



## Traditional Skills and Knowledge of the Tai People of NE India

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### Introduction

Historically, the Northeastern part of India is, nowadays, the geographically inhabited location, where, long ago, the racial groups of Mongoloid people have settled down. So far as we know thoroughly, the Mongoloid were very rich of various language families such as the speakers of Indo-Chinese language belonged under Mon-Khmer family etc. The other groups of Indo-Chinese language such as Siamese-Chinese etc., were known and realized well, and especially, Shan was grouped and included in the earlier said Siamese-Chinese as well.

Primarily, the group of Shan or Tai people, according to the credible ethnic history, was found the existence in Yunnan. After that, they emigrated from the valley in the Southern part of Yunnan to the Shweli valley, where was located in the upper part of Burma in the sixth century. Afterwards, in the thirteenth century, the Tai Ahom minority people entered into Assam and then they, nowadays, still live in this state, where is located in the Northeastern part of India. The Tai Ahom people, as observed generally, have their severally subdivided groups namely; Shane state composed of Tai Khamti, Tai Phake, Tai Aiton, Tai Turung and Tai Khamyang. Their geographical evidences of the habitation, at the present time, can obviously be found in the administrative district of Dibrugarh and Sibsagar, state of Assam and beyond the administrative district of Lohit, state of Arunachal Pradesh.

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### Traditional Skills

With respect to Tai people, they, extensively speaking, were trained and taught profoundly through the thorough principles of doctrine in Buddhism that they have obtained the religious succession continually from Burma. Undoubtedly, they have brought such the Buddhist principles of doctrine in order to guide the good, right and suitable livelihood and, sometime, apply to earn living in their everyday life. For an example regarding the Buddhist principles of doctrine that Tai people used usually in life style, is about the Fourfold Virtues Leading to Benefits in the Present (Ditthadhammikattha-Samvattanika-Dhamma) namely

1. Utthanasampada: Tai people with the fully conducted diligence towards their professional works, an honest livelihood and professional skills, are endowed absolutely with the achievement of wealthy to earn living.

2. Arakhasampada: Tai people with the watchfulness are endowed exactly with the achievement of wealth collection and protection including the succeeded works, which are derived from the hard effort and diligence.

3. Kalyanamittata: Tai people, who are omniscient in order to associate with good company, can think analytically to build up friendship with only the person, who is full of the faith (Saddha), moral

conduct (Sila), charity (Dana) and wisdom (Panya).

4. Samajivita: Tai people with the suitable and comfortable livelihood, are able to think analytically and desire the sufficiency life by not to spend too little and too much money through their own incomes together with expenses. Contrarily, they emphasize and seek for the stable way to increase their more incomes than expenses, prefer to spend economically and make saving for the necessary circumstances.

Usually, the group of Tai people will hold fast to the Buddhist principles of doctrine strictly and firmly. In particularly, they earn living that comprised of the honest and right livelihood. According to the Buddhist principles of doctrine as mentioned in the above, it can obviously be observed and touched from the Tai people's behavior through the thorough professions as follows;

1. Tai people are able to work, grow rice, earn living, know how to work and choose the suitable seeds of rice for growing at farm in different seasons and receive the good product later.

2. Tai people are able to garden. That is to say that they know to do kitchen garden and bring the kitchen garden plants in order to cook such as vegetable and fruit etc. They grow banana tree and sweet potato not only for eating, but also for selling in order to



increase more incomes to their family status.

3. Tai people are able to do needlework. That is to say that all the groups of Tai people as specified in the above have about the intellectual ability to do weaving for both the personal use and selling. Especially, the cloth that they have weaved consists of and reflects upon the differently conducted symbols of Tai people in state of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

4. Tai people compose of the generosity and like to help each others. That is to say that they probably prefer to exchange both the eatable and uneatable belongings among the groups of Tai people such as; chicken to be exchanged with rice and chili to be exchanged with banana etc.

5. Tai people hold fast to the sufficiency economic system. All the groups of Tai people follow explicitly about the contentment (Santosa) as given in Buddhism and they are clever in order to spend money as much as necessary. Particularly, they like to hold and pay attention to practice extremely about the following Fourfold Bases of Social Solidarity (Sangahavathu) for each others.

1) Giving (Dana): Tai people have gladness to give, generosity, charity and help each other via giving the general materials or belongings as well as the useful knowledge and instruction.

