

## Tai-Khamtis' of Arunachal Pradesh: A Brief Ethnographic Study

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is an attempt at a brief ethnographic study of Tai-Khamti tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The state of Arunachal Pradesh has more than 25 major tribes and more than hundred sub-tribes. With an interesting diverse cultures and languages, Arunachal Pradesh resonates with uniquely entrenched cultural practices, century old traditions, vivid festivals and delectable cuisines. Among different tribes of the state, Tai-Khampti is one of the major tribes nestled in the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh. They have an old history of migration to the present settlement. Besides being known for their rich culture and art forms, they have garnered name for being a peaceful, welcoming and warm community.

**KEYWORD:** Tai-Khamti, Ethnography, Religion, Culture, Change.

### Introduction: A Brief History of Tai-Khamtis

Arunachal Pradesh is home to multi-lingual ethnic groups all moulded into different cultural manifestations sparsely scattered across hills, mountains and plains. With a current population of approx. four lakhs, the history speaks of Tai-Khamtis as belonging to the Shan group of Tai race of Southeast Asia, tracing their roots from the Yu-nan province of China to Burma which dates back to as early as the 6th century A.D. Their transposition to the present settlement is the result of many upheavals that took place in their political and social life. As were the predicament they migrated into Assam during 1750-1850 A.D (Gogoi, 37-41). Even after their migration to the land of the pre-ruling Tai-Ahom Kingdom, they were often engaged in conflicts with the Ahoms and British before finally settling in some parts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. A set of the same group emigrated to Arunachal Pradesh and established themselves as one of the major tribal groups presently inhabiting parts of Lohit mainly the villages of Chongkham, Kherem, Momong, in and around Namsai and so on. One can find different clan roots among the Khamtis; some are namely Namchooms, Loongking, Mansai, Manfai, Loongkan, Longchot and many more to name. The word Khamti has different connotations. The most commonly understood meaning of the term, as mentioned in the legends is defined in the following manner- *Kham* in Khamti means Gold and *Ti* means Place or spot which means the 'place of gold', another meaning is referred to as 'stick to a place' (Gogoi, *ibid*). Few eminent scholars have described Khamtis from different viewpoints. Verrier Elwin found them by nature very active and progressive (*ibid*). The same author quotes Butler, they" are active, intelligent, shrewd war-like looking race of men, but there is a sinister expression mixed with a

peculiar severity, pervading their countenances, that leaves anything but a favourable impression of the benevolence of their disposition."

### **Buddhism and Socio-Religious Customs of Khamtis:**

Khamtis speak the Chinese Siamese language belonging to the Indo-Chinese form of speech. They also have their own script which is locally known as *Lik-Tai* which contains only seventeen letters, however prognosticating difficulties in preserving it the same has been developed into twenty-six letters and is being presently taught in the elementary levels of schooling. Khamtis is a Theravada Buddhist community of the Hinayana sect. Their day-to-day life and domestic routine adhere to the philosophy and sanctity of strict Buddhist values and norms. Any ritual whether social or domestic such as childbirth, marriage or death ceremony in the house, religious customs of the monastery (*Chong or Kyong*) or moments of festivals, in any of these events the Buddhist doctrine are always maintained and followed. All these rituals are performed by the most esteemed members of the community who are the monks (*Chau-Moun or Bhante*) and no religious ceremonies are carried out without their guidance and directive. The monks wear the saffron robes and are highly revered for their spiritual duties. The Temple education once had a very strong hold in society. Every child in the house used to take their elementary education in the monastery or *Chong*. There is a ritual that is followed before the sons of the house become monks. This ritual is called *Khamsang(1)* which is performed for three days. On the first day, the small boys are dressed as *Sang-along*, on the second day their hairs are shaved and *chau-mouns* or monks will wear the saffron robe and on the final day all the people visit the little monks to pay their homage. These small monks stay in the *chong* for only a certain period of time and can take away the saffron robes once they are out of the *chong*. However, small monks who wish to become monks all their lives are known by the name *Kham-Chau-Moun*. During their stay, they learned to read and write the local *Lik-Tai* script, practice art such as handicrafts and above all spirituality.

