

AHOM AND THE STUDY OF EARLY TAI SOCIETY*

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Tai-speaking peoples are widely distributed in southern China, mainland Southeast Asia and the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. For ethnographic and linguistic purposes many subdivisions are recognized, the most important of which are the Chuang in southern China, the Tho, Red Tai, Black Tai and White Tai of northern Vietnam, the Lao, the Siamese or Thai, the Shan of northern Burma, and the Ahom of Assam. The latter are somewhat exceptional in that their Tai speech is virtually extinct.

The Tai-speakers are relative newcomers in most of the regions they presently occupy; it is generally assumed that they spread between the tenth and the thirteenth century from a homeland in what is now southeastern China and northern Vietnam over the region now covered by Laos, northern Burma, Thailand and the Brahmaputra Valley. The Tai peoples were characteristically valley-dwellers and as they conquered new regions they imposed their language and much of their culture upon the local peoples they encountered, such as the Khmu, Mon and Lawa, at the same time themselves gradually absorbing features of these old-established cultures. Some Tai groups had to cross difficult, mountainous terrain in order to reach new fertile lands. In doing so they sometimes lost contact with Tai peoples to whom they were originally related. Thus, broadly speaking, the Tai of northern Vietnam could not maintain regular contact with the Siamese, whilst the Siamese were not even aware of Tai-speakers in Assam. The spreading of Tai peoples over and beyond mainland Southeast Asia in a region which was heavily interspersed with mountain ridges contributed to the diversification of Tai groups.

The comparison of one Tai group with another, especially when they may be assumed to have been separated for at least seven or eight centuries, has therefore attracted many scholars. In the field of linguistics especially, the variations in Tai forms of speech have triggered off a lively debate. The comparative study of various Tai groups has also received attention from some ethnologists and historians, but generally speaking, up until now many of these studies have been conducted somewhat haphazardly and the results have not been as impressive as could be hoped. With the

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forthcoming studies of legendary and historical accounts of various eastern and central Tai groups, undertaken largely by French researchers, a new stimulus may be given to the study of Tai culture in its various forms.

In this paper attention is drawn to the fact that the westernmost Tai, the Ahom, may also prove to have valuable sources and ought to be included in future comparative studies. I intend to demonstrate that Ahom sources are much more closely linked to Tai traditions than the best-known literature would lead us believe. In order to show the value of Ahom studies, by way of example, some Ahom terms related to rank and social class will be isolated and commented upon in a comparative framework.

The Ahom occupy a rather exceptional position amongst the Tai peoples. In the first place, they have remained relatively isolated from other Tai speakers, their contact with Shan and Khamti groups of northwestern Burma being via long, difficult and hazardous trails, and apparently interrupted for centuries at a time. Secondly, when the Ahom conquered a small corner of the Brahmaputra Valley at the beginning of the thirteenth century, they probably brought with them their own script, apparently based upon a Mon example.¹ They maintained historical records throughout the centuries, various versions of which have been preserved until today. Thirdly, although it is possible that the Ahom may have taken note of the Buddhist traditions which were adhered to in some of the regions they must have crossed on their way to Assam, there is little or no evidence that they had been influenced by Buddhism when they entered Assam. Recent research suggests instead that they brought with them their own indigenous sacrificial religion, traces of which can still be found in the modern Hindu Ahom culture of today (Terwiel, 1981).

Fourthly, and for this paper most interestingly, the Ahom people found themselves in a different situation from most Tai in that they had discovered a valley of immense size, further to the west of which were mighty kingdoms and elaborate political organizations. Gradually, step by step, the Ahom extended their grip over the easternmost part of the Brahmaputra Valley, especially at the beginning of the sixteenth century when they conquered the Kachari and Chutiya. Later in that century, and during the seventeenth century, the Ahom kings further extended their influence and gradually became masters over the whole of the Assamese valley. This was the time when the gradual Hinduization of the Ahom upper classes accelerated. The unified country under Ahom rule was soundly defeated by Muslim invaders in 1662, but a few years later the foreign yoke was thrown off and a new, invigorated Ahom rule was

1. Although it is possible that the script was introduced at some time between the thirteenth and fifteenth century, the available evidence suggests that the Ahom adopted their script just prior to the thirteenth century.

established, ready to try new methods of administration, with the intellectual élite taking Bengal culture as the ideal model. From this time onward the Ahom were firmly set on the path towards full assimilation of Assamese Hindu culture, and the Ahom tongue became obsolete. Assamese script took over from the old Ahom characters. Only in a few isolated pockets were the old traditions still remembered; amongst the traditional Ahom priestly families the ability to read the old books and the observance of Tai religious ceremonies were perpetuated.

