

# A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE AHOM PEOPLE

By

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## *History*

There are many dim and legendary accounts of the origins of the *Ahom* people. Modern accounts have pieced together a connected history of their origins but even these are confused and difficult to follow. Dr. R.M. Nath of the Indian Service of Engineers, a keen archaeologist, has, however, recently published a well connected story in his "Background of Assamese Culture" though it may be thought perhaps that he has ventured a little too far into the realm of fancy in his references to the Egyptians.<sup>1</sup>

"Several Mongolian tribes living in the hills on the western border of China—headed by the *Chao* tribe—invaded China about 1122 B.C. and ousted the powerful Tsang dynasty of that great empire. The *Chaos* who had intercourse with Egypt and other countries in Central Asia in connection with trade imbibed a lot of the Egyptian culture, and now mixing the Tsang culture with their own, they evolved a new culture known in history as the *Chao*.

"The *Chao* ruled for several centuries in China and the several tribes who came with them as their allies from their original western hilly land ruled over different states in China under the *Chao* Emperor.

"One of these tribes which ruled over a state in the Yangtse Valley was of an independent temperament. They called themselves the *Tais* (sic) or the Independent, and were a constant source of trouble to the Chinese Emperor in the 3rd Century A.D. They were driven down to the Hunan area to the south; but here also quite averse to the current thoughts of Confucianism or the new wave of Buddhism they stuck to the orthodox cult of worshipping the symbol of power-giving supreme energy in the form of a piece of cut stone and carried on frequent revolutionary campaigns against the Chinese Emperor. In about 568 A.D. the Chinese Emperor weakened this turbulent tribe by a divide-and-rule policy:— Of the two brothers

who were the leaders, Khunlai, the younger, accepted the vassalage of the Chinese emperor, while the proud Khunglung—the elder—migrated with his followers to Namkhan and then to Meung-ri-Meun-rang (commonly known as Mungri-Mungrang)—a place about 100 miles southeast of modern Lashio.\*

“From here, these people migrated to various places in the south and established a number of small kingdoms under different leaders in the hilly country to the north and northwest of Burma including the whole of the Hukong Valley. The Burmese called them the Shans or the Hill-climbers or the Highlanders, and the Chinese called them the *Nan-Chaos* or the Southern *Chaos*.

“In this area, though these people were comparatively safe from the Chinese onslaughts, they constantly fought amongst themselves. A section of them went down to the southeast and, defeating the *Mon-Khmers* and other ruling races of that area, established a powerful Kingdom which was known as the land of the Tais or according to the Burmese—the land of the Shans or the *Shams*. Here they came in contact with the Buddhist and the Hindu cultures that were propagated there by early Indian colonisers, and mixing freely with them politically, socially, and racially evolved a new culture of a high order. The Kingdom gradually came to be known as Siam or the Thai-land.

“The conservative group, remaining in the original hilly area, still persisted in the worship of *Chumdeo* (life and strength giving God) and Ai-phra-Loung (Mother-goddess-lustre). *Chumdeo* appears to have been an abbreviated form of *chao* (chuh) *ma-Deva* (Heaven great God). The influence of Lord Buddha reached them only in a distorted form—*Fvat*, *Fia*, till he became *Fa* or *Pha* and was honoured by the use of the term as an epithet after the King's name. The traditional connection with the *Chaos* was retained in the first epithet of the names of the Kings, and the winged Lion *Taoti* of the Chinese Tsang culture was used as the royal insignia.

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\*This Kingdom was known to the early historians of Manipur, an Indo Burma border state, as Pong.

The influence of the Chinese *Chao* culture—in writing family history and recounting the deeds of the forefathers of the family on every solemn occasion like marriage etc.—became a custom with them. The influence of the Egyptian culture which influenced the *Chaos* as well—in burying the dead with a host of living attendants and various necessities of life in a house built with timber and then covering it up with earthen mound in the form of a pyramid—was retained scrupulously as a sign of glory and aristocracy. Daily life was regulated by heavenly bodies counted upon according to Chinese astronomy; sixty years making a century, and each century having a separate name.

“Here, in one of the petty Kingdoms of the frequently quarrelling hierarchy Meung-Mit, a lucky prince of the family of Khunglung,\* had an unlucky quarrel with his step-brother about his share of the kingdom in the Hukong Valley, and in a state of despair and disgust left the paternal country to try his luck in fresh fields and pastures new.”

It is probable that the capital of this small kingdom was the town now called Mogaung.<sup>2</sup> This kingdom lasted until it was finally wrested from the king by the Burmese in 1799 as consequence of his intercepting an *Ahom* princess on her way from the *Ahom* Kingdom to the King of Burma or, as it was called in those days, Ava.

In 1836 the Myowun Burmese governor of this town was found by Captain Hannay, an early British visitor, supplicating the spirits of three brothers buried there who were severally the founders of the three Thai states of Khamti, Ahom and Mogaung, namely, Chao Phya Hoseng, Chao Suwei Kapha (Chao Ka Pha) and Chao Sam Loung Hue Mung.<sup>3</sup> The *Mogaung* people remain the Shans of Burma, the *Khamti* people are to be found in the extreme north of Burma and in Northeast Assam, and the *Ahom* people are, of course, the subject of this paper.

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\*Chao Ka Pha

“Accompanied by a band of seven brave friends and 9,000 followers,” writes Nath,<sup>1</sup> “he marched westwards with the *hengdan* (divine sword) in one hand, and the symbol of *Chumdeo*—the spoil of a nightly theft from the palace of Meung Khong—in another; and after a desperate march over many hills and dales—with atrocious and brutal encounters with many strange tribes that dwelt sparsely in these God-forsaken and inaccessible areas—he emerged after 13 years into the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 A.D. in a place near about present Namrup.”\*

According to one of the *Ahom Buranji* (histories) there were twelve commanders, 300 fighting men, two elephants, two conductors of elephants and 30 horses and horsemen.

Chao Ka Pha (“Heaven-come God”) left his home in 1215 A.D. and proceeding northwestwards crossed the Chindwin on rafts probably in the regions of Taro. From Taro his route is difficult to follow but the places he passed through are all known and perhaps careful research from the maps will eventually prove the route. He seems then to have moved into the hills well to the west and to have gone northwards fighting his way against the *Naga* probably along the Sangpan range till he reached the Nawngyang lake. Here he met fierce opposition and even his own historians declare he perpetrated frightful atrocities on the local inhabitants. Perhaps then, as until quite recently, the *Naga* were headhunters and human sacrificers and unfortunate things may have happened to many of his band. The *Naga* now living in this area still talk of the invasion as if it had happened within the time of their own grandfathers.