The same may not be said about the present situation. Those who learned this form of education continued to practice it as a layman even after leaving the monastery. There has been a recent cultural catastrophe befalling this community where the new generation is least interested in learning their script. Though learning and writing the local script are still maintained, other artistic pursuits have lost their ground in many *chongs* across the region. There is another member of the khamti community who has an important role to play, he is known by the name *Chow Chele*. He is considered to be the head priest who is well-versed in the history, language and principles of Buddhism. During religious occasions, like satang he leads the people into the *Chong* and also makes the offering (donated by the people) to the *Chau-Moun*. Until and unless *Chow Chele* performs the ritual it will remain incomplete. He also plays an important part in the death ceremony. Here again, he performs the ritual of putting into the hands of the *Chau-Mouns* the donation made by the family of the dead. Before the final cremation or burial takes place he reads through the prayer for the peace of the soul.

Like many other communities in the world, Khamtis also believe in their ancestral forefathers. Their folk culture often narrates stories of their origin. There are also pictures of such mythical beings that are half human and half bird known as *Kingnara and Kingnari* who are considered to be the first parent of the Khamtis.

### **The Myth of Origin of Tai-Khamtis**

According to a folktale, it is believed that at the beginning there was nothing but only water. There was no day and no night. A fish was then created by God. This fish was all alone; hence it is believed that god created an earth out of nothing placed it on the back of the fish and asked her to lay an egg on it. The fish obeyed him and gave birth to an egg. The god then took this egg and cut it into two equal halves. He buried inside the earth one half of the egg and the other half was stretched out higher and higher to form

the sky. The earth then came open with hills, mountains, river slopes and gorges. The sky cleared up to show the stars and planets. This was not sufficient to enliven nature hence to fill it with other living beings there emerged a beautiful tree and from it came all the other creatures. A flower blew and came out two pairs of human beings, one male and one female (*Kingnara* and *Kingnari*) who were believed to be the first ancestral parent from where began the race of the Tai Khamtis. In a short time, many flowers blew and out came creatures like animals and birds. Out of the roots were creatures like snakes, reptiles and insects. And all the petals which fell on the ground became weeds, plants and other forms of trees took shape.

It is not known when and how the Khunlung Khunlai dynasty came into its existence. However, they are believed to be the sole carrier of khamti descent. The last King of the dynasty had no son except a blind princess. To release himself from the burden of the blind daughter he ordered his men to take the daughter away and may well be sent across the river Nam Kiu. God had other plans. To save this dynasty from extinction he commanded Lengdon (God of Thunder) to come down and help the blind girl to start a line of Kings. Langdon took the shape of a Tiger (Su) and from their union were born four sons. Meantime, Lengdon after completing his task went away. The four sons were Chow Sukhampha, Chow Sulungpha, Chow Sukapha and Chow Sye. These sons on the insistence of their mother claimed their thrones and were given special gifts by their grandfather (after proving their real identity) who would help them to claim and settle in the land they so wanted. The first prince was given a Gong (musical instrument), the second prince was given a Nok Yang (Crane), the third one had a Mit and the last prince had a great share of a vast land. The land where these sons established their kingdoms is known by the names of Maungkong, Maungyang, Maungmit and the last one is Maungkhay in China (Nang Tertia Namshum Sandhu, Buddha Mahotsava Souvenir, 2006).

It is for this reason that in a Khamti tradition tiger is believed to be their common ancestor, is never killed and given due respect in their society. If in case a tiger is killed mistakenly then the people would stop their work for the day and make offerings of flowers to the dead body of the tiger.

