

Myths, Rituals and Traditions : Some Aspects in State Formation in the Early Tai-Ahom State

R. Buragohain

I

Introduction

In the structural system, the studies on myths, rituals and traditions might help to a great extent to understand the formative processes of all social organisations as these represent the unity and exclusiveness of social groups with a degree of respectability and stability. The unfathomable beliefs and notions that men uphold jealously, that they may live for or live by it, is dominant in the social order which is held together by a system of myths.

However, it is very difficult to give a definition of myth that would be acceptable to all. It is a cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted from various and complimentary view points. As experienced from the archaic societies, myths constitute the history of the acts of the supernaturals which is at once true and sacred ; it is related to a 'creation' indicating how something has come into existence and that it serves as the paradigms of all significant human activities ; that by knowing a myth one attempts to know the origin of things which is not an abstract knowledge but a knowledge experienced through rituals and ceremonies. In short, the foremost function of a myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities.¹

Myths and rituals are the two sides of the same coin. Myth is the counterpart of ritual, myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same.² In all archaic societies, ritual is usually taken with a peculiar sense of rightness violation of which is considered as the violation of morality. It concerns itself with an intrinsic validity not related to immediate purpose, but accepted without any reasoning or explanation. Gods and spirits are symbols expressing solidarity of particular social groups. The line-

age, kinship systems are emphasized and derived from their dead ancestors. It is an attempt to arrive at an explanation of the universe and to find man's place in it validating the moral sanctions.

II

The Conceptual Frame

To study the myths and rituals in historical perspective, is most often discouraged on grounds of survivalistic tendencies. Moreover, it has been very little emphasized in modern ethnological studies too.³ Further, ritual represents the individual's attempt to find his status as a social person in which he finds himself for the time being.⁴ It is in this context that Durkheim's view of representing solidarity of the participating groups in ritual observations is forcefully countered by Leach by saying that this solidarity continues for the time being, and once the ritual celebrations are over, it is difficult to find a latent solidarity among the participating groups. He further argues that both mythology and ritual are ideal versions of a social structure. It is just a model how people suppose their society to be organised but it is not a necessary goal towards which they strive for.⁵ 'Since any social system, however stable and balanced it may be contains opposing factions, there are bound to be different myths to validate the particular rights of different groups of people.'⁶ He goes on arguing, 'if ritual is sometimes a mechanism of integration, one could as well argue that it is often a mechanism of disintegration'.⁷

However, there are scholars who would not totally subscribe to this view. Terwiel says that, 'the study of survivals can be helpful and relevant, not so much as an independent method to establish links between different peoples living in different parts of the globe, but as an aid to deepen historical knowledge of a specific people in a limited region.'⁸

If myths and rituals are to be taken as a cultural reality, the Tylor's assertion of many archaic aspects in culture cannot also be overlooked when he emphasizes, 'collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historical knowledge.'⁹ A. Guha also suggests a similar view. Quoting Evans-Pritchard, 'a myth may be false, yet historical in character', and also citing to some Tai-Ahom myths, he observes, "These myths then suggest that the polity emerged in the proto historic times as an agency for reconciling social contradictions, and it was believed to be divinely ordained." He further observes, "The Ahoms thus believed that they were divinely ordained, firstly, to extend their permanent

wet rice culture to areas dominated by large scale fallowing and shifting cultivation and, secondly, to absorb stateless shifting cultivators into a common polity."¹⁰ P. Gogoi also speaks in the same tone. "The eight lakhs of gods, mentioned in the Tai-Ahom Chronicle, were not other than eight lakhs of Tai population (Mao-Shans)... and Lengdon was their sovereign. Hence the story of the early Mao-Shans, as fashioned in the Chronicle to give it a heavenly character, appears to the reader extraordinary and mythical; but, stripped of its garb, it is a history of the Mao-Shans plain and simple....."¹¹

Any attempt to historicize myths, rituals and traditions are bound to draw comments because of its over powering influence in society. Even then certain inferences indicating the pattern of political orientations in these, might help us to deepen our knowledge with the admission of the fact that 'certain values, sentiments and orientations were the most critical in giving collectivity its distinctive character.'¹²

In the following analysis, an attempt is being made in the light of the above conceptual frame to verify some of the Tai-Ahom myths and legends if these had any role or atleast some influence in the early Tai-Ahom State formation. In doing so, the terms 'myth', 'ritual' 'tradition' 'ceremony' are almost used in complimentary sense. The search is within existing conventions, the method being structural and the area being ideological and functional. Thus the process is a complicated one where the rationale is sought for through myth of origin, ethnic integration etc.