Perhaps it was Chao Ka Pha himself who paused for a moment on the summit of the Patkoi range in 1228 like Moses on Pisgah gazing at the Promised Land and exclaimed *Mueng Dun Sun Kham* (“The Land of the Golden Gardens”). That at any rate is what the *Ahom* people called the country they were eventually to conquer and rule for many centuries.

\*Other chronicles give it as nine nobles and 8,000 followers.<sup>4</sup>

It was certainly one of the most glorious sights in the world that met their eyes. A broad valley abounding in rice fields; in the distance the wide ribbons of the mighty rivers that go to make up the Brahmaputra and towering above everything to the north of the valley the snow-capped Himalayas tipped perhaps with the rosy tints of the early morning sun. Here indeed, after thirteen years of wandering in the wilderness, was the land of plenty.

Chao Ka Pha and his followers were a vigorous if ruthless people. They called themselves *Tai* (celestial or glorious), and the early Assamese translating this literally called them the *Asama*, meaning unequalled or peerless. *Asama* appears to have been softened into *Aham* and eventually to *Ahom* (pronounced *a-home*). It is very fair though to record another equally tenable theory that the word *Ahom* has developed from the Burmese name for the Thai *Shan*. Perhaps Siam, Shan, *Ahom*, Assam are all the same word.

After descending the slopes of the Patkoi, Chao Ka Pha and his host travelled westwards and, easily defeating the *Moran*, the first of the *Bodo* tribes they met, they made their first settlement in India at Namrup on the banks of the river Dikhu. By 1253 they had made friends with the next tribe, the *Bahahi*, and established their first capital at Charaideo, on the borders of the Naga Hills some 40 miles to the southwest. This town was to remain the capital of the Kingdom for the next 300 years or more and though the capital was moved later further to the southwest, Charaideo remained to the end the burial place of the Kings. At the time of founding the city two horses were sacrificed and prayers said under a mulberry tree. On the banks of the Dikhu the settlers had time to develop and increase in population before coming into collision with more powerful neighbours further down the valley to the west.

Chao Ka Pha, the first *Ahom* King, died in 1268. He was, according to the historian Gait,<sup>5</sup> an enterprising and brave prince and his name is sullied only by the brutal means he adopted to

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\*In *Tai Noi* history, 10 years before the foundation of the Sukhodaya Kingdom.

overawe the *Naga* hillmen on his way across the Patkoi Mountains. After his death the kings succeeded each other with regularity, governing wisely according to Thai practice through their ministers, the *chao thao lung* and the *chao phrang mung*.

During the reign of King Chao Tu Pha (1364-1376), the *Ahom* had many serious clashes with their neighbours the *Chutiya*. The *Ahom* King demanded the submission of the *Chutiya* King and required in addition that he should deliver over to him, the golden couch, the golden standard and the golden cat. He also demanded that the *Chutiya* King should resign his wife to his embraces. The King of the *Chutiya* refused to accept these conditions and wars continued throughout the whole of this reign until the treacherous assassination of Chao Tu Pha. In 1376 the *Chutiya* King visited him near his capital and pretending to be reconciled invited him to a regatta on the river. Here he enticed him on to his own barge without attendants and treacherously murdered him. After Chao Tu Pha's death, there being no prince whom the great nobles thought worthy of the throne, the first interregnum in *Ahom* history occurred. Eventually the third son of his predecessor was elected to the throne and his first act was to lead the Army and punish the *Chutiya* for the murder of his uncle. The *Chutiya* were not overthrown until 1523 in the reign of Chao Hung Mung though they had been worsted in most struggles prior to this date.

In 1536 the same King attacked and sacked the capital of the *Kachari* King and forced his people to retreat to the hills. The *Ahom* as a result of this battle had carried the borders of their kingdom 150 miles down the Assam valley to the southwest.

In 1539 Chao Hung Mung died at the hand of a *Kachari* assassin employed by his own son Chao Kleng Mung. The reasons for the assassination were a quarrel between father and son over the possession of the three Queens of the *Chutiya* King and a royal row over a cock fight. At the time of his death the King had also made the *Koch* King far to the west his vassal and had repulsed no less than three Muslim invasions, destroying completely the last Moghul army sent against him. It is thought the fact that he was the first king to use firearms may have had something to do with his military successes.

Chao Hung Mung was a bold, enterprising and resourceful ruler and under him not only did his country greatly expand in size but under his efficient administration the social condition of the people made great strides. He took a census of the people, divided them into clans, imported artisans from nearby countries and changed the calendar from the Jovian to the Hindu system. During his reign too the Hindu *Vaishnava* reformation, promulgated by the great Hindu preacher Sankardeb made considerable progress. It was his son Chao Kleng Mung who in the first year of his reign moved the royal capital from Charaideo to Garhgaon.

Wars against the *Koch* and the remnants of the *Kachari* continued for the next hundred years up to the reign of Chao Seng Pha who died in 1641. During this Monarch's reign many of the more backward tracts were developed, the *Ahom* made inroads into the hills on both sides of the valley and transfers of population were made to the more sparsely populated frontier areas to help in protecting the boundaries.

Under this King, too, many roads and embankments were built and new towns constructed. These earth embankments were models of ingenuity and exist to this day close to and in fact right into the Naga Hills to the south of the Kingdom. *Kataki* (interpreters) were appointed on the fringes of the country and none of the "wild men" were allowed to cross the frontiers unaccompanied by them. *Kataki* also acted as spies to watch the movements of the frontier tribes. In some palaces permanent forts were constructed, stone and brick bridges were built and numerous markets established.

Chao Seng Pha, like his predecessors, was a great elephant hunter and achieved the distinction of being the first *Ahom* King to own a thousand elephants. He maintained a close watch on all aspects of the administration and was also the first *Ahom* King to strike octagonal coins which were supposed to be the shape of the country he ruled.