One may take note of the very concept of god as portrayed in this folktale which stands in contradiction to Buddhism. However, according to some learned scholars, this tale is pre-Buddhist in nature but people still continue to view this story as the very base of their origin and creation of the universe.

### **Culture, Social Habits and Ritualistic Practices**

Culturally a close resemblance can be seen between the Khamtis and other southeast nations, especially Burma. For every household in a Khamti village, the day begins early morning when the daylight is still under cloak. As the tradition goes before anyone wakes up the women of the household get up before the sun rises and prepare the morning meal for the monks of the *Chong*. This is not limited to a single family. This is cyclic and every other day different families have to offer meals to the *Chong*. The men and women then go to the field after having their share of food and come back home only at dusk.

Khamtis are settled in fertile land and are solely agriculturists; they practice wet rice cultivation. They also irrigate water from the river banks. Agricultural implements are made from bamboo and wood. For cultivating the fields they make use of buffalos. Jhum cultivation is completely unheard of in this part of the region, unlike many other tribes of the state. Like many other tribal communities men and women equally participate in their fields. They cultivate in their own permanent plot of land. But in times of need members of other families also come forward to lend their helping hand (Gogoi, 62-64). They have a fish catching technique of their own which is called *Khauk* usually made to trap fish in the river. Khamti society maintains a traditional chieftainship system of its own that looks after the affairs of the villages and finds solutions to any problem. There is also a village council known as Mukchum. The chieftainship works under three level members- first, the Chau-pha-lung who has a nominal role to play; second comes

Chau-pha-kém who plays the most active part and deals with all kinds of village affairs, looking after the problems and disputes. The third is the Chau-pha-mao whose responsibility is to mobilize the youth and make them take an active part in any social or cultural occasions. When any dispute is not solved within these three levels it is then taken to the Mukchum. And if the Mukchum fails to deliver it then the affair is taken to the Govt. authorities.

Women in khamti society are equally hard-working; looking after the household chores, going to the field and weaving the traditional garments are common traits of these women. Besides these, they also partake in all the affairs relating to rituals in the social sphere and religious.

The people are genuinely hospitable and welcoming. They may not appear very frank in their disposition but slowly as they know you their extremely warm nature and straightforwardness will win you for good. Their customs are not structured according to the strict orthodoxy. However, any religious event invites strict adherence to rules and the involvement of Bhantes' (Monk) for these events is as important. Men and women are not bound by any strict social rules. They are given the freedom to choose their partners. However, in khamti society marriage with the same clan is not allowed. Marriage in a khamti community is rather simple way. The boy who so chooses to marry the girl he likes can ask for her hands and if he is found suitable for the bride's family they give their consent. As the tradition goes the bridegroom has to go through some formalities while living with the bride's family, this is done in order to measure his merit. Once he proves his worthiness they go ahead with the marriage rituals (Gogoi, 73-75). In recent times marriage through elopement has been seen in a large number of cases. When the child is born there are certain rituals that are followed such as the naming of the child which takes place after a few days of birth. This is solemnized by the *chau-moun* or *bhante* who chooses the name and in some cases, the parents themselves keep some suitable name for the child. Before the name of males an initial is given like Chow and for girls it is Nang.

In case of death like the very Hindu customs, the dead body is cremated. There is a belief among the khamti community that for any person who dies mysteriously, no death ritual is performed on that person. When a monk dies, a *kong-mu* (steep in the shape of a pagoda) is made to protect the 'remains'. For the common people, the death ritual is held after seven days. During this time the monks are offered food and given some mementoes. The relatives of the deceased person have to take *Panchasila* (the five ways of Buddha) and listen to the *Dharmadesona* (religious rites). People from far-off villages come to visit the house and are offered food; they also help the family in several other affairs (Gogoi, op. cit).