2) Kindly Speech (Piyavaca): Tai people like to use the lovely, polite and sweet speech in order to bear the goodwill and love each others.

3) Useful Conduct (Atthacariya): Tai people prefer to conduct the valuable, useful and beneficial things for the general public and the other people concerned in their associations or societies.

4) Even and Equal Treatment (Samanattata): Tai people know to do the equality consisting in the impartiality and participation and behaving oneself properly in all the circumstances namely; status, condition, person, event and environment.

In accordance with the light as specified in the above, an example of the story regarding Tai people would be brought to show here in order to illustrate clearly. The Tai Phake people, like other groups of Tai people, are regarded as an important group in Assam that their community, as observed generally, is very strong and stable by pushing the village into development and supporting the children into education in their own community. By doing so, their village has increasingly been developed and, at the same time, incomes of the Tai Phake people, who are educated, have obviously been increased highly. Consequently, the Tai Phake people, at the present time, become the already



developed men in both the balanced materials and spirits, and especially, their faces, sincerely speaking, are full of the happy smiles.

### **Clinging to the Buddhist Principles of Doctrine**

As observed generally, the several ethnic groups of Tai people came from the important base of Buddhist followers. Nowadays, almost Tai people, except Tai Ahom and Tai Khamyang that are similar to Assamese, still follow the principles of doctrine as given in Buddhism strictly. Moreover, for Tai Ahom and Tai Khamyang people, sometime the practical way of Buddhism has implicitly been changed in order to approach to the Hindu activities. In the past time, the Tai people composed about the Buddhist literatures by emphasizing the usage of Tai language as the original manuscript. At the present time, the earlier said valuable literatures have been studied and transliterated as appeared in Buddhist temples of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

According to the original manuscript of Tai people, it is disclosed that Tai language was used to write in such the manuscript aged about 1,000 years. It is discovered and kept in the Buddhist temple. This original manuscript is called among Tai people as the Tripikaka (Three Baskets of

Buddha's Doctrines). Another important Buddhist literature is Poo Sorn Lan (Grandfather Taught Grandchild) that the beneficial doctrines of Buddhism about the sevenfold aspects of wife have been added. Regarding the Sevenfold Types of Wives as mentioned earlier, it is classified by considering thoroughly the morality, behavior, habit and practices to husband as follows;

1. Vadhakabhariya: a wife, like a slayer, has malice, lives together as wife without contentment, enjoys associating with other men and always thinks in order to destroy her own husband.

2. Coribhariya: a wife, like a robber, likes to steal the husband's wealth. So, this kind of wife can be compared with robber.

3. Ayyabhariya: a wife is lazy to work, always do nothing without eating, being sharp-tongued, rude, ruthless and she likes to bully own husband. So, this kind of wife can be compared with mistress.

4. Matabhariya: a wife, like mother, always wishes own husband to get well, takes care husband, like mother takes care child, and prefers to keep or collect the wealth that own husband worked hardly and overwhelmed. So, this kind of wife can be compared with mother.

5. Bhaginibhariya: a wife likes to respect to own husband, as if the younger sister or brother respects to the



elder one, being gentle-minded, courteous and follows own husband. So, this kind of wife can be compared with younger sister/ brother.

6. Sakhibhariya: a wife, like a companion, has good behavior and is glad to see own husband as if friends are very glad to see each others. So, this wife can be compared with the friend.

7. Dasabhariya: a wife, like a handmaid, always obeys to the husband's authority, is castigated or flogged and not get angry to the husband. So, this kind of wife can be compared with slaver.

Within the important literature entitled Grandfather Taught Grandchild (Poo Sorn Lan), it is stated obviously that the wives in types of 1 to 3 mentioned in the above, are regarded as the bad wives, but the wives from the remaining types of 4 to 7 are regarded as the good wives and they are suggested to choose the spouse. At the same time, the types of husband, like the types of wife, have also been written obviously in such the literature. Especially, the Poo Sorn Lan literature has always be brought to read and give instructing to all the ethnic groups of Tai people, and the same has later been held to practice strictly. So, it caused Tai people to receive happiness and have the warm family at the present time.

