

DIVINATION BY AHOM DEODHAIS

BY

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Divination by the aid of the fowl's legs is a practice that prevails among many tribes and races inhabiting the Southeast Asian countries. Some European writers are of the opinion that it would be natural for people entering a new country for the purpose of settling in it to take note of all indications as to its fertility, including the size and condition of the fowls. This idea is derived from the Karen practice of inspecting the holes of the thigh-bones of the fowl and designating the process by the words *Ka hsaw ki* which literally mean to break the fowl's bones. Originally, these writers think, the practice might have been actually to break the bones in order to examine their structure, strength, and condition to determine whether or not the fowls were well nourished. Later the custom arose of inspecting only the holes in the bones.

But the objects for which not only the fowl's thigh-bones but also leg-bones are used as instruments of divination by different tribes do not seem to warrant the above interpretation. Among the Ahoms the kings used to consult their priests before embarking upon a great undertaking, such as war. The priests would then examine the legs of fowls and report to the king whether the result would be good or bad, victory or defeat.

The members of the Ahom priestly family are known in Assam as Deodhais and they are said to have descended from Shangbun. According to the Deodhais, Laokhri—the artist, poet and politician—was their heavenly ancestor. In the old Ahom rule the Deodhais also composed the king's Privy Council, but they were in later periods restricted to priestly duties and the divination of events.

The tradition among the Ahoms is that the first heavenly princes, Khunlung and Khunlai, the ancestors of the Ahom royal family, while descending to earth to rule over it under the orders

of Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven, brought with them a pair of heavenly fowls (Kaishengmung). Hence, a great sanctity is attached to these birds. Fowls are therefore supposed to possess wonderful powers. It may be from such original notions that of all objects the fowl's legs are chosen for divination. Though under the influence of modern culture this method of divining future events has now almost died out among the Ahoms, it commanded great confidence in the past.

Major P.R.T. Gurdon, I.A., as Honorary Director of Ethnography in Assam, gave a vivid description of a divination ceremony with fowls' legs. It was as follows:

"Some Deodhais near Luckwa (in Sibsagar district) once performed the divination ceremony for the writer's benefit. It was as follows. An altar of plantain trees and bamboos was set up (*mehenga*); plantain leaves and fruit, rice, sugar cane and liquor (*lau*) were brought, and a lamp. Three fowls and three fowls' eggs were placed upon the altar. The officiating priest sprinkled holy water on the spectators with a sprig of "block Singpha" (the king flower). Prayers were then offered up to Jasingpha (the god of learning) and the fowls' necks were wrung. The flesh was scraped off the fowls' legs until the latter were quite clean, and then search was made for any small holes that existed in the bones. On finding these, small splinters of bamboo were inserted in the holes; and the bones were held up with the bamboo splinters sticking in them and closely compared with diagrams in an old book which the priest had ready at hand. This book contained diagrams of all sorts of combinations of positions of splinters stuck in fowls' legs, and each meant something, the meaning appearing in verses written in the Ahom character, which were duly droned out by the Deodhai. The Ahom Kings placed great faith in such omens, and the position of diviner was one of no small profit." (*Vide Gurdon, A Short Note on the Ahoms*).

There is considerable divination literature (Ahom-*like*), called *mangul choã puthis* in Assamese, even today in possession of the Deodhai families of Assam. I give herewith an illustration of an Ahom *puthi* page used for divination with fowls' legs, I also offer

two other specimens to show how the arrangements of the splinters vary, the drawings representing fowls' legs with bamboo splinters inserted in the holes of the bones (1 and 2). Different pairs of bones with holes at different points and in different directions would produce their characteristic diagrams when splinters are inserted into their pin-holes. All possible orders of the splinters are drawn in the pages of the *puthis* of Sanchi bark so that any arrangement of the splinters would be found to agree with some diagram or other in the *puthi*. Each such *puthi* contains roughly 70 to 150 folios of Sanchi bark. Every diagram has its interpretation attached to it on the same page. The interpretations in Ahom could not be translated here because of my limited knowledge of the language.

Fowls' bones are the Red Karen's dictionary. He consults them to know where he should place his village or his house; whether he should start on a journey, in what direction, on what day, and at what hour; whether he should marry a certain girl and, if so, on what day; where he should make his clearing; when he should clear, sow, and reap it; in fact, he does nothing without authority from fowls' bones. When a Chief dies fowls' bones are consulted to decide upon his successor and so on. (*Vide, The Upper Burma Gazetteer, 1900, Chap. IX.*)