**Khamsang** is an important commonly practiced ritual for young boys. The term Khamsang means to endure the strict five-fold path of Buddha's principles. On turning thirteen years of age, atleast one son from the family has to live in Chong as a young monk for a period of minimum of three years during which time he is required to follow all the strict monkhood. Before his departure from home, the boy's head is shaved and then he is cleansed which is followed by wearing of the yellow robe. There is no strict rule for families to adhere to this important ritualistic practice, although most families in the villages would come forward willingly follow Khamsang, but in recent times Khamsang tradition is not very religiously followed. There is no particular month or day to perform this ritual. An ideal day is decided by elder bhantes to commemorate this ritual.

### **Economic Condition of Khamtis:**

In the villages, people are mainly dependent on the produce that comes from their fields. They are also dependent on the weekly markets which can be commonly seen in some villages since it is during this time that villagers bring rice and vegetables to sell in the market. However, people in the villages are very poor and have to struggle to make two ends meet. Whatever may be the case, at the time of coming together for an event whether religious in nature or otherwise, all women and men voluntarily participate



in the cause. This is when we can see the true spirit of the khamtis.

### Food Habits of Khamtis:

The foods of the Khamtis are famous for their richness in variety and taste. This is why they take pride in serving it to their guests. They also feel that the style or method of making these food items is less scientific. The most famous of them are *kham-hoi* (steamed rice), *Khau-lam* (bamboo roasted rice), *Khau-puk* (rice ground with mustard seeds); in the non-vegetarian items like fish, *pa-sa* is an extremely relished item that is considered to be very special. Other varieties like *Pa-chaw*, *Pa-ho*, *Pa-ping*, *Pa-lam* are also well known. In meat items, *Nau-sa*, *Nau-pho*, *Nau-lam*, *Nam-puig*, *Nau-chaw* and *Nam-tam* are famous. Khamtis have received wide recognition for their cuisine which boast of more than 150 different kinds of dishes.

### Traditional Architectural Design of Khamti Houses:

Khamti houses are made from bamboo and wood; they are raised high from the ground level with a thatched roof; the kitchen is made separately with a fireplace and slab above for storing woods and meat. The kitchen is made big enough for space that can accommodate a good number of people. A granary is made within the premise of the house for storing rice and grains. In urban areas, houses are designed as per modern day style and most of these houses will have an attached old fashioned kitchen area for a fireplace.

### Art (s) and Festivals

Art is the very reflection of a community life. It draws upon the creative imagination of the people which in turn identifies itself with the history of the time and society. Khamtis have also mastered their skill in art. This was not the only case with the common men and women but also with the monks who often used to engage themselves in artistic pursuits. Verrier Elwin quoted Dalton (Elwin, 24) who said "The priests in their relaxation amuse themselves by carving in wood, bone or ivory, at which they are very expert. In making ivory handles of weapons they evince great skill, taste, and fecundity of invention, carving in high relief twisted snakes, dragons, and other monsters with a creditable unity and gracefulness of design." Some of the arts are no longer in practice while some are still alive.

The art of wood carvings, can carvings, glass painting, stone carvings, basket making and cane and bamboo handicrafts are famous and continue to be in practice even today, most especially wood, stone and ivory carvings and glass painting which are made by well-known artists like Chow Sujanta Mansai and Chow Thanin Mansai. Some exceptional persons are experts in their knowledge of medicinal plants and have been known to have cured many ailments. The tradition of paper making and ink made from natural ingredients was once famous and is now completely out of practice. In the same manner, the traditional hydro rice mill and manual rice mill were an important agricultural technique used by the people. It is not known how but with the change of time these techniques got lost and now there is hardly any one of them to be seen. Today modern machines have replaced traditional methods. Such artistic creations are now been preserved in the form of an art piece. Khamtis are well known for taming wild elephants that are trained by experts. This tradition has long been there and is still alive.

