



Beyond The Veil: Unraveling The Mysteries of The Ahom's Mortuary Traditions

Gitalee Changmai

M.A in history (Dibrugarh University)

Email- vonti.changmai19@gmail.com

WhatsApp no: 8134956325

Article History

Received: 08 Aug 2023

Revised: 29 Sept 2023

Accepted: 29 Nov 2023

CCLicense
CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0

Abstract

The last stage of human's life culminates in mortality. After the demise of an individual the funeral practices vary in accordance with geographic location and among the specific ethnic groups or communities, and it encompasses diverse religious traditions. The Tai Ahom ethnic group of Assam upholds a unique and culturally significant burial ritual that traces its roots to the practices of Yunan Province, their original homeland. In addition to this, various mortuary customs are followed by the Tai Ahom community, from the time of a person's death through their burial and continue even after that. Over time, the gradual influence of Hinduism has led to the transformation of some of their indigenous mortuary customs, while the traditional 'Maidam Dia'(grave) still prevails in certain areas among the Ahom populace of Assam, a tradition dating back to the era of Swargadeo Chao-lung Sukapha. This paper attempts to study the unique mortuary rituals, including the practice of 'Maidam Dia', among the Tai Ahom people of Assam, and it gives an overview of the evolution of these customs over time under the influence of Hinduism.

Keywords: - Tai Ahom, Burial Practices, Mortuary Customs, Moidam, Hinduism.

Introduction: -

The Ahoms are the indigenous ethnic group of Assam. In 1228 a branch of the Tai Ahom people from Mong Mao, led by Chao-lung Sukapha migrated to the Brahmaputra valley, where they settled and established the Ahom kingdom. Sukapha played a pivotal role in establishing a

strong and enduring foundation for Ahom rule in Assam. Sukapha was a remarkable statesman and his diplomatic skills included organizing matrimonial alliances with neighboring tribes and sometimes used forceful tactics to establish the strongest foundation of 'BOR AKHOM' (united Assam). This foundation served as the cornerstone for Ahom rule in Assam, lasting for nearly six centuries. Swargadeo Chao-lung Sukapha brought with him a treasury of indigenous customs and heritage from his homeland. Among these customs, the mortuary rituals are the most distinctive, and they are still followed by a segment of the Ahom people in Assam. However under the influence of Hinduism, many of their traditional mortuary practices have changed over time. In contrast to their ancient burial customs, the majority of Ahom people in Assam now practice cremation marking a significant cultural shift.

Objectives: -

The basic objectives of the paper are as follows -

1. To know the mortuary traditions practiced by the Tai Ahom people of Assam.
2. To examine the rituals associated with 'Maidam dia' customs.
3. To explore the evolution of the mortuary customs over time under the influence of Hinduism.

Methodology:-

The present paper is based on both primary and secondary sources, which have been gathered from Books, Journal, and interviews.

Discussion and Results:-

In the Ahom society of medieval Assam, deceased individuals were buried with distinct rituals. In his book 'Ahom Din', author Hiteswar Barbaruah describes (as cited in Baruah) the posthumous customs that followed the demise of an Ahom king. These included a series of religious ceremonies, dressing the deceased in new clothing, and placement of the body within a coffin known as 'Rung-Dang', typically crafted from Uriam wood. Subsequently, the body was transported to Charaideo for burying (Baruah, 2015). This burial tradition continues to be observed in many regions, particularly among the Ahom priestly classes, including Deodhai (Ma-Chai/changbun), Mohan (Ma-hung), Bailung (Ma-plang) (Gogoi, 1976, p.88). It is noteworthy that during the ahom period, a religious ceremony called 'Dam-Lao-Dam-Phi' was conducted in accordance with the tai tradition. Here, the question arises: What exactly was 'Dam-Lao-Dam-Phi'? In this context Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, In his book 'Tai Ahom Religion and Customs' mentions that "when a Ahom king was on his deathbed without any hope of survival, a religious ceremony called Dam-Lao-Dam-Phi was performed to cut short the period of suffering" (Gogoi, 1976, p. 88). The same ritual, known as 'bat mukoli kora', is still prevalent among the ahom (Baruah, 2015).