III

The Myth of Divine Origin

All the Tai-Ahom rulers throughout their six hundred years of rule claimed descent from their heavenly ancestor Lengdon, the supreme ruler of heaven and his two grandsons Khun Lung and Khun Lai who were sent down to rule over the wide earth. Yet, they widely differed in their concept of kingship as was the case with the mediaeval Europe's divine right rulers. On the contrary, they continued to be somewhat constitutional as per the directives of Lengdon and so were pragmatic in their pronouncements, till up to the end of their rule. Lengdon remarked, 'He whose forefathers were never rulers, can hardly be expected to be a king. He can never get homage from others.'³ To this Ja-

Hsing-Hpa, one of the chief counsellors added, 'if an ordinary being be sent he will not be able to rule the earth.' Leokhri, another great counsellor and politician supported these views. Then in presence of other nobles, Lengdon finally decided to send down his two grandsons to rule over the anarchic wide earth. Lengdon dictated a 'code of conduct' to them which became the basis of Tai-Ahom gentile constitution.¹³

It can be noted here that almost all the Tai-Ahom rulers followed this convention of discussion and consultation before taking any major decision and accordingly, they organised their state system which in later sophistication gave rise to their administrative organisation in the king, his ministers and the bureaucracy. Thus the stratified Tai-Ahom society was writ larg; in their ancestral heritage.

The 'code of conduct' contained some nine provisions which the ruler had to discharge in performing their kingly duties. To mention some important ones here are,—

'If a person commits a crime, do not kill him at once without a fair trial.'

'If any of them lives by oppressing others, he should be sent to exile'. But those persons, who kidnap women and usurp other's property, should be put to death.¹⁴

Such codes definitely point to a high political culture. We may go back to the proto history of the Tais for little more elaboration on this point. The theory of the 'Mandate of Heaven' pervades through the concept of Tai-Ahom kingship. According to this 'Mandate', the kings must follow the directions of heaven ungrudgingly for the welfare of the people because 'the ruler ruled the people in trust from heaven for the welfare of the people and that when a ruler misruled, he automatically forfeited his right to rule.'¹⁵ Again, 'Heaven hears and sees through the eyes and ears of our people. Heaven expresses its disapproval through the expressed disapproval of our people.'¹⁶ Confucious, the Chinese philosopher also says in the same tone, 'For heaven is not an arbitrarily governing divine tyrant, but the embodiment of a system of legality. Heaven does not act independently but follows a universal law the so called Tao'¹⁷ It may be noted that a blend of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and even Hinduism influenced the Tai culture and thinking in Southeast Asia even before the advent of the Tai-Ahoms to Assam.¹⁸

If the mythical aspect of the heavenly character of the Tai-Ahom rulers is taken out, atleast three inferences appear before

us at the early stage of the Tai-Ahom state building process. Firstly, the Ahom king was not a divine tyrant, secondly, he had to be constitutional as per the directives of his ancestors in as much as he was to take the aid and advice of his councillors even for his own power and position, and thirdly, justice and welfare of his people were his first and foremost concern. Whenever there was a deviation from these set rules, the state was on the verge of collapse, and whenever these were strictly followed, the state survived sometimes miraculously. The Chronicles bear ample testimony to this fact. Firstly, the early Tai-Ahom state survived atleast three interregnums totalling nearly eighteen years (1364-1368, 1376-1379, and 1389-1398) when the state was ruled with a symbolic king in the vacant throne by the nobility and secondly, during the period of weak rulers (1673-1681) when Atan Buragohain, the Prime Minister, thrice refused the crown on the ground that he did not belong to a royal family. Such reconciliations of the social contradictions through a mythical process is unique and generally not noticed in other state systems.