Twenty or more years after his death, 1662, closer control of the *Koch* kingdom to the west and raids into Muslim territory by the *Ahom* led to another attempt by the Moghuls to overcome them but Mir Jumla, one of Aurangzeb's greatest generals, met the same fate Napoleon was later to meet on his march to Moscow. The *Ahom* let him come right through the country, two or three hundred miles to their capital at Garhgaon which he entered on March 17, 1662. Rain and fever then did for the Muslims what snow and frost did to the French. When the rains broke the country was as usual transformed into a vast swamp and military operations became impossible. The invaders were shut up in their camp and those who ventured out were eliminated. Communications and supplies were cut off. Mir Jumla found himself unable to maintain his outposts and had to withdraw them one by one; to the terrors of a persistent and unseen enemy were added several epidemics, especially dysentery. Finally he was compelled by the clamour of his troops to patch up a treaty with the King and retreat to Dacca in Bengal. Dying himself on March 30, 1663 in sight of home, he lost a large number of his men on the way back and most of his artillery. Though his doctors gave various diagnoses for the illness which led to his death the men commonly believed that the sickness was the result of witchcraft practised by the *Ahom* King.

A contemporary Muslim account of the Garhgaon Treaty is worth quoting in full<sup>6</sup>:-

- "1. The Rajahs of Asam and Batam (never identified) should each send one of their daughters to the imperial harem.
- "2. Each should pay 20,000 taels of gold and 120,000 *tola* of silver.
- "3. Fifteen elephants to be sent to the Emperor; fifteen to the *Nawab* (Mir Jumla) and five to Dilir Khan (one of Mir Jumla's lieutenants).
- "4. Within the next twelve months 300,000 *tola* of silver and 90 elephants to be sent as tribute to Bengal in three quarterly instalments.



- "5. 20 elephants to be furnished annually.
- "6. The sons of Budh Gohain, Karkas-ha, Bar Gohain Prabatar, the four principal *Phukan* of the Rajah to remain as hostages with the *Nawab* till the fulfilment of the conditions in Article 4.
- "7. The following districts to be ceded to His Majesty the Emperor :-
- A: In the north.
- Sirkar Durang bounded by Gavhati on one side and by the Ali Burari (Bhoreli) which passes Fort Chamdhura on the other side;
- B: In the south.
- The district of Nakirani (near the Garo Hills);
- The Naga Hills;
- Beltali;
- Dumurian (extends to the Kallang river);
- "8. All inhabitants of Kamrup kept as prisoners by the Rajah in the hills and in Namrup to be restored; so also the family of the *Budli Phukan*."

In territory the Moghuls got little out of the treaty. Durang had been theirs at one time and the area claimed on the south bank of the river was mostly hill and jungle and inhabited by wild tribes who would yield to no one.

From other Moghul records<sup>6</sup> it is clear that the cession of Durang was purely nominal, there is no record of payments of money by Muslim historians but it is true that some of the elephants arrived and that a daughter of the king was subsequently married to an Imperial Prince, Mohamed A'zam, with a dowry of 180,000 rupees.

There is a remarkable similarity between the *Ahom* and the Muslim accounts of this treaty.

Chao Tam La, the *Ahom* King, himself died in November of the same year and his successor, Chao Phung Mung, refused to tolerate such a dishonourable treaty as had been negotiated by his

predecessor.<sup>7</sup> Soon after his accession he called a council of elders to concert measures to destroy the remaining Muslim power in the valley. He established firearm and munition factories and built a large number of warships. He prepared a muster roll of all able-bodied men in the kingdom and instilled into their minds by propaganda the sentiments of valour and the importance of the liberation of the country. It is recorded that he personally instructed recruits how to fire the arrow, hurl the spear and use the shield.

In this connection a quotation from Shakespeare, who was living in England when the *Ahom* people were making their greatest progress, seems most apt:

“For forth he goes and visits all his host  
 “Bids them good morrow with a modest smile  
 “And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.  
 “Upon his royal face there is no note  
 “How dread an enemy had enrouded him.”

It was Chao Phung Mung, well to be compared with Shakespeare's Harry (Henry V), who drove the Moghuls across the river Manas and established a viceroyalty at Gauhati 250 miles from the point where his great predecessor had entered India. He died in 1670 only to be followed by seven kings all of whom were assassinated by their ministers in the short space of 11 years. But at the end of this period there arose in 1681 Chao Phatpha, one of the greatest of the *Ahom* monarchs, who inflicted such a crushing defeat on the Moghuls that the roar of their guns was no longer heard in the valley. In a history written by an Englishman in 1814 the *Ahom* successes were ascribed to the fact that the people “were fierce of their independence and invigorated by a nourishing dish and strong drink”. He added that the prince “had not sunk under the enervating and unceasing ceremonies of the Hindu doctrines”. Not only did this king defeat the Muslims once and for all but he succeeded in subduing all the frontier tribes. He had a peculiar penchant for land survey which he had picked up from the Moghuls and though he strove hard the survey of the country had not quite been completed by the time of his death in 1696 A.D.

The accession of his son Chao Khrung Pha alias Rudra Singh was the beginning of the end. Though he and his immediate successors constructed some of the finest roads and artificial lakes in the country they began to fall under the sway of the Hindu priests and with this monarch's death can be traced the end of the generation of strong kings and "we hear no more of brave deeds, heroic exploits and territorial acquisitions". The comfort and devitalising influence of the land they had conquered had begun to sap the energy of this once virile race. They had to accept a subordinate position in the Hindu caste system and give up the nourishing fare to which they had been used.

If the kings up to this date were like the Tudors, Chao Khrung Pha was the first of the Stewarts. During the reign of Chao Rampha (1751-1769) we find the nobles for the first time refusing to go on active service and declining the command of military expeditions. The decadence was the same as that of the Stewarts. The Hindu priests worked upon the vanity of the *Ahom* kings in the same way as the Christian clergy cringing for royal favour played upon the Stewarts. Earlier kings, though they patronised and even accepted Hinduism, always placed the safety of the state above all other considerations. It was the later kings who fell completely under its sway, finishing with the country full of religious preceptors and their followers who claimed exemption from the universal liability to fight and to assist in other public works. The earlier kings had spotted the possibility of the Hindu caste system destroying the *Ahom* tribal system and did all they could to avoid the priests breaking it up—even going to the extent of giving the most degrading work including the construction of a highway to those whom they considered owing to their higher caste might upset the system. For some time the people continued to perform the old tribal rituals alongside the new worship of the Hindu pantheon recalling the analogous situation in Rome at the time of the adoption of Christianity by Constantine the Great.