### **Ancestors as the Important Prototype**

Tai people in Assam have the important identity for each group. Villages will locate around the temple and school. Importantly, they will set the temple to play a large role as the central place in order to run the different religious activities. Especially, the culture that will be succeeded from the temple obviously in the different Buddhist Holydays such as the Buddhist Holydays; Magha Puja Day, Vesak Puja Day, Asalha Puja Day, the Buddhist Lent Day and the End of Buddhist Lent Day etc., has been ran in the temple area. Tai people will go to make a general merit, republic benefits at the temple, participate in order to practice the Dhamma and observe the precepts. Particularly, the ancestors are regarded as the important prototype in observing the Five Moral Precepts as follows;

1. Panatipata veramani: abstaining from killing or all kinds of injuring each others.

2. Adinnadana veramani: abstaining from taking the belongings of others or stealing.

3. Kamesumicchacara veramani: abstaining from sexual misconduct or infringing the loved husband/wife of other people.

4. Musavada veramani: abstaining from lying, false and untruth speech.

5. Suramerayamajjapamadatthana veramani: abstaining from drinking intoxicants causing heedlessness.



### Proficiency Knowledge in Other Fields

Regarding the proficiency knowledge in other fields that Tai people have occupied already from the former times till the present times, it can obviously be addressed here, such as ability in composing the literatures entitled Grandfather Taught Grandchild etc., ability to choose spouse for wedding, ability to comport and do different ceremonies by focusing on the praying words towards such the literatures.

### Holding Fast to the Agricultural Culture

The culture of Tai people, which is regarded as another important activity has been succeeded continually long ago. Such the culture is known well as the Culture of Eating the Pounded Unripe Rice. The earlier said culture has widely and obviously been recognized among the group of Tai people in Assam. Not only that, such the culture has also been found in the group of Thai people in Thailand, but its naming is called or pronounced differently according to the linguistic identity of each locality. However, the practical way to run such the activity, as observed truly, is similar each other very much namely; they bring it and offer respectfully to the monastic orders as monks and novices at the temple nearby/within their own villages.

According to this activity as said in the above, people in the Northeastern part of Thailand called it as Boon Khao Jee. For the Tai people in Assam, they have practiced and followed according to the practical ways that their own ancestors taught and introduced. It will annually be started to run around December after farming season. Within the ceremony, there will be the formal invitation of monks in order to pray and also other Buddhist followers in order to participate in the morning time. The mostly aged women are regarded as the key women or representatives of others to bring the tray of food and offer respectfully to the Buddhist monks at temple, lighten the incense and candles for worshiping the Stupa and start praying to recall the Buddha's grace. After such the religious activity, they will be back to their village. At the village, when the monks and Buddhist followers got ready in the ceremony, the monks will start to pray by uttering Pali language as follows;

Bhavatu Sabbamanggalang May all good fortune come to you,

Rakkhantu Sabbadevata May all the deities protect you,

Sabbabuddhanubhavana By all the power of the Buddha

Sada sukhi bhavantute May you always enjoy well-being.

After the chief of monks in the ceremony delivered Pali language in



order to give the five moral precepts (as stated already in the item no.4), the monks will start to read Mongkalarattana Sutra and Karaniyamettayya Stura and give a sermon to the villagers. This is called Hotala. Then, the villagers in the ceremony will start to pray and request apologizing from the monks. This is called Ka Kan Tor Jao Mon. It can be said that the Buddhist activity takes part in this culture and it ends by making a merit devoted to Goddess of earth. This is called Yern Nam Her Nang Ma Chung. It will be done by those persons, who have experienced the monastic order as monks already. This is called Pa Tao. However, while Tai people are pouring the water onto the earth, there will be praying words as Pali language as follows;

Raja Dosa May the king's anger not come to us

Jora Dosa May the robbers not disturb us

Manussa Dosa May the human not disturb us

Amanussa Dosa May the non-human not disturb us

Aggi Dosa May the Buddha protect us from fire

Udaka Dosa May the Buddha protect us from flood

Eventually, the ceremony will be finished about 10.00 am.

According to the religious activities as specified in the above, it takes part of

life that they succeeded continually from the previous generations to the present one of Tai people in Assam. It is regarded as another important culture of the several phenomenon of the existing culture. The holding fast to the principles of doctrine in Buddhism makes the Tai people's mind strong and the Buddhist language that they used to pray is still the Pali language, but their praying pronunciation and accent regarding the Pali language, as observed generally, may be different a little bit. There seems to be the similar pronunciation and accent to Burmese language, because they obtained the Buddhism succession continually from Burma from the beginning.

