

# Tai Ahom Language: Abandoned to Extinct in Upper Parts of Assam?

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**Abstract:**

Assam is a land of diverse culture. It is a land to the main language family groups such as the Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Kadai and Austroasiatic. Assam consists of a multi linguistic, multi ethnic and multi religious society. The main dominant language of Assam is Assamese, "Asamiya" though the tribals use their own language in various domains of their chorus. After the Ahoms established their kingdom in 1228 in Assam, they brought along with them their language the "Ahom language" or "Tai- Ahom language".

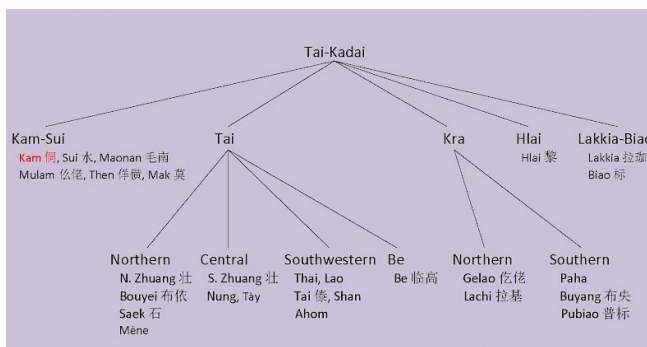
This paper focuses on the various socio- political reasons that led the Ahomsto adoptthe dominant Assamese language of Assam leaving their own language to die and the classification and linguistic linkage of the Tai-Ahom language.

**Keywords:** endangerment, language shift, language revitalization, lexicon, tonal,cognate.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The Tai language belongs to the Kra–Dai language family group. It is fairly found in large areas in parts of Southeast Asia and Southern China. Tai is the name of a group of people with distinct culture including language or a group of languages. The Tais live in six different countries each with different government system. There are various groups of ethnic minorities of the Tais except for Thailand and Laos. It may be possible to trace the origin of the Tai language and culture by undertaking comparative studies.

**CLASSIFICATION OF TAI LANGUAGE:**



A single language from the past Tai-Kadai have evolved and diversified into sister languages and

cognate languages. Tai language is the biggest group within the Tai-Kadai language family.

The Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson 1904) contained a very important study of the Tai languages. Grierson (1904:59) included the Tai languages in a family which he called Siamese-Chinese. Nowadays the thesis that Tai belongs to the same family as Chinese is not generally accepted, rather Tai is grouped together with the Kam languages of China as the Kam-Tai family, and at a higher level with the Kadai languages to form a macro-family called Tai-Kadai . Within the Tai proper, Li Fang-kuei (1977) identified three subgroups which he named as Northern Tai, Central Tai and Southwestern Tai. The Tai languages of Northeast India belong to this Southwestern group.

Grierson (1904:59) divided these into two groups:

1. Northern: Khamti, Chinese Shan, Burmese Shan & Ahom
2. Southern: Lao and Siamese

**TAI LANGUAGES OF ASSAM:**

In Northeast India, seven languages of the Tai family have been spoken. According to Grierson in the Linguistic Survey of India (1902), they are Ahom, Aiton, Khamti, Nora, Phake ,Tairong and Khamyang.

Amongst those Khamyang is still spoken by elderly people in a village of Tinsukia district of Assam. Though Aiton, Khamti and Phake is spoken and taught to children, they are still under the threat of extinction. Both the Nora and Tairong languages are extinct. Nora community now speaks Assamese while the Tairong language is extinct and the community speaks the Singpho language with some Tai words and a tonal system that may be influenced by the Tai language. The Ahom language is considered as a dead language though it is under the process of revival. Lastly, Aiton is spoken by children and a small group of children and is critically endangered.

#### **IMPORTANCE OF AHOM LANGUAGE IN ASSAM(AHOM PERIOD):**

The Ahoms are considered as the strongest and greatest of all Tais in Assam. The origin of the name Ahom, from which the word Assam comes, is debated. The most widely accepted etymology is that Ahom is cognate with the words Shan and Siam. After their successful conquest of Assam, the Ahoms built the largest Tai Kingdoms. They were a band of Tai who ruled a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley for about six centuries until the British conquest in the 1820. Today the Ahoms are the larger owner on the lands of Assam conquering every social, political, economic aspects of Assam.

