-English dictionary (N.C. Gogoi 1987). The result is a hodgepodge of three different Tai languages written in Ahom script. This, however, fulfils its purpose, namely to provide the revivalists with the means of converting their mother tongue into what they claim and believe to be Ahom, admirably. Part of this newly coined vocabulary is learnt by leading members of the revivalist movement, who combine these words into sentences with the aid of grammatical rules that usually reflect Assamese. The result is that the revivalists communicate in a medley of words of Tai origin that is intelligible only to Assamese speakers who have internalized the same lexicon.

The creation of pseudo-old Ahom ritual

The beginnings of the pseudo-Ahom language may lie in the mid-1960s, at a time when *Ahom Lexicons* was published and the Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad was founded. It is likely that this was also the time when Ahom ritual was first re-enacted. So far I have come across no record of the state ritual of Medam Mephi being performed before the 1970s. Similarly, when the anthropologist Indira Barua asked questions about the traditional Ahom wedding in the village of Moranjan in the early 1970s, she discovered to her surprise that the inhabitants could recollect only a single marriage that had taken place in the Chaklong style and that that had been as recently as 1968 (Indira Barua 1977:62). The puzzling features of Ahom ritual that were pointed out earlier in this paper indicated that Ahom rituals were created in very much the same way as the sentences in the pseudo-Ahom language: sequences of ritual acts were strung together into a single ritual. This ritual was performed for the first time in the 1960s in response to a political demand.

This procedure should not be simply dismissed as being intentionally fraudulent. The priests have always maintained that they can speak Ahom, and they have backed up this claim in time by their ability to decipher the old script and to translate some short sentences with the aid of dictionaries. This ability has been used very successfully over the years to enhance their status. In the 1960s, however, they were faced with an extraordinary demand: old state rituals had to be performed again, an old marriage ceremony had to be re-created, temples erected, and community rituals performed in them.

The old manuscripts contained some clues about the appropriate ingredients, such as *pit*, *kai*, *kheu*, *oi* and *mak mu* (ducks, chickens, rice, sugar-cane and areca nuts), but how these ingredients had to be used

could not be deduced from the texts, as the priests had no understanding of Ahom grammar. If these manuscripts contained any prayers, these could not be found, recognized, or understood. The priests, who had derived so much status from their ability to read Ahom texts aloud, now faced a dilemma: either they admitted to not being able to understand Ahom or they had to provide the required ritual details.

They opted for the latter alternative and created something that appeared to them as a ritual of the kind the ancient Ahom might once have performed, in which prayers made up largely of pseudo-Ahom were an essential ingredient.⁶ Here the Ahom-Assamese dictionaries came to the rescue, and with much creativity prayers were made up and intoned in an appropriately reverential manner that satisfied the needs of the political movement.

The Ahom priests had very little to guide them in this. Although the old texts mention a *rik-khwan* state ritual, they provide no further details on this. A ceremony to honour the king is referred to, but there is no indication of how this was performed. Mentions of animal sacrifices abound in the historical accounts, which omit to mention what instrument was used to kill the animals, however. Now, in the 1990s, when the sacrifice of the sacred cock is re-enacted, the animal is decapitated with a stroke of nothing less than the object that is mentioned in the historical texts as one of the regalia, namely the sword of state, *hengdan*. The temples for these pseudo-old rituals were constructed on an octagonal plan, probably inspired by the eight-sided coins. Someone may have read about the *lak* (ritual post), but I suspect that the holes drilled in this central pole to stick a multitude of brackets for lamps in, so that it may be used as an enormous 'candle tree', must be ascribed to recent inspiration.

In the same way as the pseudo-Ahom language met with success and people began learning Ahom terms of address by heart, the new 'old' Ahom ritual took off and over the past twenty years has started living a life of its own. These developments may be illustrated by, for example, the proliferation of symbols. In the early mid-1960s and 1970s, Ahom revivalism used few symbols except for the fact that some priestly families built their houses on stilts and wore white dress and white turbans as signs of their individual status, the wearing of white and gold-coloured silk already then being perceived as a sign of Ahom-ness, as the Ahom claim that they introduced sericulture to India. Males of Ahom descent who are prominent in the revivalist movement have now furthermore started prefixing the title Chow (Tai, 'Lord') to their name, and women the title Nang ('Lady').

⁶ Many prayers begin with the sentence *Chao nu ru chao oei*, which is an exclamation meaning 'Lord over our heads, O Lord!' Though this may have been derived from an authentic old Ahom document, the sentence following it is usually in pseudo-Ahom.