### Knowledge of Tai People in Assam

Obviously, Tai people in Assam hold fast not only to the principles of doctrine in Buddhism, but also have the professional knowledge and skills that they have succeeded continually from their own ancestors in order to earn their living. They are, as observed truly, able to make about the instruments or equipments for many activities such as farming, gardening, hunting and fishing etc. Moreover, they are very able to produce clothes creatively and compound the herbal medicines.

#### 1. Farming Instruments

Tai and Thai people have knowledge and skills about surveying



the materials which will be brought to make as tools, farming or gardening instruments such as plough, harrow, barn, cart for containing materials in house. According to the different tools as mentioned earlier, they are as follows;

Plough: mostly, it made of Pterocarpus macrocarpus, because it is the hardwood, which is able to endure using longer. The harrow, like the plough, is made of such the wood.

Barn: Tai people know to make the barn in order to contain materials. About their intellectual ability, they are able to choose different categories of wood in order to make the barn namely;

Padauk wood: it is used for making the yoke and barn structure.

Velvet tamarind wood: it is used for making the barn axle.

Selangen batu wood: it is used for making the barn hub.

Xylia kereii craib wood: it is used for making the wheels of a cart.

According to the light as showed the different categories of wood in the above, each category of wood will be suitable for making as the barn equipment that is held as the incredible folk wisdom succeeded continually from the ancestors.

## 2. Fishing Instruments

2.1 Bamboo fish trap: it made of the bamboo knitted with rope. Its benefits are to entrap fish in the shallow

river. However, in the deep river, the kind of bamboo fish-trap with a narrow neck will better be used.

2.2 Coop-like trap for catching fish: it made of the small bar of bamboo that brings to weave as the fishing instrument.

2.3 Kind of bamboo fish-trap with a narrow neck: it, like the bamboo fish trap, made of the bamboo too, but the sizes of the bamboo strip, are made bigger than the bamboo fish trap, so that can trap fish in the deep river.

2.4 Fishnet: Tai people are able to make the fishing implements. Fishnet here is regarded as the important one that Tai people in Assam have the skillful ability by bringing the thread to weave the fishnet consisting of 6-8 sizes. The fishnet is held as the fishing instrument, which is available among the group of Tai people or Thais.

## Knowledge of Food Preservation

### 1 Shrimp Paste (Kapi)

As the clever men, Tai people know to bring the fish to dry out and ferment such the fish with salt (1 Kilogram of fish per 50 grams of salt) and then contain it in the bamboo tube, bind and close the mouth of bamboo tube tightly. Such the shrimp paste, as the special food, can be bought in order to welcome the visitors as well as the closed up relatives. About this, it can





later be kept for eating approximately 2 months.

#### 2. Dried Meat (Nue Haeng)

Regarding the dried meat, its practical procedure to cook is, as observed generally, similar to the shrimp paste, but the kind of dried meat can shortly be kept for eating about 1 month only.

#### 3. Pickled Fish (Pla Som)

About the pickled fish concerned, Tai people know to bring the fresh fish to mix with the already cooked rice including salt, contain in the bamboo tube and keep delayed about 5-6 days. Such the pickled fish can be brought to eat, especially in the several important occasions such as the wedding ceremony etc. It can shortly be kept about 1 month. For another kind of doing the pickled fish, this kind of pickled fish, like the fresh fish as said above, will be brought to chop as the small pieces and then, start to ferment such the fish.

#### 4. Fermented Fish (Pla Ra)

According to the practical procedure of doing fermented fish, it can be explained obviously that the body of fish must be brought to mix with salt and the already cooked rice and then ferment it in the bamboo tube. Such the fermented fish are held as the eatable local food of Tai people in Assam and Thai people in Thailand. The fermented fish of Tai people will

explicitly be kept about 1-2 weeks and then, it can be brought to eat. Contrarily, the fermented fish in Thailand can be kept to eat longer.

#### 5. Pickled Cabbage (Phak Kad Dong)

Intellectually, Tai people are clever to bring the fresh vegetable to sun softly, do mixing such the vegetable with salt, the cooked rice, and contain in the bamboo tube or pot. After keeping delayed about 7 days, it can be brought to eat.