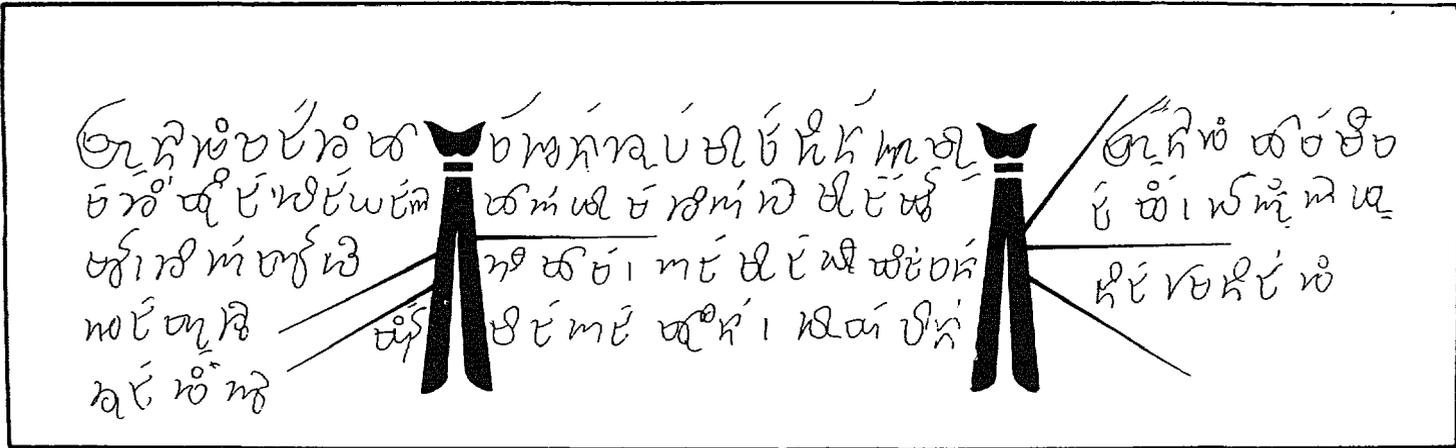
According to the Karen system of divination as prevails in the Tharrawaddy district of Burma, the left thigh-bone (*mi*) represents the jungle. If this bone has a larger number of holes than the right thigh-bone or has them arranged in a certain way, the omen is unfavorable. That is, the *k'la*, or life principle, will be influenced by this reading to depart from the body of the person concerned, thus causing his sickness or death. If, however, the bones are being consulted in regard to some undertaking, the reading above indicated would imply that it must be postponed until a favorable omen can be had. The right thigh-bone (*hsa*) represents the house, and when it affords a favorable reading all is well for the undertaking or the person concerned. The bones are

held reversed at the time of reading, the top being called the *hkaaw* (literally, the foot), the other end being designated the *hko* (literally, the head). The right (*hsa*) and left (*mi*) are the reverse of the diviner's right and left. Six different arrangements of the holes are specified. Instances are as follows: If in a particular pair of bones the jungle bone (*mi*) has three holes, while the house bone (*hsa*) has only one the diviner says, *Mi a, mi neu hsa*, meaning that "the jungle has more and wins over the house". This bodes bad luck or sickness. In another pair of bones suppose the arrangement is opposite of the above and is reported *Has sa a hsa neu mi*. This reading is a prognostication of good fortune. (*Vide*, Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 1922, pp. 282-83)

The Wa are in the habit of preserving scores of chicken bones in the thatch of the roof, which they use for divining the future or ascertaining a lucky day. The elders seem to preserve a lucky pair in a rudely carved bamboo phial.

It appears from the above that in these types of divination of the various tribes there is a large untrodden ground on which further investigation should be conducted, for the social habits of these peoples are almost entirely governed by their belief in the efficacy of divining by means of fowls' bones.

PAGE OF AHOM MANUSCRIPT BOOK ON DIVINATION

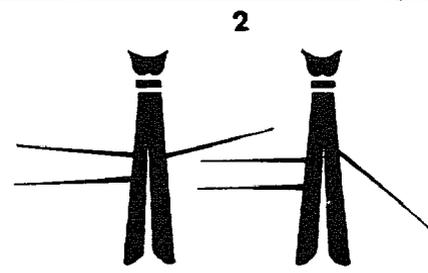
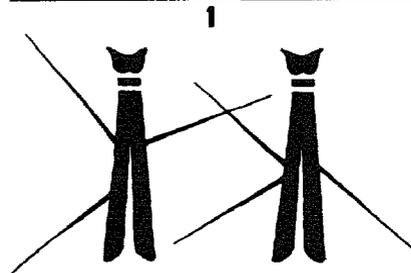


Transliteration

Tu nāi chām bāng khām rāu kan khup möng nen U mu Khām rōng
 ling jāng kāi rāk phu khek lai möng thāu tāo. Khik tāo lai shi
 rāu. Kāng möng li thing bān shang tu khroi tēm ming (bing?)
 Kāng ren hit pin khrung chām koi.

Transliteration

Tu nāi chām rāu mi bāng
 bam. Heu um kāi phu ning
 be ning chām.



Interpretation of every possi-
 ble arrangement of the sticks
 in each pair of fowl's legs
 in given with diagrams in the
 Tai-Ahom manuscripts.