This sketch of the Ahom intrusion into the Brahmaputra Valley suffices to establish the point that historical Ahom documents may be of great value for the study of Tai peoples in general. For centuries the Ahom extended and elaborated upon a basically Tai substratum in order to cope with a kingdom which grew to a great size. The Ahom developed sophisticated communication systems and organizational hierarchies; they maintained a large army and secured a state income. Generally they succeeded in keeping a tight hold over a large populace of great diversity.

The only other case of Tai-speaking peoples having to deal with such a complex large-scale society was that of the Siamese, whose power spread rapidly during the thirteenth century over much of the Chaophraya Delta and southwards in the Malay Peninsula, much faster than the Ahom had spread in Assam. The extraordinary speed of Tai dominance can be partly attributed to a temporary weakness amongst the Cambodians who traditionally had played the dominant political role in the region. The Siamese seem to have coped with their rapid expansion of influence basically by extending and repeating their valley-political system, whereby a Tai family would rule an important town and place friends and relatives in minor towns and settlements. Loose alliances were kept which were activated in case of outside threat. The Sukhothai kingdom may appear to some to be a magnified version of the traditional system whereby various surrounding towns were subject to a chief one, with others, often further away, tied to it by alliance. It was only later, during Ayutthayan times, that the Siamese developed a more complex and effective administration system suitable for governing such a large territory.

The Ahom and Siamese societies therefore seem eminently comparable. They share a similar substratum of small-scale Tai administration; they used closely related languages; they have preserved written sources which provide historical data as far back as the thirteenth century and further back into legendary periods. They formed the two cases who had to face the most extreme challenge of expansion of territory and manpower, and in both cases they emerged politically successful from many dangers and traumatic situations. It would seem that a comparison of Ahom and Siamese sources should lead to a deeper insight into early Tai history. It should be of value to

determine for each of these two societies just what may have constituted a Tai feature, and what was adopted from local peoples who were absorbed over time. The fact that each of these two developed without knowledge of the other is of great assistance in determining early Tai features.

In this paper there will be an attempt to juxtapose Siamese and Ahom titles, ranks and names indicative of social classes. It was decided to select for both Siamese and Ahom the very early period before the administrative systems had evolved to any great extent.

The Siamese evidence, 13th-14th century

The basis for the compilation of words and expressions in Table 1 has been the corpus of early inscriptions dating from the late-thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century. Although the official texts as issued in *Prachum Silāçhāru'k* have been consulted, the more recent studies by Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, under the general title *Epigraphic and Historical Studies* (hereafter EHS), have been studied more closely. It was decided, however, not to follow EHS's transcription system, which appears well-suited for Sanskrit and Pāli words, but which does little justice to words of apparent Tai origin. The transliteration system chosen here is basically that of the American Library of Congress, applied to a reconstruction of the words in modern Thai spelling.

Most of the words in Table 1 have thus been taken from inscriptions, but a few concepts from old written material were added. Care has been taken to include only evidence from accounts which deal with pre-fifteenth-century Tai culture, evidence which contains no apparent anachronisms, and for which some reinforcement exists in inscriptions. Therefore the oldest parts of the Mangrāisāt (EHS, No. 17) were included.

Table 1 contains by no means all references to titles, ranks and classes. Many terms were omitted simply for the reason that they were undoubtedly of Sanskrit or Pāli origin and could not possibly have formed part of the old Tai substratum. Other words easily found in Cambodian pre-thirteenth-century inscriptions were also left out as obvious borrowings. A few cases where some doubt as to the origin of a term may exist, such as *phra* and *phrayā*, were included in Table 1 in the hope that the Ahom evidence might provide a new angle on the possible origin of these words. In general the search was kept fairly wide, taking care to include terms of Tai origin which applied to more than one person and involved some type of inherent classification of people. The results are a list of fifty expressions, tabulated below.

Table 1 : *Terms indicating rank, title or class from early Siamese sources*

khun : ruler of a fortified town and its surrounding villages, together called a *mu'ang*.
In older sources the prefix *phō* ("father") is sometimes used as well.