In the Ahom society, after an individual's death, the body is typically buried following the completion of specific traditional rituals. "Initially, the deceased is carefully moved from the location where they passed away and placed on a 'pira' (wooden tool) with their head oriented eastward, usually in front of the main entrance of the house. Then one of the deceased sons holds

a sickle upside down in his left hand, breaks a chicken egg on the deceased's head and spreads it all over the body, and proceeds to wash with mah-halodhi (paste of black lentils and turmeric) as part of the ritual. Applying eggs to deceased body during cleansing, believed to delay decomposition, ensuring longer preservation without rooting (Burhagohain, 2017). Bathwater is drained through a hole in the wall. Afterwards, the body is dressed in white clothes and brought to the courtyard, where a small structure is (rabha/pandel) constructed using four bamboo posts and banana leaves on top. In the pandel the dead body is placed on a new carpet, head oriented towards the northeast. The rest of the body, except for the face is covered with the white cloths". (Gohain, 2009). The 'pandel' constructed in the courtyard to place the body and to facilitate to performance of rituals is known as 'Rangchali' (Changbun Baruah, as cited in Baruah, 2015).

Afterward, a ritual, namely, the cooking of rice for the deceased begins. The three main earthen kitchen posts of the family are removed, and new one are set up in the courtyard, typically to the right of the deceased. In the new earthen posts, three 'pithi'(equivalent to the back of the left hand) of rice, along with three eggs are cooked for the deceased. Then a chicken is killed, burnt in the fire. A pair of banana leaves is placed on the 'Maihang'(a raised dish)on the right side of the deceased, and the chicken, rice and two boiled eggs are set upon it. Similarly under the Maihang, a piece of betel nut with chinkara flowers, rice, an egg thoughtfully arranged upon a banana leaf. Meanwhile, 'Namlao' or 'Loklao' are presented on a separate platter (Gohain, 2009).

After the customary ceremonies are concluded, a Rang, primarily crafted from bamboo, is prepared for the transportation of the deceased for burial. Dr. Birendra kumar Gohain referred to this coffin as 'Sangi', 'Rangbhar', or 'Tungkhung' in his book 'Tai Ahom Janagusti and Tai Parampara'. As part of the rites, deceased son pays a tribute to the bamboo tree and makes an initial cut using a knife. Subsequently other individuals present during the funeral rites complete the construction of the 'Rangbhar'(Baruah, 2015). To put the body into the Rangbhar, specific rituals must also be followed. Four pieces of betel nut are positioned on the forehead, two arms and navel of the deceased. Before or after these actions, there's another ritual known as 'Navi Kota' is conducted. According to the customary procedure, a needle-like bamboo implement filled with 'ewa yarn' is placed on the white cloth covering the deceased's navel, three knots tied, and the excess thread is cut using bamboo saw. This signifies the termination of all connections with the deceased and their living relatives(Gohain, 2009). Before placing the dead body into the Rang, 'Pengoni Kubua' is celebrated. During this ritual, a priest kills a chicken in a specific manner, the chicken legs placed on the 'Rang' and the remaining parts are discarded in an isolated location. This process also symbolizes the breaking of all bonds between the deceased and their relatives (Gohain, 2009). "The deceased son then washes the Rang with consecrated water and places the body in the Rang, preparing it for complete burial. After the body is placed in the Rang, the priest who was involved in the peng mora ritual hangs the 'Mo'cheora' (a white cloth) on two sticks of the Rang. Prior to the funeral procession, the family members, knelt in front of the deceased to pay their final respects, and the priest bestowed upon them 'Janming', which signifies blessings"(Baruah, 2015, p. 165).

