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THE AITONS: SOME ASPECTS OF THEIR LIFE AND CULTURE

Joya Burgohain

The Aitons, better known as Aitoniya, an Assamese form of the name, are a small group of people of about five thousand. They are chiefly found in ten villages in two localities viz. Borpathar and Kaliani in the Dhansiri Valley. Borpathar lies about 36 kms from Golaghat town in the District of Jorhat and Kaliani is located about 11 kms to the west of Marangi on the Numaligarh-Dimapur road. In addition there is one Aiton village at Jonapathar in the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh and another mixed village of Aitons and Turungs at Balipathar in the Karbi Anglong District. Kaliani and a part of Borpathar fall within the district of Karbi Anglong, the other part of Borpathar comes under Jorhat District and accordingly from the administrative point of view, the Aitons of Kaliani as well as those living in the Karbi Anglong, part of Borpathar are under the District Council of Karbi Anglong, administered under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. But those residing in the Jorhat District are under the general administration of Assam.

According to Grierson, the Aitons came into Assam from Mung-Mau in the recent past. According to Padmeswar Gogoi, the Aitons are the section of the Mung-Kong Tai² who had their settlement in the District of Aiton² in the region of the Upper Chindwin. From the place name Aiton, they are known as Aitons. Gogoi, however, said that the time when these people arrived in Assam was not known. According to their own version, both written and oral, they came from a place named Khao-Khao Mao-Lung which they identify with Mung-Mau-Lung, a Shan State of Burma near the border of China. These differences of views about their original

homeland are not mutually contradictory. From our detailed examination of the various sources including information collected from old and knowledgeable persons among the Aitons, we learn that the Tai people now called Aitons lived in Khao-Khao Mau-Lung which formed a part of Mung-Mau-Lung from where the Ahoms, the pre-British rulers of Assam came in the 13th Century. From there they moved to Mung-Kong (Burmese Mogang) and lived at a place called Aiton in the Upper Chindwin near Patkoi. the date of their migration from Mung-Mau to Mung-Kong appears to have occurred long ago. But their written account called Lik-Khu-Mong does not mention the date of their migration from Khao-Khao-Mau-Lung to Mung-Kong. But it is certain that they could not have been known as Aitons (Assamese Aitoniya) before their settlement at Aiton and their migration to the Ahom kingdom sometime in the middle of the 18th century.

The historical records of the Ahoms called Buranjis, however, speak of a place called Aiton, as early as the 13th Century somewhere in the Patkoi region on the present day Burma side. They say that Sukapha, the first Ahom King on his way to the Brahmaputra Valley, founded a colony of Tais there.³ But they were not called Aitoniyas, but merely Tai. The Buranjis also mention that there had been occasions when the Aiton chief changed his loyalty between the Ahom and the Mogaung rulers.⁴

During the eighteenth century, Aiton came under Burmese control and as a result of the oppressive conduct of the Burmese, the Tai people now called Aitons or Aitoniyas left the place and entered the Ahom Kingdom. The then Ahom king Rajeswar Singha gave them permission to settle near Sadiya as neighbours of the Khamtis, who had settled there a few years earlier. But the Aitons did not long remain at Sadiya and moved further west and came

to Kaliani in the Dhansiri Valley and then to Borpathar.

In spite of many changes taking place today in society, the Aitons still preserve many aspects of their traditional life and culture.

The Aitons had been agriculturists and did wet rice cultivation and hence always gave importance to permanent settlements and were tied to the land. The Aiton houses are built on stilts four to five feet above the ground. This serves as protection against floods and wild animals, and also against damp. The houses of the well-to-do have wooden frames and platforms, while those of the common people consist of only bamboo frames and split bamboos for platforms. The space of the ground portion remains open on all sides and is utilized for the loom, keeping agricultural implements, storing articles and for other domestic purposes. The open platform or verandah of the house can be reached by a ladder (normally it is of the stem of a tree). Inside the house is a living room with an open platform and a fireplace in the middle of the platform and beyond at the back, one more sleeping room. As the houses do not have windows, the inside is always slightly dark. Villagers use pot latrines and very few families have bath rooms. The young and the old alike prefer taking bath in the river.

The house building activity is still carried on in a collective way where friends, relatives and neighbours lend their helping hand. Cattle is herded outside the village and they are tied up near the entrance of the house in the cow-shed. Each family has a flower garden from where they pluck flowers to offer at the house hold altar that faces the east. All villagers go about bare feet in the house.

A raised granary with wooden posts but thoroughly woven with bamboo, about four to five feet above the ground stands at a little distance from the house. It is plastered with mud and cow-dung and roofed with thatch. The prosperous families sometimes have more than one large granary while the commoners have only one. It has a small door made of wood or bamboo and is reached by means of a ladder, smoothly scrapping the outer fibrous covering of the trunk. The wide extending arch protects the storage bins from rain. The Aitons store only rice which is kept in big basket like containers made of mat but plastered inside and outside with a mixture of mud and cow-dung.

Besides rice cultivation they raise mustard, areca-nut, betel-leaf and go for seasonable vegetables. They are fond of root and shoots of edible plants as well as creepers which are still favours tea without milk. Betel chewing is almost universal among the old.