It was to some extent persecution of those who accepted the Hindu doctrine that kindled the fire of the *Moamaría*<sup>1</sup> rebellion during the reign of Sunyeopha (1769-1780) that was the beginning of the end of Thai *Ahom* rule in Assam. Though Sunyeopha succeeded in quelling the rebellion the insurrection broke out afresh in the reign of his son Chao Hitapangha (1780-1795). The capital, Rangpur, was actually seized by the rebels in 1786 and the King was forced to flee nearly two hundred miles to Gauhati. The disorders dragged on for several months, whilst the Prime Minister Purananda *burha gohain* valiantly strove to put them down.\*

It was this rebellion and the anarchic state of the country that led to the first arrival of the British who by this time had replaced the Muslim (Moghul) power on Assam's borders. The country had become filled with the turbulent ruffianism of the great bazaars in Bengal, with disbanded soldiery and fighting fanatics pillaging the villages, laying waste the fields and reducing the country to ruin. The King appealed for help to a nearby British merchant whose private army was defeated and eventually to Lord Cornwallis the Governor General of India, who agreed that he must take steps to stop marauders from British territory interfering in the internal affairs of Assam. The gangs of pillagers from Bengal, were accordingly ordered to return to that state but refused to do so.

In 1792 Captain Welsh with a small force accordingly went to the *Ahom* King's relief. He retook Gauhati which at this time was under the control of a gang of low caste Hindus from Bengal, and advancing up the valley by March 1794 had retaken the capital Rangpur for the King and put down the *Moamaría* rebellion. But unhappily for the *Ahom* and despite vigorous protests by the *Ahom* King the new Governor General Sir John Shore ordered Captain Welsh to leave the country. (It would be very interesting in the

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\*The *Moamaría* are believed to have been an aboriginal tribe that had settled in the upper part of the country before the coming of the *Ahom* people. The whole tribe embraced Hinduism but rejected the popular worship of Siva. They professed themselves votaries of the Vishna-Vishnu religion.

light of later events to speculate on what would have happened if this order had not been issued.) A few months later the King died to be succeeded by Chao Klingpha (1795-1810). The *Moomaria* rebelled again and the *Ahom* suffered continuous attacks from the hill tribes. A period of great disorder prevailed but a temporary respite was obtained by the fine generalship of Haripod *deksa phukan*, who received a large reward of land from the King for his great services. This land still remains in the hands of his descendants.

Chao Klingpha was succeeded on his death by his brother Chao Din Pha who was in his teens at the time. This boy was fond of keeping low company, Satram, the son of a poultry-keeper, being the principal object of his attachment. He raised him to the high rank of *charingia phukan* and thereby greatly incensed the nobles. The favourite realising how much he depended on the King soon set about stirring up trouble among the ministers of state. There was a serious quarrel between the two great officers, the *bar phukan* and the *burha gohain*. The King, fretting against the influence of the *burha gohain*, sent his supporter the *bar phukan* to call on the British for aid. This was refused, the British not wishing to get involved in the internal politics of the state, and an appeal was then made to the Burmese who entered the country with a large force. This force supported the King but eventually retired. The *burha gohain* seized his chance and deposing Chao Din Pha set up Purander Singh, a royal prince, as King. Chao Din Pha again called on the Burmese for assistance. They sent an army to aid him and Purander Singh was forced to flee to British territory in 1816 as a political refugee. In 1819 he applied for British assistance but this was refused.

In due course Chao Din Pha found the price of Burmese support more than he could afford to pay and he soon became anxious to get rid of them. He applied once more for British assistance which was as usual refused and after a quarrel with his Burmese allies he, too, was forced to flee for asylum to British territory. The Burmese then set up Jogeswar Singh, a distant

relative, in his place and sent a message to the British demanding the handing over of the King on pain of invasion of Bengal to seize him. The British countered this by sending troops to the frontier and a warning to the Burmese to keep out. The Burmese, however, persisted in advancing on Cachar, a state which had sometime previously placed itself under British protection. The British thereupon declared war and within a year had driven the Burmese from Assam and Manipur but not before they had committed the most frightful atrocities on the people. According to the historian Mackenzie<sup>8</sup>: "Nothing," at this time, "could have been more wretched than the state of Assam when the valley was first occupied by our troops. 30,000 Assamese had been carried off as slaves by the Burmese. Many thousands had lost their lives and large tracts of country had been laid desolate by the wars, famines and pestilences, which for nearly half a century had afflicted the province. The remnant of the people had almost given up cultivation, supporting themselves chiefly on roots and plants. The nobility and priestly families had retired to Goalpara (Bengal) or other refuges in British territory, often after losing all their property, and with them had gone crowds of dependents glad to escape from the miseries of their native land."

The invaders committed the most horrible acts of torture and barbarity. Many of these were described a few years later to a traveller, Butler, with great minuteness which left in his mind no doubt of their authenticity. In one case as many as 50 men were decapitated in one day, in another, men, women and children were herded into a large bamboo and thatch building and burned to death. On February 24, 1826, when the operations of the Burma campaign had been completed elsewhere, the Burmese signed the treaty of Yandaboo. Article 2 of this treaty reads: "His Majesty the King of Ava renounces all claims upon and will abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies."

Unable to find a useful prince of the royal house to whom the country could be handed over, the British<sup>8</sup> "with great

reluctance" found themselves for security reasons in the position of having to control the country for the next seven years. In 1833, however, despite two ineffectual Burmese supported risings, the first one under Gadhadhar Singh, a nephew of Chandra Kanta and relative of Jogeswar Singh, the second under the ex-*bar gohain* and *burha phaulkan*, a large part of the country was placed under the rule of Purander Singh who was believed to be morally and otherwise the most eligible representative of the royal stock. A treaty was executed by which he was protected and guaranteed against invasion on condition of his paying an annual sum of 50,000 rupees. In October 1838, however, he declared himself "unable to carry on the administration any longer" and the territories were resumed by the Government of India, the King being pensioned off with a political pension of 1,000 rupees a month.

The final decay of *Ahom* political power came with the release by the British of the many slaves employed by the rich nobles without compensation and the abolition of the *paik* system whereby the great families had been able to cultivate their large estates. In addition the more educated Muslims and Hindu upper classes were employed in the work of the Government. The *Ahom* all fell to the level of humble cultivators and the *Kolita* a people of Aryan descent who had lived amongst the *Ahom* throughout, made the most important advance. The *Ahom* people number now only a few hundred thousand and are confined mostly to the Upper Assam Valley.

#### *Government.*

The Government of the *Ahom* was a limited or oligarchic monarchy, but as the state grew in size the monarchy tended to become more absolute, the amount of limitation depending partly on the personal influence and character of the king and partly on the power of the great nobles.