Moidam Dia: The Traditional Burial Practice of The Ahom: -

After the completion of the aforementioned rituals, the body is taken to the cemetery for burial in a special manner following the tradition of their ancestors. Their burial practice is known as 'Moidam Dia'. "The grave with a huge mound of earth on it is called Moidam (Gogoi, 1976, p.92). However, the present day Moidams display significant structural differences from those of the Ahom period. The rituals associated with 'Moidam dia' have undergone slight modifications over time. However, during the funeral processions, deceased son carries a symbolic load instead of the deceased body. In the said load, he packs essentials like clothing, accessories, beddings, and other personal belongings which were used by the deceased in their daily life. Additionally, he brings a Banana plant, Betel nut plant and the Maihang (a raised dish) consisting of rice and eggs, which were already prepared, as offerings for the departed. On the other hand, some raw Turmeric and the white parts of the 'Patidoi' (Murta Tree), are cut into pieces as symbol of gold and wealth. These are then placed into a white bag, prepared on the spot, which is also included in the same load (Gohain, 2009). These items, used in their life, are carried by deceased son during the funeral procession for the purpose of burying them together with the departed. He also carried a jur (traditional torch made from bamboo) and cotton thread, and "drops at regular intervals on the way cut fringes of cotton cloths" (Gogoi, 1976, p. 95). This act also signifies the severance of the relationship between the deceased and the relatives (Gohain, 2009). Four individuals, primarily including the son and relatives of the deceased, carry the Rangbhar. However, according to Ahom traditional beliefs, only two people are allowed to bear the Rang for minors and the unwed. In Damchao Hem Burhagohain article, it is mentioned that no specific rituals are performed for suicide victims (Burhagohain, 2017).

To bury the deceased body, it is customary to acquire a piece of land from the 'Ailengdon' (staladhipoti, a deity), typically achieved by presenting him with 'guapan' (betel nut). Then, the deceased's son initiates the process by using a hoe to dig a patch of earth, placing it near 'Guapan'. Following this, the relatives have completed digging a grave with dimension of seven feet in length, four feet in breadth and five feet in depth (Gohain, 2009). After completing the grave, the Rangbhari(the men is associated with carrying the Rangbhar) gently turns the body around it three times before thoughtfully placing the rang beside the grave. The grave is ceremonially cleansed with water from tekeli (earthen pot). Following this, a second coffin, typically crafted from Uriam wood (or another available wood), is carefully positioned over the grave. The deceased is then gently transferred from the previous bamboo Rang to the wooden Rang within the grave. Finally the coffin is sealed with plank and secured in place with nails. Following this the bamboo Rang is delicately cut and gently placed inside the grave (Baruah, 2015). However in some places the coffin carrying the deceased is buried without any alternations. All the belongings, including the rice and eggs, carried by the deceased son meticulously placed near the deceased's feet within the grave. After that, everyone present in the funeral procession gather around the grave holding a piece of soil in their hands. The Mo'lung (priest) then recites mantras and bestows 'Janming' (blessings). In accordance with the customs, the deceased son, who has previously set aside a piece of soil, solemnly places it in the grave.

Subsequently, everyone puts soil into the grave, forming a crescent shaped moidam (Baruah, 2015). The present moidam is comparatively smaller than the moidams from the Ahom period. However, if any objects are accidentally left to be buried in the grave, the family members later leave them on the Moidam.

Following the completion of the Moidam dia, the deceased son build a small house with a thatched roof on the top of the moidam. Then, the mo'cheura, carried on the rang with two sticks during the funeral processions, is draped over the roof of the house (Gohain, 2009). It is believed that if the cloth remain there for an extended period, the departed holds onto numerous hopes. If the cloth or Mo'cheura falls off quickly, it is believed that the person has departed without carrying any hopes in life. Within the structure a wooden square is constructed, (Dr. Sukha Baruah mentioned it as 'Khat-paleng' in her book 'Tai Ahom Hokolor Swakiyo Dharmiyo Porompura') and four urns resembling banana flowers (kol dil) are arranged at each corner of the square. These urns are referred in the Tai language as 'Ri-ri-ya-si-si-ya' and are primarily colored with charcoal, yolk, and turmeric. Then, horses, bumblebees and birds, crafted uniquely from bamboo (tamal) adorn the top of the 'Ri-ri-ya-si-si-ya' (Gohain, 2009). "This house is referred to as Mo-rong ghar, has its entrance oriented towards the feet of the deceased". (Gohain, 2009, p. 289)