Rikkhan and Medam Mephi Traditions

The chronicles refer to the celebrations of the Rikkhan and Me-Dam Me-Phi ceremonies on number of occasions. Though these are basically religious in character, were used as a means to social control for solidarity, vitality and life force in the national life. Rikkhan is closely related to popular Taoism to secure longevity in individual and social spheres for hapiness, health and wealth. It is more closely related to the three original principles of Taoism, namely, essence, vital force and spirit. The first state level celebration of this ceremony, as mentioned in the Chronicle, was during the rule of Hso-Hum-Mong Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) after his conspicuous victory over the Chutiyas,¹⁹ then after defeating the Kacharies.²⁰ Hso-Klen-Mong (1539-1552) performed both Rikkhan and Me-Dam Me-Phi after the victory over the Mussalmans²¹ and Kacharies²² and after conclusion of peace with the Koches.²³ Hso-Hseng-Hpa Pratap Simha performed the Me-Dam Me-Phi after the disaster with the Kacharis²⁵ and before going to war with the Mussalmans²⁴ in 1616 A. D. and performed both Rikkhan and Me-Dam Me-Phi after the victory over the Mussalmans.²⁶ Onward the reign of Hso-Tam-La Jayadhwaj Simha (1648-1663) the performing of these rites receded as a result of increasing Brahmanical influence. The process started even from the last part of Hso-Hseng-Hpa's reign when in 1628 A. D.,

offerings were made to the Brahmins instead of performing these rites.

It is evident in the Tai-Ahom state formation process that Ahomization was followed by Hinduisation under the Brahmanical influence. Whether these were accelerating or retarding factors in the process is not the issue to be discussed here. But we can refer to a very pertinent issue when Hso-pong-Mong Chkradhvaj Simha (1663-1669) decided to perform these ancient rites to wipe out the Mughal domination. The Chronicles mention, "...the king held a council with the three Dangarias and other high officials. Addressing them, the king said, 'my brother, Chaopha Shutamla did not make any offer to our forefathers. He also did not offer sacrifices to Indra and all other gods. So the Mussalmans could come to our country and devastate the province. The Karis and Hajuas were massacred and all people suffered great misery. Now I wish to propitiate Indra and other gods by offering sacrifices and to make offerings to the forefathers. The people, at large, should be collected and offerings should be made. I wish to free myself from the subjugation of the Musalmans. I think I shall be successful in the attempt. I wish to know your opinion. The Baragohain said in reply, 'In the ancient time, your forefathers used to do the same thing when they were overtaken by such misfortune. They, thus, regained their former powers. Your proposal is really praiseworthy.'²⁷ A similar episode is also mentioned in the Tai-Ahom *Mantra Puthi 'Lit Lai Penya Kaka'*. The story goes like this : 'Hsing-Kam-Pha, the third son of the Lord Creator of the Universe, was made the king of heaven. But in course of time, he totally ignored the sound advice of his forefathers and stopped making offerings to the gods and oblations to the dead. As a result, anarchism set in and he died. His son restored these ancestral rites and he decided to continue its performance by collecting all the people. Since then the ceremonial performance of the Me-Dam Me-Phi began.'²⁸

So, this is the antiquity of Me-Dam Me-Phi, as a form of ancestor worship. It was usually performed in the Tai-Ahom state before facing and after overcoming an external crisis. Thus it hints more at a political socialisation channelising the forces of solidarity and vitality in the national life than merely performing an ancient rite.

The sacral status of the sovereign is found almost in all the early state formations. It is not an exception in the case

of Tai-Ahoms. The relationship between the godly ruler and the ruled is discernible here. This relationship is marked by trying to establish a legitimate position of the sovereign. Because, 'legitimacy is the type of support that derives not from force or its threat but from the values held by the individuals formulating, influencing, and being affected by political ends, with the 'degree of legitimation' closely linked to it, and which means 'in reality a political system based on either coercion only or on consensus only is found no where. There will always be a combination of both, the degree of legitimacy representing the relative proportion of each.'²⁹

In this respect, we can cite an illustration from the Tai-Ahom Chronicle. Once, King Hso-Kam-Hpa (1553-1603) had to change his decision of sending Chaopet, the son of the Bargohain, as the hostage to the Koch king on protest from his mother Nangbu, who took the king to task by saying, "Why should he reign when he is unable to save his subjects from enemies."³⁰ Undoubtedly, it speaks of a wider political dimension in the Tai-Ahom state system where the myth of the divinity of the kingship cracks.

IV

Conclusions

Time and space would not permit to take up each and every aspect of the myths, rituals and traditions that cover the whole of Tai-Ahom socio-religious and politico-cultural systems. This is just an overview attempting at an understanding of the rationale of polity formation through a conventional method. As the primary function of myth is to justify or to explain a particular human act in social groups, its influence in state formation studies is bound to be secondary. Even then, a hypothetical premise has been attempted to place here to avoid a possible lapse in an overall assessment in such studies.