The monarchy passed from father to son with great regularity in the early days of *Ahom* rule but in later times the succession might devolve on a brother or even a more distant relative. In the

choice of a successor much depended on the wishes of the previous king, much on the personal influence of any rival candidates and of course a great deal more on the action of the two, later three, great nobles who at least in theory and often in practice would constitutionally nominate the new king. They were in fact regarded as the depository of sovereign powers and in the interregnums of 1376-80 and 1389-97 such powers were actually exercised by them. In other words, as in ancient Rome, when a king died his sovereignty passed to the elders.

In appointing a successor, however, there were two essential qualifications. Firstly, no one could in any circumstances ascend the throne who was not of royal blood; and secondly any noticeable scar or blemish, even the scar of a carbuncle, operated as a bar to the succession. It was frequent practice amongst the *Ahom* kings on coming to power to endeavour to secure themselves against intrigues and eventual deposition by their relatives by mutilating all possible rivals. It is recorded that this sometimes took the form of making a small nick in the ear, though in other cases the mutilation might go much further. No king could be legally enthroned unless first the great officers of state had concurred in his proclamation. Originally, as already mentioned, the principal councillors of state numbered two, the *chao thaolung* (Great-Old-God) and the *chao phrangmung* (God of the Wide Country). They were called in Assamese *bar gohain* and *burha gohain*. In the reign of Chao Hung Mung a third was added, the *chao senglung* (Great-Holy-God.) They had provinces assigned to them in which they exercised sovereignty but so far as the general administration of the country and its foreign relations were concerned their functions were purely advisory. The King in theory was bound to consult them on all matters of importance and could not issue general orders, embark on war or negotiate with other states without doing so.

In practice these appointments descended from father to son but the King had the right of selecting any member of the prescribed clan that he chose and could also at any time dismiss a *gohain* though this was usually done with the concurrence of the other two.



The *gohain* were highly privileged and were given a number of families to serve them but they were required to provide their portion of militia to serve in war or the required number of workmen for any great public work.

As the country grew in extent it was found necessary to delegate certain of the King's duties to others and various new appointments were made, in particular in the reign of Chao Seng Pha the *bar barua phulkelung* and the *bar phukan lung*. These were not hereditary appointments but the posts were filled only by members of twelve specified families. In order to prevent the *gohain* from growing too powerful, members of their clans were not allowed to hold any of these new posts.

The *bar barua* received the revenues and administered justice in the northeast whilst the *bar phukan* was the viceroy of the western portion of the Kingdom. Each was given command of twelve to fourteen thousand men. 7% of these men were, however, allotted to the officer for his private use together with any fines which he might levy on them for certain offences. He also received fees paid by persons appointed to minor government offices, though in all cases their nomination had to be confirmed by the monarch. The *bar phukan*, owing to the distance he lived from the capital, became at a later date one of the most powerful officers in the Kingdom.

Below these five great officers were governors who administered many of the districts along the frontiers. Some of these governors were from the royal line, some from the clans of the three *gohain*, others from senior families and yet more were vassal princes, declared governors of their own territories after conquest or submission.

Another thirty two officers existed called *phukan* and *barua*. There were six military *phukan* on the council of each *bar barua* and *bar phukan*. In addition to commanding units of the Army they appear also to have had certain civil functions in specified areas. Subordinate to them were the *ra jhowa* who commanded 3,000 men each.

Amongst these thirty-two were the officers who superintended the various arts, sciences, trades, sources of public revenue and the king's household. A *phulkan* managed the queen's affairs, another the royal gardens, another the fleet. There was a keeper of the royal wardrobe, a guardian of the Hindu temples and superintendent of the gunpowder factories. Subordinate officers, the *barua*, managed other departments. There was a treasurer, an officer in charge of the palanquins, a chief executioner, a mint master, a royal physician and an officer in charge of the elephants.

The *phulkan* had to be chosen from four noble families, descendants of those who had accompanied Chao Ka Pha in his conquest of the country. Most of these other officers were also of noble birth though the posts were not hereditary.

In short it will be seen that the King governed through the aristocracy. Wanton infringement of the rights of the aristocracy was one of the main causes which finally proved the ruin of the country.

#### *The Administration.*

A short description of part of the coronation ceremony of the king would not be out of place here. It has rightly been described as very elaborate.

"The King wearing the *Sondeo*, or image of his tutelary deity and carrying in his hand the *hengdan* or ancestral sword proceeded on a female elephant to Charaideo where he planted a *pipul* tree. He next entered the *Patgarh* where the presiding priest poured a libation of water over him and his chief queen, after which the royal couple took their seats in the *Holongghar*, or a bamboo platform, under which were placed a man and specimens of every procurable animal. Consecrated water was poured over the royal couple and fell on the animals below. Then, having been bathed, they entered the *Singharighar* and took their seats on a throne of gold under a series of nine white canopies and the leading nobles came up and offered their presents. Before the reign of Chao

Khruing Pha it had been necessary for the king before entering the *Siringhar* to kill a man with his ancestral sword but that Monarch ordered the substitution of a buffalo and the example was followed by his successors. New money was coined, and gratuities were given to the principal officers of state and to religious mendicants. On the seventh day of the ceremonies *Chumdeo* (or *Somdeo*), the titular deity, was worshipped in a magnificent manner and at the end of the religious rites the King, in the presence of the deity, had to make a solemn promise to rule according to the advice of the *dangaria* (the elders). In theory a king not duly consecrated did not possess full sovereignty. He could not strike coins, sit on the throne or hold the sceptre and the white umbrella. In practice, however, the King exercised most of his powers before coronation as in some reigns owing to foreign wars or scarcity the ceremony could not be held at all.

The *Ahom* administration was based on personal service in lieu of taxation. It was the people, not the lands, that were the property of the state.

All the free adult males from 15 to 50 were called *paik*. Four *paik* made one *got* (except during the 18th Century when the number had to be reduce to three), five *gots* of 20 men were commanded by a *bora*, a *saihia* was in command of five *bora* and ten *saihia* controlled by a *hazakika* (1,000 men), three *hazakika* by a *rajkhowa* and two *rajkhowa* by a *phukan*. The *bar phukan* and the *bar barua* were the commanders-in-chief and were in charge of approximately 12,000 men each, i.e. each man commanding the forces of two *phukan*.

A number of *got* were again combined into *khel* according to the calling of the *paik*, such as the function of looking after elephants, making and manning boats, building houses, repairing temples, making arrows or spears, etc.

The *paik* nominated their own *bora*, and *saihia* who were appointed by the *phukan* and *rajkhowa*. The *phukan*, *rajkhowa* and *hazakika* were appointed by the King on the advice of his ministers, the *gohain*.