Then the deceased son proceeds to perform very last rituals related to Moidam dia. He digs the bottom of the Moidam with a hoe, sows sesame seeds, mustard seeds, and black lentils seeds. It is then enclosed with bamboo fencing, and everyone contributes by placing tree branches, completing the funeral rituals for the deceased (Gohain, 2009). When the people return from the funeral, their family members light a fire at the gateway. Participants in the funeral rituals then put thorny branches into the flames and bathed before entering the house (Gohain, 2009). Some individuals proceed to their own home, while the rest come to the deceased's house, and they perform the same ritual. However, a relative purifies everyone by sprinkling water from a pot near the fires, over the branches of chinkara flower. After that, people, excluding family members and relatives, touch the 'telpani' (a combination of mustard oil, water and rice), prepared by the Mo'lung. Those who are older than the deceased traditionally touched the 'telpani' with their thumbs, while younger ones used their little fingers. Afterwards, the family members invite everyone for 'Tiloni', offering them Tamul-Pan (areca nut and betel leaf). (Baruah, 2015).

It is noteworthy that the eldest son traditionally undertakes the responsibility of performing 'kaj dhora' (brat/vow) from the moment of the deceased passing until the doha. In the absence of the eldest son, another son takes on this responsibility. The appointed individual is given a sickle; the same one used during the deceased's bathing ritual, along with a stick and is obligated to follow these customs until reaching the 'doha'.

Post- moidam dia rituals: an overview

1. Tiloni (Kun tai chi or Ban le):- Tiloni or Tilani is conducted three days after a person's death. During these three days the relatives of the deceased observe fasting. On this day, the family members and relatives clean and wipe the house, as well as wash dishes and clothes in

preparation for performing the rituals. In her book, "Tai Ahom Hokolor Swakiyo Dharma Parampara," Dr. Sukha Baruah provides a detailed account of tiloni. The following description outlines tiloni, drawing from the insight shared by her: On the morning of the Tiloni, the villagers construct a small structure (rabha/pandel) using four bamboo posts and banana leaves on the top, in the backyard of the house. The deceased family offers one koloh lao (rice beer) and two chickens, specially for the rangbhari and the peoples present in the tiloni. Subsequently, individuals present at the tiloni, followed by family and relatives completed the Telpani Suwa ritual as customary, just as it was performed during the deceased's passing. Afterwards, the offering wishes for the eternal peace of the departed soul and presenting janming (blessings), some relatives proceed to cook chicken meat with 'kol posola' (banana shoot) and 'handohguri' (an Assamese fast food made by grinding roasted bora rice). This dish is then served, along with namlao (traditional rice beer), by mo'lung (priest) and the attendees. According to another ritual, a set comprising areca nut and betel leaf, a stone, an egg, two 'jumuthi' (small bundles of paddy strew for kindling fire), and two bamboo barrels - one filled with water and the other with namlao, are carefully arranged on a pair of banana leaves on the rabha. The priest breaks the egg with a stone, puts it on the fire, pours water and lao (rice beer) on it, and then extinguishes the fire (Baruah, 2015).

2. Doha: - Ten days following a person's demise, the dohakaj is conducted on an odd-numbered day, such as the eleventh, thirteenth, or fifteenth in accordance with precise rules and regulations. The deceased's son, who is involved in 'kaj dhora,' observes fasting the day before the doha. It is customary for the eldest son-in-law of the deceased to provide a 'Pig' and 'Luklao' during the doha. Additionally, the other son-in-law also contributes pigs, chickens, ducks, etc. as much as they can. "In the traditional practice known as 'chickchak khuwa' the meat from the lower abdomen of a pig is fried and given to relatives in advance as part of a longstanding ritual, often consumed with luklao" (Changbun Baruah, as cited in Baruah, 2015).

