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# A Study On The Dress – Culture Of The Tai-Ahoms Of Assam

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## Abstract

The Tai-Ahom communities are the major communities and they have great contribution to the Assamese culture. The Tai-Ahom entered the Brahmaputra valley from the East in the early part of thirteenth century. They ruled over the area for six centuries (1228-1826) until the British gained control of the treaty of Yandabo. The Tai-Ahom people are well-known for their artistry of silk cultivation and weaving on the loom. Their artistry has added glory to the overall spectrum of the handloom designs of the region. The Tai-Ahom women wear mekhela-chador woven with muga, mulberry silk and other materials as well as cheleng-chador and other piece of cloth called riha. A blouse is also worn by them. Traditional attire of men folk is kurta or shirt and Dhoti that is the lower garments. In this paper, therefore, an attempt has been made to describe the different type of dress-cultures of the Tai-Ahom communities of Assam and the changes in their tradition.

**Keyword:** Tai – Ahom, communities, Assamese culture, Silk cultivation, Muga, Eri, Riha

## 1.Introduction

The Tai or Thais are the people of Mongolian stock. They belong to the Shan branch of the great Tai race. Culturally and traditionally, Tai-Ahom is a rich branch of the great Tai people who migrated into Assam from Northern part of Thailand, China, North Burma and Myanmar. Compelled by a clash, Chou Lung Sukapha, the eldest prince marched in 1215 through the Patkai ranges towards Assam in 1228 A.D. and established the first Tai-Ahom kingdom in Assam. In 1251 A.D. he established their first capital at 'Charaideo', which is now a district of Assam. It is said that the Ahoms habits and customs are based on nature, agriculture and their traditional belief system. Though they were converted into Hinduism and Buddhism in 17<sup>th</sup> century, they refused to give up all their cultural heritages and furthermore they still believe in their own religion and customs. In course of time, the Ahoms had identified themselves with the indigenous people and made significant contribution to Assamese culture in various ways, till the end of their rule in 1826 A.D. the contribution of the Ahoms in the field of textile industry is significant. The style of making and wearing dresses designed by the Ahoms is worth mentioning. The Ahoms were the pioneers in rearing Muga worms and wearing dresses made of yarns spun out of Muga cocoons. It is they who paved the way for expansion of the silk industry in Assam.

## 1.2 Objectives of the study

- a) Explain the unique traditional dresses of Tai-Ahom people of Assam.
- b) To analyze the economic importance of the dresses made by the women of the Tai-Ahoms in the present time.

## 1.3 Methodology

In this study we follow a descriptive method within the larger framework of historical methodology and this research paper is framed with the help of various secondary sources.

Traditional dress of the Tai-Ahoms:

At the time of their migration, the dress of the Tai-Ahoms was the same as the one worn by their kinsman, whom they had left at their motherland, Mung-Mao in western Yunnan. It is mentioned in the Buranji's (Ahom chronicles) that at the time of their arrival the colour of their clothes was black which comprised of black Pot-Lung (a kind of trouser), black mekhela (Pha-sin) and kun-bin and kun-kha. This kun-bin and kun-kha, comprising the upper garment and lower garment, was the traditional formal dress of the Ahom. For head covering the Ahoms used a piece of cloth called Pha-siu. Common dress comprised of ordinary shirt called pha-tu-wai, a piece of cloth put on up to the knee, Tangali (waist band) and ordinary turban made of piece of cotton.

The different types of shirt used by the male Ahom are: enga chala (a type of waist coat), buku chola (a type of waist coat), mirju chola (a jacket), chougá (cassock like a drapery), and chapka (elongated double breasted shirt). Some of the churiyas or lower garments generally used by the Ahoms were: Dhuti Puchra, Patar Churia, Mejunkari tetakaria churia, Mugar bar churia, kapahi churia, Dhalpatar churia, kingkhapar churia, etc. Gariáli cheleng, Gunakata cheleng, Acuali cheleng, Doriyali cheleng, Bonkora celleng, xunia celleng are some types of celleng or wrapper. Bar kapor, Adphalia kapor, Gunakata Barkapor, kuhumbulia Juria Borkapor are names of different beautiful shawls used during the winter. At the very beginning of their arrival in Assam, the Ahoms put a kind of Shan fashioned turban on their head called fasou. Later they started wearing different types of turbans of their people including that of the Mughals. They used some different Pag, these are-mughalai pag, sikon pag, mothura pag, uka pag, gunakata pag. Xunar phulbasa pag, gunakata pag, kuhumbulia pag, tikoni pag, etc. one kind of hand towel called Hasoti was so widely used by both Ahom male and female. Another most essential cloth was a kind of towel is gamacha.