The art of handicrafts is still practised by the women of this community. Verrier Elwin quoted Dalton (Elwin, 58-60) who says of khamti women "They are exceedingly industrious, spin, weave, dye, and embroider, and can themselves make up all that they wear." From the growing days of their childhood young girls are trained in this art. They learn to make different sorts of garments like *Pha-noi* (Lungi), *Sin* (Apron), *Pha-ho* (Turban) and *Pha-mai* (Shawl). Interestingly the clothing styles of khamti women are divided into three kinds as *Khat-sam* worn by girls during their childhood, *Phot-pha* which is the kind of style normally seen among girls during the times of adolescence and the third

kind called *Khun-sin* worn by adult women. Khamti dances are also varied in form and style. Some of them are known by names such as *Ka Cheung* (Martial art dance), *Kakong Tokai* (Cockfight dance), *Ka Phi Fai* (Demon dance) and *Ka Sieuk* (War dance).

Before the cinema emerged in the 20th century, there was only one form of visual entertainment and it was the art of Poong. The songs, dance, music, the story and spiritual teaching through drama worked as catharsis for the people. Just as art plays an important part in community life, in the same way, festivals are the base for creating solidarity among the people. They do not alone enliven the celebration moment but spread togetherness. It is during festival times that people also come to celebrate the glory of Lord Buddha. Most of the festivals of the khamtis are based on religious rites. The most commonly known festival is *Sangken*, it can also be called the water festival. The images of Buddha are taken out from the *chongs*<sup>1</sup> to the **Chong-phra**<sup>1</sup> and are given a bath. Each and every individual whether from the community or an outsider can pour pure and scented water into the images, there is no caste and no creed. Depending upon the lunar calendar of the year the festival is celebrated which sometimes happens for only two days and most of the time it goes on not beyond three days. All the families in towns and villages prepare traditional sweets such as *Khau-tek*, *khau-mun* and *khau-mun-tong-tet*, including many other kinds.

**Kathing**, robe-making festival is another significant customary event which is celebrated by women, where women who are interested divide themselves in groups. Each of these groups then craft robes on handloom and these robes are then donated to the Chong for Bhantes'. Women who organise this festival also hold fastest robe-making competition for all the groups and the winner is declared once the competition comes to an end. Kathing is celebrated with much fervour and merrymaking.

The **Poileng** festival is another very important festival of the Khamtis. It is celebrated on the occasion of a prominent monk's death. It is believed that any *chau-moun* who has dedicated his life for more than 20 years is given such a respectful celebration. This festival is organized on a public ground. On this occasion, a large chariot is made from wood which is beautifully decorated with colorful patterns and designs and where the deceased body of the monk is preserved for three days. This chariot is then pulled by people to receive blessings. On the final day, the whole chariot is burned down. During the festival monks sit for hours and read through the verses from the religious texts for the peace of the departed soul. People from across the region come to be a part of this wonderful festival. Women and men from villages voluntarily partake in making foods that are given to the laymen free of cost.

Another occasion that is highly religious goes on for a span of three months known as the holy months called **Satang**<sup>2</sup>. This event is important from the viewpoint of my study since after the completion of three months poong is organized in the *chong* across the villages. It is called *Potwa* and within it comes *Khaw-wa*, *Naw-wa* and *Satang*. This year it began in the month of 17th July and will end in the middle of October and then will begin *Potwa* and *Poong* will go on for at least a month. What is the significance of this festival? It is difficult to say if it can be termed a festival but for the people, it is no less than so. Now

<sup>1</sup> Chong-Fra is a place which is built outside the *Chong* within the premise. This is meant for the occasion of *Sangken* when the Buddha statues are brought outside and kept in the *Chong-fra*. Inside this is made a small *Han-lin* (boat) and *long-kung* (rotating wooden fan with multiple bamboo sticks attached to it). As people pour water to the long-kung it sprinkles the water into the statues.