In accordance with Tai Ahom Tradition, the primary aim of the 'mora hokam' (death ceremony) or 'doha' is to establish 'Dam', after ten days. Three priests take the fried pork from the 'chickchak khuwa' and consecrate a 'Grihadam'. This signifies that the soul of the recently departed is placed on the grihadam from the day onward. Henceforth, the deceased receives adoration, joining the rest of the dam. Following this, an elaborate banquet is prepared, and all attendees are served. Subsequently, a meeting of "randhoni and bilonia" (cook and those involved in serving the food) is convened, during which a 'Mehenga' (a net like structure crafted from bamboo) is arranged. All the ingredients cooked during the banquet are carefully arranged on a pair of banana leaves in the mehenga. A dish is specially prepared for 'Teo lung'. It is believed that this constitutes the last meal of the deceased, shared with the living (Changbun Baruah, as cited in Baruah, 2015)

From Moidam to Cremation: The Evolution of Ancestral Farewell Practices:-

The traditional burial practices of the Tai Ahom and the associated rituals have undergone substantial changes over time, influenced significantly by Hinduism and the rise of Neo-Vaishnavism.

Those who adhere to Neo-Vaishnavism within the Ahom community practice cremation, and perform death ceremonies such as Tiloni and Doha. However, these ceremonies are conducted in accordance with distinct rituals. Additionally, they also conduct 'Mahekia'(performed one month after the death of a person), 'Somohia'(performed six month after the death of a person), and 'Boserekia' (performed after completing one year of the deceased's passing). The use of 'Mah-prakhad', a mixture of chickpea, greengram, rice, banana, sugarcane, pieces of coconut etc. is integral to the death related ceremonies.

The transition didn't happen overnight, it was under the reign of Bar Raja Phuleswari konwari (a non-ahom wife of swargadeo shiva singha) that the practice of cremation, rather than burying the body, was introduced to the Ahom royal family((Gogoi, 1976). "During the time though the corpses of the swargadeos were cremated, yet the bones were collected from the cremation ground and was buried under the ground over which a mound (Moidam) was built".(Rajkumar, 1968, as cited in Saikia, 2019). However, under the aforementioned system, the Moidam of the Late Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha was bestowed. Subsequently during the reign of his son Lakshmi Singha the kingdom faced numerous troubles and challenges. In response, Lakshmi Singha discussed the matter with the priest and reinstated Rajeswar Singha's Moidam, following Ahom tradition (Gohain 2009 p. 396).

Conclusion: -

The mortuary customs of the Ahoms hold a profound and significant place in the cultural and religious history of their community. Each funeral ritual holds its unique and meaningful significance. Over time, a significant portion of the Ahom population adopted Hinduism, resulting in shifts in their mortuary customs. Despite this shift, Deodhai, Mohon, and the Bailungs faithfully preserve their unique identity. They continue to observe the Moidam dia customs and other minor rituals, maintaining a tradition that traces its roots back to the time of the Ahom dynasty.

References

1. Baruah, S. (2015). *টাই আহোমসকলৰ স্বকীয় ধৰ্মীয় পৰম্পৰা (Own Religious Traditions of The Tai Ahoms)*. Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha.
2. Borgohain, H. (2017). *টাই আহোমৰ শৱ সংকাৰ*. Khoun moun.
<https://www.facebook.com/741797565967045/posts/1080320202114778/?mibextid=ZKlF025XJ6KyrSs8>
3. Gogoi, P. (1976). *Tai Ahom Religion and Customs*. Publication board.
4. Gohain, B. k. (2009). *তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠী আৰু টাই পৰম্পৰা (The Tai Ahoms and Their Traditions)*. Aparupa Publishing House.
5. Rajkumar, S. (1968). *ইতিহাসে সোঁৱৰা ছশটা বছৰ*(A. Saikia, Trans.). Naksa Print & Publication.
6. Changmai, G. (2023, November 4). Interview on *Cremation and post cremation rituals of Neo-Vaishnavism followers*. [Interviewr: Gitalee Changmai].

7. Baruah, N. (2023, November 4). Interview on *Mortuary customs among the Tai Ahom Community*. [Interviewer: Gitalee Changmai].