Women's Dress: the women of the aristocratic families wore three pieces of garments. A mekhela or a waist cloth formed the lower garments. Riha and chadar were used as the upper garments. The mekhela are various types like pator mekhela, mugaar mekhela, kingkhapar mekhela, butabosa mekhela, karchipar bonkora mekhela mejunkari mekhela,

satinor mekhela, gomchengar mekhela, cotton mekhela, etc. some kind of Ahom rihas are dahiyaliya riha, gariyali riha, gunakota riha, keshbosa riha, asualia riha, borai gola riha, dhalari riha, mugar riha, sisupar riha etc. celeng chador and the khonia chaddar was used as an upper garment or shawl.

The married women of the Ahom aristocratic family wear one type of long sleeved high necked waist long shirt. They also used different varieties of it, like fulbosa chola, suti chola, kanchali bondhac chola. The common Ahom women were not allowed to wear the same kind of dress worn by the aristocratic moment. Only those respectable women could wear dresses made out of pat silk, tos pat, mejunkari, gumseng. Only they could put jackets and blouses having embroidery of golden thread. The chief queens of the king were high ranking dress materials.

It was traditional practice of the Ahom warriors including the king and the high officials to wear a special type of attire in the battlefield. A strong belief was prevalent among the Ahoms that unless a wife could clean cotton, spin yarn and weave the martial attire for battlefield. This special attire worn as a waist belt (Tangali) was popularly known as 'kabash kapor' in Assamese. This attire was considered as a very sacred by the Ahoms.

#### **1.4 Dress Material:**

The dresses of the Tai-Ahom were made mostly of silk and cotton fabrics. Assam manufactured three kinds of silk muga, pat and endi or edi. Muga silk was produced by cocoons fed on leaves of som tree. Its colour was yellowish gold. Muga silk was the dress of the middle rank. Endi silk was produced by worms fed on the leaves of castor plant. Rearing of endi confined only to the womenfolk. It is coarse than muga but more durable, it was generally used by the common people as they easily can afford it. This silk was used to prepare warm clothes as shawls. Pat silk was obtained from the worm fed on the leaves of mulberry tree. Its rearing was restricted to a class of people known as katani. Two other varieties of silk were obtained from worms fed on leaves of tree of the name mejunkari and champa silk. Mejunkari constituted the dress of the higher ranks and Champa silk was only for the Ahom royalty. Another variety of foreign textile called kingship and Bengal satin was also imparted to Assam which was used only by the royalty.

#### **Weaving**

The Ahom women are excellent weavers. Every woman in Assam, whether princes or a commoner. A sudra (person of lower caste) or a Brahmana (priest) a Hindu or a Muslim knew, the art of weaving. A woman who did not acquire proficiency in weaving was called by derogatory term 'Thupury' meaning ignorant of weaving, hence worthless. Before the advent of the Ahoms weaving was confined to certain professional sections and some tribal societies. But during the Ahom rule, manufacturing of cloth had been extended to all sections including those of the upper caste of the society. The credit of making weaving

universal among all classes and castes is attributed to Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a minister of Pratap Sinha (1603-41), who made it obligatory on the part of every household to spin and weave. Queen Sarveswari the wife of Shiva Singha (1714-44) is said to have greatly encouraged spinning and weaving by the ladies and also imported designs and patterns from other parts of India.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, it can be said that the Tai-Ahom ethnic dresses has captured the economic market of Assam to a larger extent at the present time. These dresses are now used by all sections of people, but during the Ahom reign, dresses with certain design and workmanship of higher standard meant for the king were not allowed to be used by the nobles. Similarly, this was restriction for the king in using the dresses of lesser standard meant for the noble alone. The standard of the dresses of the ministers (Patra-Mantries) was in between that of the king and the nobles so as to indicate the distinction among them.

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