The *paik* could claim the dismissal of *bora*, *saikia* and even their own *hazakika* whereby they were saved from oppression which might otherwise have been their lot. Justice was meted out all the way along the chain of command though there was an appeal to the sovereign dealt with by an officer named the *nyay sodha phukan*.

As remuneration for his service to the state amounting to a third of the year each *paik* received  $2\frac{2}{3}$  acres (2 *pura*) of rice land called *ga mali* (body land) free of charge. When each *paik* was on service the cultivation would be carried out by the remaining three members of his *got*. This land was the property of the state and was theoretically neither hereditary nor transferable. There was however nothing to prevent a *paik* from owning other cultivatable land or a homestead garden. Should he do so he paid Re 1/- annually as a house, poll or hearth tax for his homestead and Re 1/- per annum for every other *pura* of land held.

Slaves, however, were not taxed but when the first British administrator made an enquiry into the title by which slaves were held he discovered that many *paik* were content to be called slaves and concealed amongst them in order to avoid taxation. After his enquiry more than 12,000 persons were reinstated as *paik*!

It was this supply of disciplined labour that enabled the kings to construct the great public works which even to this day of machines are a wonder of the age. The system was not particularly popular but it worked and above all taxed the people on the one commodity they had to spare—labour.

Artisans were taxed at a higher annual rate than the cultivators, sums varying from Re 1/- to Re 5/- per person. Since writing the above I have been re-reading Wood's "History of Siam" and it is worth quoting exactly what he says on pages 37 to 39 where it will be found that except for the *corvée* labour little change seems to have taken place in the Thai system of administration between leaving China and arriving in India.

"It is clear from the annals of the Tang dynasty that the *T'ai* Kingdom of Nanchao was a highly organised state. There were

ministers of state, censors or judges, treasurers, ministers of commerce, etc., each department being called *shawang*. Minor officials managed the granaries, royal stables, taxes etc. The military organisation was similar to that of modern Siam. It was arranged by tens, centurions, chiliarchs, deka-chiliarchs, and so on. Military service then, as now, was compulsory for all able-bodied men, lots being drawn for each levy. Each soldier was supplied with a leather coat and a pair of trousers; they wore helmets and carried shields of rhinoceros hide.

“Land was apportioned to each family according to rank, a system which survives in Siam to the present day, in the nominal *sakdi na* grade conferred upon officials.

“There were six metropolitan departments and six provincial Viceroys in Nanchao.

“The people were acquainted with the art of weaving cotton and rearing silkworms. West of Yang-chang a type of mulberry-tree grew, the wood of which was used for making bowls; and gold was found in many parts, both in the sands of the rivers and in the mountains.

“When the *Tai* King appeared in public eight white-scalloped standards of greyish purple were carried before him, also two feather fans, a hair plume, an axe, and a parasol of kingfisher's feathers. The standards of the queen-mother were scalloped with brown instead of white.

“The chief dignitaries wore a tiger skin.

“Each man paid a tax of two measures of rice a year, and there was no *corvée* labour. Some may say that in the last respect the ancient *Tai* set a good example to their Siamese descendants.

“Had the Nanchao *Tai* a written character, or did they use Chinese ideographs? We do not know. In the opinion of the author, it is very improbable that any system of writing at all resembling those now in use (all of which are of Indian origin) was adopted before the eleventh century. It is likely that the Nanchao *Tai* used Chinese characters.

"As to the religion of the ancient *T'ai*, we likewise have no definite information. We know that Buddhism, the religion of almost all the modern *T'ai*, was introduced into China, from the south, during the first century of the Christian era. It is, therefore, probable that the Buddhist religion was quite familiar to the *T'ai* inhabitants of Nanchao for several centuries before many of them migrated south. The Buddhism of China is, however, the later form of the religion, known as the *Mahayana* or Great Vehicle, whereas all the *T'ai* since the dawn of their modern history in the twelfth century have been followers of the *Hinayana* or Small Vehicle, which claims, with some justice, to be the true religion taught by the Buddha himself.

"It is fairly certain, therefore, that the *T'ai*, as a race, became Buddhists after they had emigrated to the south. There may have been some Buddhists among the old Nanchao *T'ai*, but as a nation they were almost certainly animists, worshipping the beneficent spirits of the hills, forests, and waters, and propitiating numerous demons with sacrifices and offerings. This simple faith survives in Siam to the present day, and in the north is still more truly the religion of the country people than is Buddhism."

No close administration of the surrounding hill tribes of Assam was ever achieved for any length of time but many of them paid annual tribute in kind. When the tribute was not forthcoming or the tribesmen raided the plains, the pass by which they entered was blockaded and only reopened on submission or the payment of a fine. As already stated relations with the hill tribes were conducted through *kataki*.

#### *The Administration of Justice.*

The chief judicial authorities were the three *gohain* and the *bar barua* and *bar phukan*. An appeal lay to them from their subordinates and a second appeal could be made to the king.

Tributary chiefs and the *phukan* administered justice in their own districts but an appeal from their orders lay to the *bar*

*phukan* and the king. It is suggested that one of the main defects of the *Ahom* system was the countering of the judicial system with the executive.

The administration of justice up to the time of the *Moamaria* rebellion was speedy, efficient and impartial. Courts were open but no pleaders were employed. The parties themselves would appear or be represented by a relative.

Assessors were consulted and in civil cases written evidence was recorded. The judge decided according to the custom of the country and his common sense (a system retained by the British in the hill districts) but a capital sentence if imposed had to be confirmed by the King though it is recorded that the *bar barua* exercised this power. He could not, however, order an execution in which the blood of the victim might be spilled. Nevertheless other punishments inflicted were barbarous in the extreme.

After the *Moamaria* rebellion, justice like everything else deteriorated and it was described as characterised by great harshness and on the lines of "tooth for a tooth".

#### *Public Works Administration.*

As already described this depended upon the extremely well organised *palk* system. One has only to travel around the country to see the effects of the system and to realise how keen the rulers must have been on public works—and what hard taskmasters they must have been. Roads, embankments, bridges, temples, royal palaces and enormous tanks abound. Many of them like those in Ayuthia have fallen into decay but some of them are still found to be of considerable use whilst others are a pitiful reminder of a once great nation now fallen into decay. To approach by road the old *Ahom* capital of Rangpur is to approach the old Siamese capital of Ayuthia. The similarity is weird and most striking. The same embanked road, the same overgrown tanks, the same red tiled dilapidated walls and temples. In Rangpur however many of the tanks have again been cleared and some attempt made to rehabilitate the temples and palaces by the Government under the National Monuments act.