The religion of the Aiton was and is Theravada or the Hinayana form of Buddhism. Every village has one Buddhist monastery with a spacious compound which is located normally in the centre of the village. It is managed by at least one monk with several novices. Elders inform us that formerly the monks came from Burma and belonged to the Sangha in Burma. As such, the Burmese - form of Theravada Buddhism is strong among the Aitons. This school of Buddhism is rigid in the observance of rituals and ceremonies. But at present due to restriction of entry of foreigners, Burmese monks are being replaced either by their own monks or by monks from the other Tai communities such as the Khamtis and Phakials. As a result, some amount liberalism is witnessed in the observance of the faith. The novices learn the Buddhist teachings

in the monasteries and acquire preliminary knowledge of the ancient language - Pali from the monks.

Within the monastery compound is built a separate house for the monk and is called "Bapu chang". There is also a dormitory for novices and temple boys. The sacred religious books are kept with great care in wooden almirahs. Most of these are written in the Pali language. Some, however, are in the Tai language. Monks and novices copy old books. The altar of the temple with its image or images of the Buddha always faces east.

The elderly come to the temple daily and discuss religious matters, village services, religious festivals and other ceremonies. The congregation gossips, chews betel and smokes during service. Every morning, each family brings a part of its food such as cooked rice and curry to the 'Bapu chang'. It is a feature that the villagers never take their meals until it is sent to the temple. The monks take meals once a day.

One of the important customs in men's life is that they enter and seek to be ordained as novices or monks for sometime during their life time. According to the elderly people of the village, males, who do not serve either as novices or as monks are not accorded the respect in later years by the community. One, in fact, cannot be a true Buddhist until he enters the temple as a monk or a novice.

Although fervent Buddhists, the Tai Aitons believe in the existence of a number of supernatural gods and 'phis', either malevolent or benevolent. They are all to be propitiated whenever occasion demands. Their belief in 'phis' or spirits that are ever present in trees, rivers, gardens, houses and crops, suggests that theravada Buddhism

has failed to erase completely certain non-Buddhistic influences in their customs, ceremonies, beliefs and festivals.

Marriages are normally arranged by the parents. Sometimes the boy may select his own mate which ultimately receives the parental approval. In the marriage, an intermediary or a go-between known as pa-sau-kun-di plays an important role from the beginning till the end of the marriage for which purpose he receives some monetary benefit. Aitons are mainly endogamous. The most sought-after bride is the daughter of either the maternal uncle or maternal aunt.

In the past, marriage outside the community was unknown to a Tai Aiton. Gradually it has become more common to select the partner from other Tai groups as well as from the non-Tais. The enormous rise in marriage expenses which are required to be solely borne by the groom's family discourages many to go for such type of marriages. Dowry is not prevalent among the Tai Aitons, but well to do parents sometimes present cows, land, agricultural implements and household articles.

Like the other Tais, the Aitons too believe in 'Khawn' which is often translated as 'vitality' or 'life essence'. They believe that human has 32 khawns which reside in different parts acting as protecting guardians of those parts. For instance, the eyes have a khawn, hands another, the feet another with the head having the main khawn. Any ailment of a particular part of the body, it is believed, is caused due to leaving of the khawn from that part for some reason. Hence they perform a ceremony called hong-khawn meaning 'calling back of khawn'.

Although Aitons have been living in Assam for more than two hundred years, they still speak Tai

as their mother tongue and in fact the members of the older generation are not well-versed in Assamese, the language of the local population surrounding them. Their language is similar to that of the Shans. Due to their having their script, they possess a large number of manuscripts, prayers, mantras, story books etc. Earlier all these works were written on paper made by themselves.

In spite of the tremendous pressure of change, the Tai Aitons more particularly the older generation still wears traditional dress. The married ladies put on hand woven three pieces of cloth of which the lower garment is called 'pha-cin-dam' a dark coloured skirt, 'pha-bai', a piece sheet thrown over the body and 'pha-nang-wat', another piece of cloth to cover the waist. 'Sai-rang' is used as a kind of belt. They bind their hair with a top knot and use another piece of cloth, covering the knot of hair, but the younger generation does not strictly follow this custom.

The traditional dress of the males consists of 'pha-tung' (a kind of chequered hand woven lungi), 'pha-ho' (a head gear), 'pha-phek-mai' (a piece of white cloth about two metres long and one metre wide placed over one's shoulder). The younger generation particularly the school going children, are going for modern dresses.

This paper is based mainly on the writer's own field work conducted among the Aitons from time to time during the last seven years. There is practically no published work and very few articles written on this particular community.

Notes & References

1. George Abraham Grierson, **Linguistic Survey of India**, Vol. III, 1891, p. 193.

2. Padmeswar Gogoi, "The Tai People of Assam", *Lik-phan-Tai, The Journal of the Tai Historical and Cultural Society*, Vol. I, 1966, p. 28.
3. Hem Chandra Goswami, (ed.), *Purani Assam Buranji*, 1922, pp. 19-20.
4. This has reference to diplomatic correspondences exchanged between Ahom King Sudangpha and the Mogaung ruler during the last decade of the 14th Century. *Ahom Buranju*, ed. & tr. by Golap Chandra Barua, 1930, p. 51; *Satsari Assam Buranji*, ed. by S.K. Bhuyan, 1960, p. 53.