

Significance of the Sacrificial Rites of the Buddhist Aitons of Assam

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The Aitons, a small Tai community of about five thousand people who live in the Dhansiri valley, are Buddhists of Theravada School which they originally received from Burma. There is a monastery in each village with monks and novices. Formerly, the costumes and other essential articles for temples and monks were imported from Burma. Pali, the language of Hinayana Buddhism is taught to the young boys by the monks. The temple is the main centre of their religious life and they never fail to observe Buddhist rites and ceremonies with deep devotion. Moreover, the villagers have their daily contact with the monks.

They observe four lunar days in each month and accept five precepts (*Pancha shila*) from the monk, which teach them to abstain from taking life; not to partake what is not given, not to indulge in improper sexual act, not to tell lies, and not to imbibe any intoxicating substance.

Every male of the community enters once in his life time the Buddhist monastery as novice preferably before his marriage. Some women too join the monastery as nun. The Buddhist rites and ceremonies which they perform regularly include Poi Kathin (gift of robes to monks at the end of the Buddhist let), Buddha Purnima to commemorate the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha, Poi Kham Chang or the ordination of youth, Poi Lu Phra i.e. presenting image of Lord Buddha, Poi Chang Ken or water sprinkle to the image of Lord Buddha. But a careful observation and deeper study of their life reveals that they also believed and propitiated certain gods and spirits such as Phi Ban (guardian spirit of the village), Phi Doi (spirit of the hill), Phi Din (spirit of the earth), Phi Hun (spirit of the house), Phi Khaw (spirit of the rice), Phi Laka (spirit of the Naga), Phi Laku (spirit of the

monkey), Phi Nam (spirit of the water), Phi Phai (spirit of the fire), Phi Su Mong (spirit of the state), Phi Then (spirit of the forest), Phi Tun (spirit of the tree) and so on. They still believe many such *Phi* but they do not make any sacrificial offerings as they did in the past. Instead, they generally make offerings of flowers and leaves, candles and incenses and pray for the welfare of the individuals as well as the community.

It is, however, noticed that their belief in some *Phi* was so strong and deep rooted that they still continue to worship these but in modified way fitting the Buddhist way of life. This certainly is a compromise between Buddhist way of life and supernaturalism. Their belief in Phi Su Mong, a spirit, said to be the guardian of the locality is a case in point. In general this spirit is widely worshipped by all the Tais of Assam such as Khamtis, Khamyangs, Phake, Turung, Shans of Burma. Thais of Thailand, Laos, Lue, Black and White Tai, Red Tai. This deity is known among the Tai groups of Assam by different names. The Aitons and the Khamtis call it Phi Su Mong; Khamyangs Phi Seng Mong, to the Phakes it is known as Sao Su, Phi Mong₂ or Phi Su Mong; and as Mong Nut among the Turungs.

This deity was worshipped for the welfare of the community to ward off evil and malignant spirit to₃ protect them from epidemic and natural calamities₃. Previously, this *Phi* was worshipped by the people of each village separately outside the village and made sacrifices. Male members from each house brought their share of animals and articles such as pig, black coloured goat, duck, fowl, *nam lao* (home made rice wine) and other things. According to one informant₄, even buffalo, dog, monkey were also sacrificed. These were offered under a tree and placed on a raised platform made of bamboo. A small portion of meat of the sacrificed animals was cooked at the spot and was offered to the Phi Su Mong under the tree. Rest of the meat and other articles were distributed among them and taken to their own

houses for consumption by the members of the families. They also took *nam lao* on the occasion. Women were neither allowed to take part nor were they invited to see the ⁵sacrifice. B.J. Terwiel reports that most of the Tais⁵ performed sacrifices to the Phi Su Mong under tree.