The Ahoms used the Ahom language for their business and political reasons to rule the state. The Ahom priests also used the language in their manuscripts and did chant prayers. Later due to various secular and political reasons the Ahom peasants started using the Assamese language for everyday usage. The language was restricted to be used by Ahom priests and higher authorities which was the major reason to downfall. The use of the language was completely ceased by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **PRESENT SCENERIO OF THE AHOM LANGUAGE:**

The Ahoms practised their own traditional religion, of which some traces remain in the present day wedding ceremony of the Ahoms (called Soklong), and in an annual feast in honour of the ancestors (Me Dam Me

Fii) and in certain animal sacrifices. There still exists Ahom priests who possess a great knowledge in the language and have great expertise in reading the Ahom texts. It is still passing down from elders and parents.

Despite the loss of the language in everyday communication, a large number of Ahom manuscripts survive, representing a substantial literature of histories, creation stories, astrologies and other religious texts. Brown (1837) was the first to attempt to translate an old Ahom manuscript, using one Juggoram Khargaria Phukan as his informant. These early attempts are discussed by Terwiel (1989). In more recent times, Terwiel and Ranoo (1992), and Ranoo (1996) are two excellent modern editions of very important Ahom texts. Ranoo (1996) is a very scholarly edition of the Ahom Buranji, the history of the Ahoms back to the creation of the world.

A language revival movement has been underway for several generations, involving the teaching of Ahom in primary schools in those areas where large numbers of Ahom people live, the setting up of a Tai language course at Dibrugarh University, and the publication of short texts including modern songs and poems in the Ahom language. There is also an institute established in the Moranhat, Assam Institute of Tai Studies and Research which carries on different projects and also has a huge collection of documents, preserved scripts and books on the Tai language.

#### **WHY IS THE LANGUAGE DEAD?**

There exist various reasons that attributed to the dwindling of The Tai language especially the Ahom language in Assam and one of the reason is the lack of recognition and displacement of populations to absence of livelihood options for speakers and “stigma” against their mother tongue. In Upper Assam, the Ahoms seems to be shifting and expanding their kingdom and they then felt it to be necessary to include the local people in the administration affairs who used the local language which immediately boosted their self esteem. The Ahom king won the hearts of the local people by showing high esteem to the local language with its practice in royal interactions. Another reason is the Inter marriage of Tai speakers with the Non-

Tai community. Several Ahom kings did wed princess from various different Non Tai communities which led to the decline of the Ahom language. Again the Ahom language is tonal and monosyllabic in nature. Besides, the phonetic system of the language is difficult. Hence, the Ahoms became interested in a comparatively simple and toneless Assamese language. Lastly many Ahom kings converted themselves into Hinduism which led to the loss of the use of their Ahom names.

#### **FINDINGS:**

The Ahom language is not used in Upper parts of Assam though exceptions are there. It is found to be used by the priests in rituals performed by the Ahom community. Again many Ahom words are still used in the lexicon of Assamese community such as “Appa” meaning boy and “Appi” meaning girl due to language shift. There are many names of places where the Ahoms named against their language such as the Brahmaputra river tributary “Namdang” which in Ahom language “Nam” meaning ‘river’ and “deng” meaning ‘red’, thus the river suggests the meaning ‘muddy water’. The surnames of the Ahoms are also derived from the Tai ahom words which depicts their clans and designation in the Ahom administrative community. Scholars and researchers are working on various process to revive the language through documentation and other technological methods which have been described in detail in the above paragraphs.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

A vivid study description on the historical background of Assam explains particularly what led to the shift and the eventual extinction of the Ahom language in Assam. It is evident that the role of Assamese language is crucial in the endangerment of Tai Ahom. Though the Assamese have replaced Tai Ahom both in the royal court as well as in common Assamese households, another significant reason for the extinct of the Ahom language is due to the language contact between Assamese and Tai Ahom. Even though Tai Ahom does not exist today in spoken form, its presence is still intact at least to some extent in the form of borrowing words found in Assamese

language and various training programmes have been brought up by many renowned institutions to revive the language and to aware the people the existence and power of the language.

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