The country being low and subject to flood, irrigation embankments and canals had to be dug and to facilitate trade and military action great roads had to be constructed a considerable height above the flood waters.

Bridges were constructed of stone and brick and the following description of the bridge over the river Namphuk is illustrative of the great size of some of the undertakings: \* 16,000 stones, 303,000 bricks, *matimah* (*phaseolus radiatus*) 64 *dhol*s, *Sum* (hemp) 64 *dhol*s, 36 *dangs* fish, 1,360 *dhol*s stone lime, 1,218 *dhol*s shell lime, 1,229 pitchers lime water, 556 pots molasses, 68 seers resin, and an unspecified quantity of oil. The cement used in the construction of these old bridges cannot be equalled today and it is probable that an analysis might prove that the cement in Ayuthia is much the same.

Roads probably run into some thousands of miles. The Dhodar Ali, 115 miles in length, is completely bridged and is said to have been built by "the slothful people." Another long road was ordered to be built by "incompetent priests".

The tanks, though, are probably the greatest of the *Ahom* works. The two largest, the *Jai* and *Gauri Sagar*, have areas under water of 155 and 150 acres respectively whilst their total areas including banks and ditches are 318 and 293 acres. These are in the neighbourhood of the old capital of Rangpur. To walk round one of these tanks is a perambulation of just over two miles.

#### *Armed Strength.*

The *Ahom* seem to have had well organised armies and their navy was well able to rival the Moghuls. Some warships carried as many as 80 men. In one attack made on the Moghuls on the Brahmaputra in the 1660's the *Ahom* used between seven and eight hundred ships losing in the engagement three to four hundred manned with cannon on either side. The ships were described by a Moghul historian as extremely well constructed of *chambal* wood but slower than the war vessels of Bengal.

\* Tradition has it that large blocks of stone collected on either side of the Brahmaputra river were collected by a *bar phukan* with the intention of bridging it.



The Army in the 17th Century at the height of its strength possessed considerable well cast artillery and matchlocks in addition to spears, bows and arrows. The Muslims claimed during the 1662 expedition to have captured 675 cannon and 6,570 matchlocks in addition to one iron cannon that fired a ball weighing more than 200 lbs. Gunpowder was locally made but some was imported from India. Uniforms were woven from cotton and by custom the whole process from ginning to weaving had to be carried out between midnight and sunrise.

Considerable use was made of elephants and for defences it was usual to raise wide earthen embankments, often topped with wooden palisade type forts. In front of these embankments the *Ahom* would dig ditches which they filled with *panji*, pointed bamboo stakes, which were extremely difficult to cross.

Their fighting men have always been described as brave and in fact the Moghuls referred to a few of them as capable of holding up thousands of the enemy. They dashed into battle screaming like jackals and were particularly given to night attacks (Tuesday of the week was considered the most propitious day for such attacks).

Their commissariat appears also to have worked well and granaries seem always to have been well-stocked and well placed for assistance to the troops.

One or two notable tricks adopted by the resourceful *Ahom* in war are worth recording. In one case they dug out a long portion of an embanked road during the monsoon, so long that it could not be bridged. On another they chose strategic places along the banks of rivers and carved off the sides so steeply that neither horses nor elephants could clamber up the bank on the opposite side.

There are no records of the use of cavalry though their allies the *Mani puri* came to their assistance on occasion with this arm.

Generalship appears on the whole to have been good and fighting well co-ordinated. Well it might be, for failure was some-

times punished not only with the death of the general but on one occasion with the slaughter of his whole family.

Various estimates have been provided of armies put into the field from time to time and it is difficult to gauge the greatest force the *Ahom* ever raised but it seems possible that during the Mir Jumla invasion they may have had an army 50,000 strong and a navy consisting of several thousands, though the standing army of *caodang* or palace troops was never more than 6,000.

#### *Acknowledgements*

This account of the Thai *Ahom* people was written purely for a talk to the members of the Siam Society and was not in its original form intended for publication; it has not therefore been fully annotated. It contains nothing which has not already been published. Sources are keyed to the text by numbers and are listed below.