For cooking other kinds of food such as flour, popped rice, dried rice etc., Tai people in Assam and Thai people in Thailand, proudly speaking, have the special ability and body of knowledge in order to cook very well and the practical procedure of cooking is regarded as the great way of food preservation and flavor. The body of knowledge that brings the materials to cook is derived explicitly from the nature, and without chemical harmfulness. By practicing so, it causes Tai people to become the healthy men with long living. So, it can be said that such the practical procedure of cooking still is regarded clearly as not only the food preservation, but also the environment preservation in the world as well.



## Indigenous Folk Wisdom Concerning the Dyeing Colors from Nature

### 1. Making Alkali Water

Intellectually, Tai people know to bring the old and auburn trunk of spiny amaranth to dry out, and then burn it as ashes mixed with pure water. Having delayed it to precipitate, they started pouring only the clear and pure water in order to mix with colors to be dyed.

### 2. Dyeing Black Color Derived from Ebony Ball

Usually, Tai people know to bring the fresh ebony ball to pound crushingly and keep soaking it in the already prepared water, which have the roots of black Roselle mixed with ebony ball. Afterwards, they bring their clothes and do dyeing clothes about 3-4 times. In all the times of dyeing clothes, clothes must always be dried out.

### 3. Dyeing Purple Color Derived from Jambolan Plum

Obviously, Tai people know to bring the ripe Jambolan Plum to squeeze for bringing out the purple water. Then, they will bring such the already squeezed water to boil approximately 1-2 times. After that, they will put the colored clothes in the boiling water in order to do dyeing. While dyeing their clothes, they often stir in order to embed the colors into the body of clothes deeply.

### 4. Dyeing Yellow Color Derived from the Core of Jackfruit Tree

Explicitly, Tai people know to bring the core of jackfruit to cut as the thin and small pieces, start to crush by both hands, wrap all pieces of jackfruit with the clear white cloth and boil the wrapped cloth about 4 hours. After that, they will bring the cloth that they want to do dyeing for boiling about 1 hour, and then start to sun it to make it dried.

### 5. Dyeing Red Color Derived from Roots of Leek

Undoubtedly, Tai people know to bring the root of the old leek for cutting as the small pieces, put them into the boiling water, lay the cloth in the colored water and soak about 3 minutes, and then bring it to dry out.

### 6. Dyeing Indigo Color from Leaves of Indigofera Tinctoria

Clearly, Tai people cut and roll up the leaves of indigofera Tinctoria, bind and soak it in water about 2-3 days until its leaves become soft. After that, they will bring the trunk with leaves and crab, which are derived from burning extremely the roots of banana to mix. Having delayed it about 2-3 nights, Tai people start to pour out the water that put in, and put indigo color as much as they want.

### 7. Dyeing Green Color from Leaves of Indian Almond

Exactly, Tai people know to bring the leaves of Indian Almond tree to pound, squeeze it to receive the colored water, filter and boil. Then, they



put the cloth to do dyeing and bring it to dry out.

#### 8. Dyeing Green Color from Leaves of Myrobalan Bark

Truly, Tai people know to bring the Myrobalan bark to boil, simmer until it becomes dried, pour the water into clay pot, put the cloth, which is dyed firstly by the indigo color into the hot colored water, boil about 1 hour and then, bring it to dry out.

Tai people in Assam or Thai people in Thailand, at the ancient time, have probably preferred using the naturally derived colors in order to do dyeing thread, cotton including silk, because they believed obviously that the naturally derived colors, deeply feeling, will truly be colorful, and the same are not harmful to the users surely. As looked back in the former times, Tai people admired extremely to do dyeing silk, breast cloth, robe of the Buddhist monk, cotton cloth, fishnet as well as seine by themselves. In respect

to dyeing the cloth, Tai people will bring the different parts of tree concerned such as trunk, bark, root, core, leaf and fruits etc., in order to grind colors, according to the practical procedure of dyeing through their indigenous folk wisdom.

Such the practical procedure of dyeing always consists of and implies about the incredible body of knowledge for utilizing fully the naturally derived materials. For this point, it can clearly be uttered that Tai people, by their characteristic, often give precedence to preserve and, at the same time, emphasize to protect their own environment undoubtedly. To summarize herewith, it can shortly be said that Tai people realize the uncountable values of nature, because a man, as they believed deeply, who will be alive in this world, must depend upon the alive forest and, at the same time, the forest that will be alive in this world, must depend upon a man too.



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