A mosaic of images of community with kinship and religion, war and politics - along with locality, race and occupation - serving at various times as the nucleus of community enshrine the whole history of man. A conclusive generalisation encompassing all these elements is indeed difficult to arrive at as the issue by itself is a complex one, varying in time and space. However, to deepen our knowledge with facts for an imaginative understanding from the available data, perhaps, shall not be out of place.

Note and References

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, 1978 edn., p. 1133., for definition of myth.
2. Leach, E. R., *Political Systems of Highland Burma: a study of Kachin Social Structure* (London, reprint 1964), p. 13.
3. Terwiel, B. J., *The Tai of Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual*, Vol. I., Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Gaya, 1980, p. 23. See in the same page for details on the studies of 'survivals.'
4. Leach, n. 2, p. 10-11.
5. Leach, n. 2, p. 286.
6. Leach, n. 2, p. 277.
7. Leach, n. 2, p. 278.
8. Terwiel, n. 3, p. 23.
9. Terwiel, n. 3, p. 22-23., Quoting E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, London; John Murray, Vol. I, 1929, p. 71.
10. Guha A. "The Ahom Political System : An enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam : 1228-1714". Occasional Paper No. 64., CSSSC, Calcutta, October, 1983, P. 13-14., Quoting E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Essays in Social Anthropology' (London, 1962) p. 53.
11. Gogoi, P., *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 125.
12. Seaton, S. Lee, "The Early State In Hawaii" in H. J. M. Claessen & Peter Skalnik ed., *The Early State*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978, p. 272.
13. *Ahom Buranji*, Tr. & ed. by G. C. Barua, Calcutta, 1930, p. 10., Gogoi, n. 11, p. 121.
14. Gogoi, n. 11, p. 121-23., n. 13, p. 15-16.
15. Gogoi, Thanuram, "Tai Jatir Prachin Dharma Aru Sama-jniti" in *Che-Rai-Doi*, ed. Hem Buragohain, Hemkosh Press, Sibsagarh, January, 1984, p. 79.
16. Gogoi, n. 15, p. 83., a quote from *Wisdom of China* by Lin U Tang.
17. Gogoi, n. 15, p. 83., a quote from *History of China* by W. Eberherd.
18. Scholars are not unanimous with regard to the religious culture of the Tai-Ahoms when they first founded their kingdom in Assam. Dr. Lila Gogoi has asserted that the Tais accepted Buddhism (but did not give up many of the Tao rites and customs) before their advent to Assam and that the Ahoms were in the first stage of Buddhism. He has force-

fully argued by citing specific and definite traces in this respect. (See page 4-5, in 'Che-Rai-Doi', a souvenir publication of the Me-Dam Me-Phi Celebration Committee, Sibsagarh, January, 1985). On the otherhand, B. J. Terwiel has rejected such projections saying that 'All the available evidence points to the idea that this religion is to be regarded as a branch of the old Tai religion and that should suffice to identify it' (See pages 45-46, in the second volume of 'The Tai of A Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual', Centre for South East Asian Studies, Gaya, 1980). Dr. Amalendu Guha is also of similar view when he compares the spirit of 'the Tai-Ahom religious cult- a form of animism tinged with elements of ancestor worship' with that of degenerated Tantric-Buddhist and tribal fertility rites. (See page 7, 'Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency : Peasant uprisings and the crisis of feudalism in late 18th Assam', Occasional Paper No. 67, CSSSC/Calcutta, May, 1984) As regards the tinge of Hindu influence, this might be due to the apparent and superficial similarity between Hindu and Tao thoughts. Hence, our observation is largely based on this. However, this needs further serious investigation.

19. AB, n. 13, p. 58; Gogoi, n. 11, p. 290.
20. AB, n. 13, p. 60 & 66.; Gogoi, n. 11, p. 307.
21. AB, n. 13, p. 73
22. Ditto.
23. Ditto, p. 86.
24. AB, n. 13, p. 97.
25. Ditto, p. 97 & 98.
26. Ditto, p. 100.
27. Gogoi, n. 11, p. 456-57., AB, n. 13, p. 195-96.
28. *Lit Lai Penya Kaka* -a Tai-Ahom religious incantation book in Tai-Ahom language, translated into Assamese by Chao Bani Deodhai Barua, published by Ban Ok Paplik Myung Tai, Uumphra Printers, Dhemaji, September, 1983, p. 19. (Ship-Kao).
29. Claessen, H. J. M., & Peter Skalnik, ed., *The Early State*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978, p. 566.
30. Gogoi, n. 11, p. 223.; A. B., n. 13, p. 88.