<sup>2</sup> The date of *Satang* is fixed according to the lunar calendar of the khamtis. This date differ with the English calendar such as the date and month. The satang date this year was fixed on the 17<sup>th</sup> July according to the English calendar. But in lunar calendar it starts every year on the 8<sup>th</sup> day (*pét-wan*) of the month of July which is followed by another three days which are the 15<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and the last date of the month that is *chalay*, *sāu-sām* and *nun-sum* respectively. This is common to the other two months August & September till October mid as well.

let me give a detailed understanding of this whole thing. The day this festival begins is called *Khaw-wa* and the month of October when it ends is called *Potwa*. The duration between the months of July and October which is of three months is known as *Naw-wa*. And the day when *khaw-wa* starts is called *Satang*. *Satang* means the days that are considered auspicious and holy during the time of *naw-wa*. During these days a group of families gets involved in preparing *Petesha* which is made of bamboo sticks and looks like a tree which is then decorated with colored paper cuttings in different colors like red, green and blue which is called *hai*. In this *petesha* they tie money donated by the families of whole group. They also prepare a large utensil which is filled with rice and *alang* (tiny flags made of bamboo sticks) are put in the entire bowl. These tiny sticks are decorated entirely with white paper *hais*, *chong-chata*, *tan khawan* and *ketya* or *chakku*. These white paper *hai* are believed to reflect the pure minds and hearts of the people who are donating them. The people then carry them in possession towards the Chong and the whole thing is donated to the Chong. Likewise, other groups of families follow the same ritual. In a month there can be about three to four satangs and sometimes even more. For example, in the month of July are three satangs namely *satang khaw-wa*, *satang sāu-sām* and *satang nun-sum*. In the month of August, there are *satang piet-wan*, *satang sip-ha*, *satang sāu-sām* and *satang nun-sum*. For September month they are *satang piét-wan*, *satang chalay*, and *satang sāu-sām* and *satang nun-sum* or *satang mau-pi*. And during October there will be *satang piét -wan*, *satang sip-ha* and *satang-potwa*. These all together make up to 12 satang days during the whole period (3).

On these days the laymen and women including children go to the monastery or *vihara* to receive blessings from the monks and to take a vow of the five noble paths of Buddha. These five noble paths are:

- i. Abstain from killing
- ii. Abstain from stealing
- iii. Abstain from sexual misconduct
- iv. Abstain lies and falsehood, and
- v. Abstain from intoxicating substances

During *Naw-Wa* i.e., the duration between *Khaw-Wa* and *Potwa*, the Buddhists do not entertain marriage, construction of the house, quarrels, shifting from the village or house and initiating anything that is in the interest of the family and the society as a whole.

The monks of the higher level known as *Chau-Mouns* practice the eight-fold path which abstains them from having meals after 12 noon including the five-fold path. The lower-level monks known as *Chau-sang-min* also practice the eight-fold path. Those who take up the five-fold path can live like a layman which is not allowed in the eight-fold path.

The relationship between Poong and Potwa is that after going through rigorous religious customs for three months there was a need to create an atmosphere for enjoyment as well. The older folks would take more interest in Poong. This was the reason why prongs used to be performed for the common public, especially during potwa. Some families used to make special requests for the performances on this occasion. However, it is done only for one month after which it is completely out of scene.

There is so much that can be found in khamti society offering tiny glimpses of multifaceted traditions and customs interwoven into one large whole. From their chronicle of history to culture, from religious rituals to social habits and from art to festival astound the dynamics of a society. Amidst such a reservoir of wonderful phenomena, this society is now becoming conscious of its being at the tip of transition in the face of irrevocable change endangering its values and traditions. During the time of my fieldwork, I had the chance to look at several factors which correspond to the growing need for a stable society of earlier

times. Though many interviewees were straight there were still many who could not speak their heart out. Some pointed at the system that divides Khamti society into clans, while some felt the influence of opium and drugs among the younger generation was the root cause of such change. This has brought not only change but has adversely affected the art forms. It's hard to find the performers; their numbers have greatly reduced. Those who worry about the present social change are now too old to continue the art. Many people are vocal about it but on a practical level not much has been done to preserve what is left.

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