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TIBET

CHUTIYA

TWELVE BHUIYA

AHOM

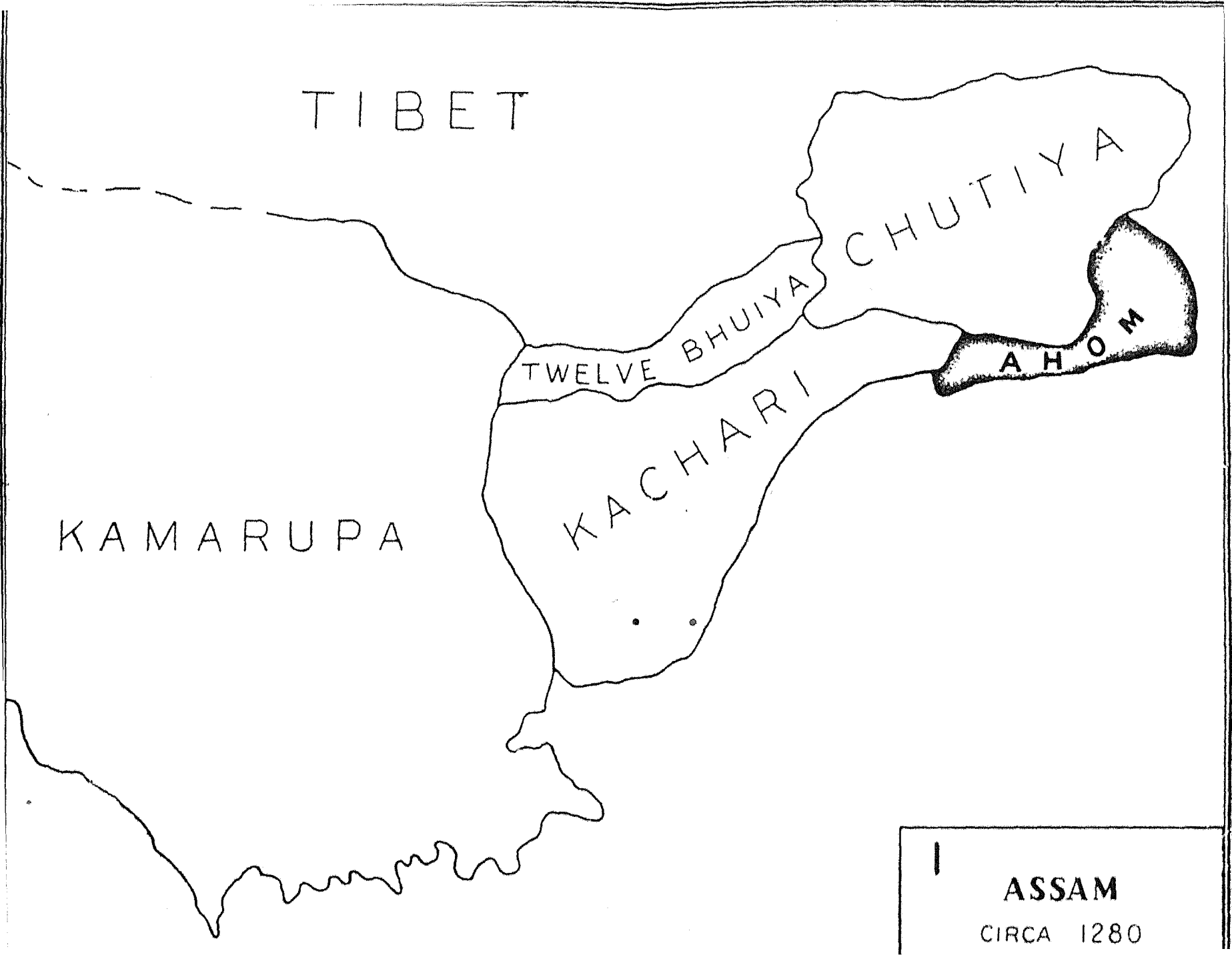
KACHARI

KAMARUPA

1

ASSAM

CIRCA 1280



TIBET

BHUTAN

AKA  
TRIBES

ABOR  
TRIBES

MISHMI

CHUTIYA 1523

1268

1281 MORANS

1236

1215

DAFLA  
1646

1617

TWELVE

BHUIYA

CACHARI  
1526

1244

1253

K O C H  
1638  
1671

A

1617

OMARUA

H

1536

CACHARI

NAGA TRIBES

KHASI

JAINTIA

1708

CACHARI

MANIPUR

BURMA

MOHAMMEDAN  
EMPIRE

TIPPERA

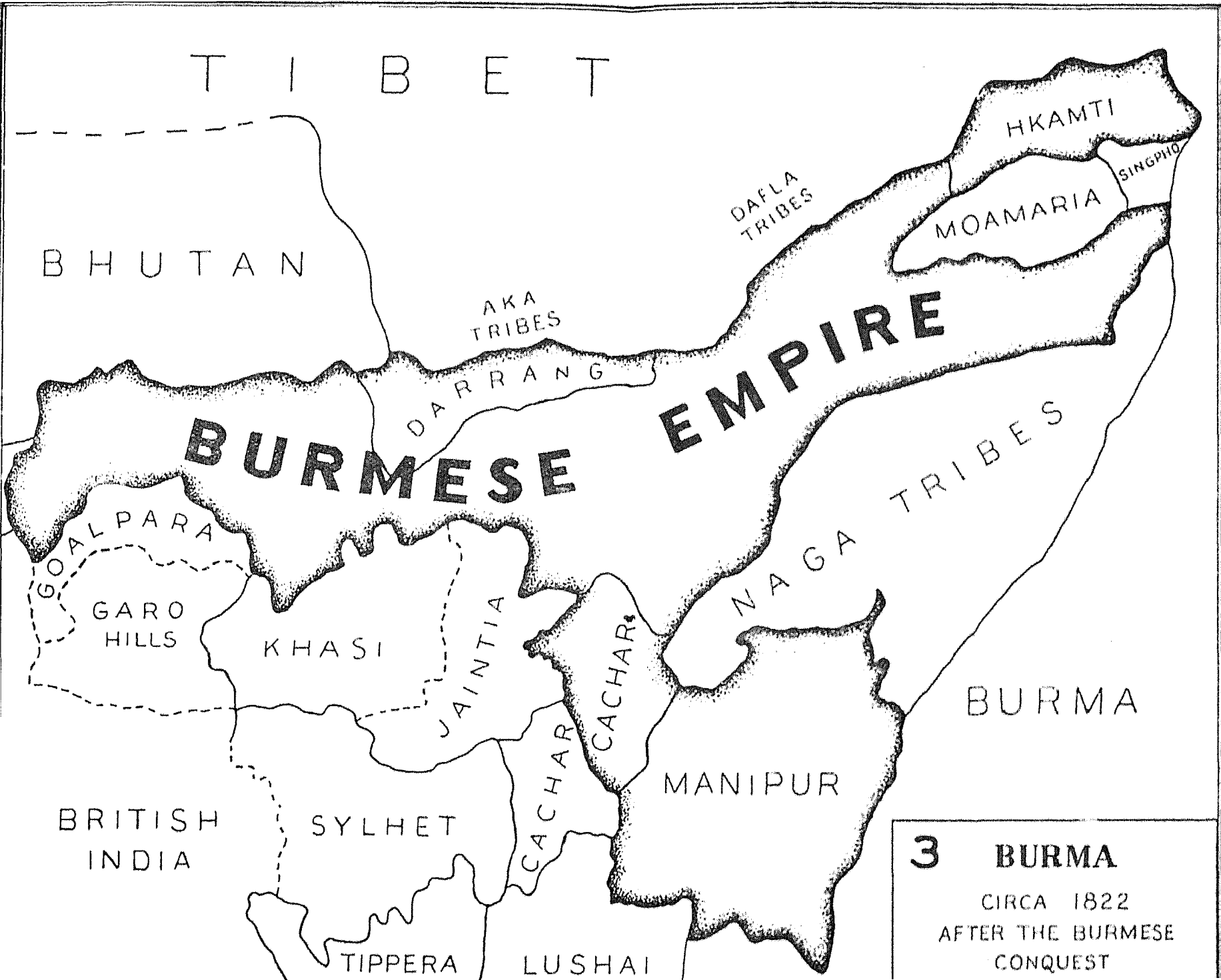
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2

ASSAM

CIRCA 1708

THE GROWTH OF THE  
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**3** **BURMA**  
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In addition to the sources listed above, use was made of various journals of the Assam Research Society. Despite the fact that much research has been done since the writing of Gait's "History of Assam", it remains the standard work and contains one of the best accounts of the *Ahom* people.

*Bangkok 1951*

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