çhao : “chief, master”. This term is used by itself for independent rulers, but also in compounds, such as *çhao phaen din* (“lord of the earth”, “king”), *çhao mu’ang* (“chief of a town”), *çhao ban* (“village chief”) and *çhao kha* (“master over servants or slaves”).

phrayā : exalted title, used both for independent and allied rulers. The combination *çhao phrayā* seems an honorary elaboration of the same term.

thāw : “lord”, often used where *phrayā* would also apply. Its synonymous position is clear in expressions such as *thaw phrayā* and *pen thāw pen phrayā*.

phrayā phang : a term only occurring in Inscription XXXVIII, when Sukhothai was coming under Ayutthayan sway. Probably it means “vassal ruler” (EHS, No. 4, p. 120 and p. 129, fn. 15).

phra : a general title indicating value and importance, also used to indicate the honourable status of names of mountains and rivers.

khun yi : probably a descriptive term used for “nobles” (EHS, No. 10, p. 91 and p. 109).

khun nāng : a general term for the class of nobles.

lūk çhao : literally “the offspring of chiefs”, a term used to indicate the noble class in general, often in combination with the term *lūk khun*.

lūk khun : a term indicating officials in general. It has been suggested (EHS, No. 9, p. 206, fn. 26) that there may have been a distinction between *lūk çhao* and *lūk khun*. As I read the evidence, such a distinction might have been relevant during Ayutthayan times, but in Sukhothai times the terms appear to be equivalent.

çhao saen : literally “lord of a hundred thousand”, apparently a very high official, probably with military duties. The title is part of a system including the class of *lām* officials and using various numerals. Reference to this system is made in EHS, No. 3, but the more complete list occurs in the early part of EHS, No. 17.

çhao mū’n : “lord of ten thousand”, a class of officers directly below *çhao saen*.

lām : “intermediary”, title of an official. Often a numeral was attached to indicate the level of *lām*, see below.

lām mū’n : officer attached to a *çhao mū’n*.

çhao phan : “lord of a thousand”, officer below *çhao mū’n* and probably also below *lām mū’n*.

lām phan : official assisting the *çhao phan*.

lām phan nōi : “smaller, lesser *lām phan*”, apparently a rank just below *lām phan*.

nāi : “master”, term also used in various compounds such as *nāi mu’ang*, “town’s master”; see also entries below.

mun nāi : officials appointed to supervise territorial units. From the system described in EHS, No. 17, it appears that the *mun nāi* were all below the rank of *lām phan nōi* (See also EHS, No. 20, p. 67, fn. 4).

mun tawān : This expression occurs only once, and Griswold and Prasert surmise it to be a synonym of *mun nāi*, whilst speculating that the word is a Malay loan word from *tuan*, "master". It is worth considering, however, that *tawān* might have been a Mon loan, from the word *twān*, "village" (Shorto, 1971, p. 178). Mon loan words are more likely than Malay ones, given the political situation in Sukhothai times.

nāi rōi : "master over a hundred", an officer apparently just below the rank of *lām phan nōi*.

lām bāo : by inference this officer was below a *nāi rōi* (of articles 1, 2 and 3 of EHS, No. 17).

nāi hā sip : "master of fifty", probably a rank below *lām bāo*.

nāi sip : "master of ten".

khom kwān : probably "village elder", literally "weight upon house, village", or "village elder" (EHS, No. 17, p. 147, fn. 12).

çhā : probably a fairly minor official; it occurs only once in the compound *çhā khā* in inscription XXXVIII.

çhā khā : officer supervising slaves.

phū yai : literally "big man", an official.

phū ram : an expression occurring in inscription XL in combination with *phū yai*. At that point the text is damaged and it is by no means certain whether *ram* is the complete word, or whether some expanded expression was intended.

pua : a word designating a male; possibly in Sukhothai times it had connotations of rank and may have meant something like "Mister" (EHS, No. 9, p. 205, fn. 19).

nāng : "lady"; it seems that originally the term indicated a lady of high rank, but that with the passage of time the term was used to include women of a less exalted class.