Some copper-plate inscriptions of between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century have a seal featuring a winged lion engraved on them.⁷ Whatever the cultural background of this winged animal may be, it has been adopted as an important national symbol and over the past few years has come to adorn letterheads, Ahom publications, carrier bags, and commemorative medals, and now takes pride of place on the national flag.⁸ Other important neo-Ahom symbols are the above-mentioned candle-holder, or *lak sang*, the sword of state, *hengdan*, which has become popular as the ornamental weapon of the chief male revivalists, and the elevated metal tray, *horai*, which probably indeed has a Southeast Asian origin and now is the chief symbol in the Medam Me Phi state ritual, in which 39 past kings are honoured. There are furthermore the snake, *laka*, known from texts containing calendars, and the tiger, *suea*, the word for which is part of the royal epithet. Recently a winged horse and a winged snake-bird have been added to the Ahom bestiary.

Chukafa Nagar, the new Ahom cultural centre in the capital city of Assam, has its own monument, made up of an assortment of symbols. Basically it consists of an octagon surmounted by the winged lion. Inside the octagon are the ladders by which the legendary founders of the Tai race descended from heaven and, in huge Ahom characters, the words *Ran Suea Ka Pha* (*ran* apparently comes from Thai and means 'building', while *Suea Ka Pha* is the name of the leader who led the Ahom to Assam).

As the movement developed, the rituals became more flamboyant and assertive. In the early 1990s the Ahom organized a ceremonial military-style march-past, followed by the raising of the Ahom flag, on a flagpole surrounded by an octagonal fence. Three Ahom dressed in loose pure white uniforms, their turbans at least three times as high as those the priests used to wear a decade previously, stood guard ceremonially with raised *hengdan* outside the fence.

Assessment

The case of the Ahom of Assam illustrates how important a lost heritage can be, and how a people may yearn for its roots, how keen may be its urge to recover the past, and how it may channel these wishes and urges into a strong political movement. The leaders of the Ahom, in their search for an Ahom identity, were thwarted by the loss of virtually all of the Southeast Asian culture, the people long ago having adopted the Assamese language and various variants of the Hindu religion. The old priestly castes, through their custodianship of old manuscripts and their ability to read old Ahom

⁷ Pushpa Gogoi (1990:21) claims to have seen this symbol on late-seventeenth-century coins as well, but I personally have not hitherto come across a single Ahom coin featuring it.

⁸ It is worth noting that over the years the symbol has changed shape: its originally long ears have shrunk, its mane and wings have grown, and its hind legs have become bird's claws.

texts aloud, had created the impression that they were still fluent in Ahom. This exaggeration of their knowledge placed them in a difficult position when, as a result of the exuberant growth of the political revivalist movement, there arose a strong demand for the resurrection of ancient state, community and private rituals. In response to this demand the priests did what they could, searching for clues in the annals, with the aid of dictionaries coining Ahom phrases, and, it is claimed in this paper, creating new ceremonial elements virtually out of thin air, thus producing a make-believe ancient ritual.

This explains why a comparison of Ahom ritual with the rituals of other Tai peoples is apt to yield relatively little result. In light of the present assessment it seems advisable not to attempt such a comparison without first ascertaining whether particular ritual features are likely to go back to the time when Ahom culture was still alive or have been newly invented in response to revivalist trends.⁹

The Chaklong prayers, and, I assume, the basic outline of the Lengdon and Ja Sing Phra community ceremonies, as well as such Ahom state rituals as Medam Mephi and Um Pha, appear to have been largely re-invented in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the past thirty years these rituals have met with a resounding community response. There can be little doubt that the Ahom people genuinely believe that they are observing an age-old tradition here, a tradition transmitted in an unbroken line from the early days in the thirteenth century when King Suea Ka Pha crossed the Patkai Mountains.

If the process of re-inventing Ahom ritual had taken place a generation earlier, and more especially, if the priests had been able to adequately read Ahom texts describing ancient rituals in some detail, and if the tell-tale signs of uncertain diction, the presence of brand-new cult buildings and the lack of ceremonial paraphernalia had not existed, it would have been difficult to deny the Ahom claims that they were observing a non-Hindu, non-Buddhist tradition derived direct, in an unbroken line, from the pan-Tai religious tradition of the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D.