The worship of the Phi Su Mong still continues but in a form which can be called compromise or rather an inclusion of this spirit in the Buddhist pantheon. It is no longer worshipped out side the village, but is done within the monastery compound, however, under a banyan tree as before. Earthen pagoda shaped mound, in some cases permanent brick structure called *kam bu* is built. Every year, after celebrating the *poi sang ken* in the month of April on a particular day the villagers irrespective of sex and age go to the shrine at monastery compound and worship. Even the village monk participate in the ceremony who in fact, recite Buddhist scriptures at that place while others present offer flowers, candles, incenses, puffed rice, sand and water in the name of the spirit. Instead of sacrificing animals and birds, they now offer cooked meat along with other articles to the Phi Su Mong. At the end of the function the young boys collect sand, water from *kam bu* and throw these at every house compound uttering "phi hai phi hok paya,payo" meaning "bad phi go away".

On that occasion one or two young men take a bunch of thread fixed in a wheel made of bamboo and move round the village by sacred thread symbolising the protection against any type of bad influence.

People from out side the village are not allowed to enter the village compound on the day of worship of the Phi Su Mong nor are the villagers allowed to leave the village. Terwiel informs that the Lue⁶ of Thailand and Burma also do not allow outsiders on the occasion of the worship of the "guardian spirit of the mong". A⁷ similar custom is to be found among the Khamyangs, another Tai group in Assam. The Aitons also refrain from certain activities like agricultural work, digging earth, cutting fire wood, weaving, cloth, fishing, husking paddy, grinding of rice etc. The belief and worship of Phi Su Mong appears to

have been a part of their ancient culture and hence pre-Buddhist.

It was so ingrained in their life that even after their close and devoted association with Hinayana Buddhism which is totally opposed to such beliefs and practices, the Aitons could not do away with its belief and worship. This ultimately resulted in a compromise in which the Phi Su Mong gained a place of honour in their Buddhist way of life.

Their belief in various *phi* and worship of these, although contradictory to Hinayana Buddhism in general, do not create any kind of confusion in their mind. The adjustment is admirable. Instead of offering sacrificial animals and birds to the *phi* they now offer, in all cases, flowers, leaves, incenses, candles, cooked rice, meat of pig, goat or fowl and fish etc. In South East Asian context, such form of compromise is a general phenomenon. However, some western scholars of older generation found it difficult to understand this adjustment between Theravada Buddhism and supernaturalism. It is reported by Keyes that even modern writers find it difficult to understand how Buddhism (Hinayana) and other religious beliefs could belong to a single religious system. Spiro writes, in upper Burma, too, Burmese are adherent of two distinctive religions i.e. Buddhism and the other supernaturalism which are often contradictory.

Notes & References

1. P. Gogoi, "The Tai People of Assam", **Lik Phan Tai**, Journal of the Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam, Vol.I, pp. 23-51, 1966.
2. B.J. Terwiel, **The Tai of Assam**, Vol. II, 1981, pp.36-81.
3. It is also believed by all the Tais of Assam such as Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung. See also J.H. Telford, "Animism in Kengtung State", **Journal of the Burma Research Society**, Vol. XXVII, Part 2, August, 1937 p.135.
4. Interviewed Mahendra Shyam, 64 year old Aiton at Barpathar Barshyam Gaon, Golaghat on 24-10-88.

5. B.J. Terwiel, pp.25-82; See Also W.C.Dodd, **The Tai Race**, Iowa, 1923,pp.26-27.
6. **Ibid.**, p.67.
7. **Ibid.**, p.25.
8. Michael M. Ames, "Magical-Animism and Buddhism:A Structural Analysis of Sinhalese Religious System", **Aspect of Religion of Southeast Asia** (ed.) by Edward B. Harper, pp.61-76; A.T. Kirsch, "Phu Thai Religious Syncretism", Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1967; **Buddhism and Spirit Cult in Northeastern Thailand**, Cambridge, 1970.
9. Charles F. Keys, **The Golden Peninsula, Culture and Adoption in Mainland Southeast Asia**, 1977,p.115.
10. M.E. Spiro, **Burmese Supernaturalism**, N.J., 1967, pp.247-80.