The case of the neo-Ahom rituals illustrates how leaders of ethnic minorities may under modern political circumstances use a variety of devices to satisfy the need for an old ritual. Ahom priests are by no means the only ritual specialists who are asked to observe traditions that have been imperfectly transmitted. The Mizo priests of Mizoram, for instance, at present are in the process of scanning *inter alia* the books of the Old Testament for clues as to their original religion. The spiritual leaders of an ethnic group that has lost most of its past culture may draw on old ethnographic accounts relating to their ancestors, or, if these are not available, descriptions of neighbouring groups, accounts from other parts of the

⁹ An example of a 'Southeast Asian cultural good' that the Ahom appear to have preserved throughout the long period of their stay in Assam is rice-beer making (see Terwiel 1992:127-68).

world, or pure inspiration may serve the purpose. The profession of a ritual specialist does not usually admit of uncertainties: he must show that he is well trained as well as inspired. When performing some ceremonial act for a group whose links with the past have become tenuous, the celebrant may well be obliged to fill in gaps in his knowledge by relying upon inspiration.

The first time I asked an Ahom priest to translate some Ahom, not in general terms but word-for-word, he reluctantly admitted that this was rather beyond his powers and suggested that I pour him a glass of whiskey, since that might help obtain divine inspiration. The whiskey did not have the desired effect, but it did remind the anthropologist of the frequent use of alcohol by religious specialists. May we assume, then, that alcohol and other stimulants are occasionally used to bridge gaps in the historical continuity? Have we anthropologists not been rather too quick to believe the claims of age-old traditions? How strong is our evidence for the historical depth of oral traditions? These are some of the disconcerting questions prompted by the Ahom case.

Theoretical considerations

1. The material presented above firstly raises the question of truthfulness. For the Ahom priests, there was no question that they had remained the custodians of the old Ahom tradition. After all, they were able to copy and read the old manuscripts, they studied old word lists, and they managed to understand a few words of Ahom. When the political movement aimed at reviving old rituals took off, they responded as best they could, at first always searching their historical documents for clues. Although a goddess Ja Sing Phra is mentioned in the Ahom Buranjis, there is no evidence that a Ja Sing Phra ritual was performed in the past. As far as I can see, the entire ritual sequence, including the Ahom chants, may have been created in the late 1970s. Hesitantly at first, but now, almost fifteen years later, with greater and greater confidence, Ahom ritual has 'started living a life of its own'. Those conducting the rituals are convinced that they are re-enacting their old tradition. The leaders of the Ahom revivalist movement are still in the process of building up their cultural heritage. So one of them in September 1993 visited Bangkok, where he collected video recordings of Central Thai dances to take to Assam and teach these dances to the younger generation there, he assured me. Before long, these dances will inspire Ahom versions which will further enrich their culture and enliven the voyage of discovery into their ancient past.

The anthropologist, however, is able to demonstrate that the Ahom cannot read their ancient manuscripts. He can further show that the rituals there described have nothing in common with the constructs of after the 1960s. To him the claims of historical continuity are simply untrue. This puts him on a direct collision course with the revivalist movement. There are several ways in which he may deal with this situation. So anthropologists may formulate their findings with so much caution or using such

convoluted terminology that they may hope to avoid a direct confrontation. Others, the present author included, readily engage in a debate. It does not seem likely, however, that one academic will be able to stem the tide of revivalism once it has got under way. The revivalists will simply dismiss him as an ill-informed or ill-intentioned crank.

2. In the second place, the material has revealed some interesting linguistic phenomena. Virtually all the ritual language used has turned out to be a pseudo-language. When used by the priest in the temple, the lack of intelligibility of this language may be interpreted as serving a religious function. However, the Ahom community has been assiduously instructed in this pseudo-Ahom, in the 1990s letters are being written using words from Assamese-Ahom dictionaries, and a basic Ahom vocabulary seems to be developing among the revivalists. When short phrases are coined in this ritual language, the pronunciation, word choice and syntax are heavily influenced by the rules of the Assamese language.

3. Lastly, it has been established that the Ahom ritual is largely *sui generis*. In the performance of what the celebrants believe to be an ancient Southeast Asian ritual, the choice of ceremonial objects and the manner in which these are treated springs from the imagination of the priests and committee members.

Ahom has as yet no myths. If the links between myth and ritual are as close as the functionalists, who proclaim laws such as 'myth is the charter for ritual performance' (Leach 1972:240), would have it, then the development of an Ahom mythological charter must be imminent. The rise of such a neo-Ahom mythology as an underpinning of the reconstituted Ahom ceremonies may then be seen as the birth of a new religion.

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