çhao bān : "village chief".

chāo : "people", "tribe", "inhabitant", apparently a word of Chinese derivation (McFarland, 1954, p. 294).

chāo mae chāo çhao : an expression translated in EHS, No. 21, as "princesses and princes". However, the word *chāo* does not usually carry any connotation of high rank. In the context it comes at the end of an enumeration which may have been meant to indicate a descending hierarchy. Therefore I would prefer to read this term as "people, both men and women".

khon : neutral word, designating a person, see compounds below; it is often synonymous with *phū*.

phū : "person".

khon taeng hūng : "cooks" (EHS, No. 8, p. 199).

khon thai : a legal category; when used in contrast with *khā* ("slave") it means "free person".

çhao khā : used as a legal term, "slaves' master", or "servants' master".

çhao thai : used in a legal document in the sense of "slave-master" or "free person".

chāng : "craftsman, skilled worker"

phrai : "subject", "member of the general populace".

phrai thai : "the populace", "free people", presumably identical to *phrai fā*.

phrai fā : "commoners", all people lower than nobles and above *khā*. The use of the word *fā* ("sky") is probably derived from the expressions below.

phrai fā nā sai : literally "commoner-sky-face-open", which has been translated sometimes as "bright-face commoners" (as opposed to the "covered-face commoners" mentioned below). See EHS, No. 9, and Ishii, 1972, p. 131. This translation is purely speculative, there is nothing to suggest that some people in Sukhothai had their faces covered or uncovered. It appears more likely that the word for "sky" was used in that period in expressions related to the weather. Thus *fā* is used in the sense of "rain" in the later inscription dealt with in EHS, No. 14, and similar expressions are found in the Mangrāisāt. Taking this into account, the category *phrai fā nā sai* could mean "commoners-weather-uncovered", and when *nā* is read not in its meaning of "face" but in its meaning of "season", the two categories seem to indicate *phrai* of the open-sky (dry) season, and *phrai* of the covered-sky (wet) season. Taking this alternative translation a step further, it would appear that there might have been some system of corvée in Sukhothai times, and that the populace was divided for that purpose into two groups.

phrai fā nā pok : see the entry under *phrai fā nā sai*.

phrai fā khā thai : apparently a category encompassing freemen and servants or slaves.

khā : "servant", or "slave", used both as a legal category and as a descriptive term to indicate the lowest class of people.

The Ahom evidence

The compilation of a list of concepts related to rank, title and class for early Ahom times comparable to that of Table 1 above, is not an easy matter. Unfortunately there are no early Ahom inscriptions equivalent to the ones scrutinized for the thirteenth

and fourteenth-century Sukhothai period. The oldest stone pillar inscription using Ahom characters dates at the earliest from the sixteenth century, and even that one is not very informative for our purposes (Dikshit, 1927).

There are a number of historical studies which mention the development of Ahom administration and aspects of social class. The best-known amongst these are Bhuyan (1963), Robinson (1975), Gait (1963) and Acharyya (1966), whilst less-easily accessible works on the topic are Puri (1968), Basu (1970), Deka (1977) and Baruah (1977; 1978). All these sources agree in broad outline in their description of the hierarchical system. Under the king were the great *gohains*, in some important outer provinces were subordinate *gohains*, while *rajkhawas* ruled other outer provinces. Officers of medium rank were various *phukans*, assisted by *baruas*. In descriptions of the military organization all authors agree that there were *hazarikas* commanding 1,000 men, *saikias* commanding 100 men and *boras* commanding 20 men. Ordinary men were called *paiks*, while there were a multitude of names for slaves and bondsmen. Many of these titles and ranks have been described in further detail and dozens of names and professions are scattered about in the works mentioned above.

All this information is of little value to the student wishing to compare early Siamese and Ahom material. In the first place, these descriptions reflect largely the time when the Ahom administrative system had already expanded over the whole valley and developed into its most complex phase. When these sources are checked specifically for pre-fifteenth-century material, little more emerges than the fact that originally there were only two great *gohains*, the *bar gohain* and the *burha gohain*, who assisted the Ahom kings, and one of them would sometimes rule during an interregnum. In the second place, the great majority of these names and ranks are given in Assamese, the language which only in relatively recent times overtook the Tai speech. Assamese is basically a language quite unrelated to Tai; its grammar and vocabulary rank it, together with Bengali and Oriya, amongst the Eastern Indic languages.

For our purpose it is essential to find out which of the ranks, titles and words indicating social class were used in relatively early times, and what were the Ahom names for them. The first Assamese scholars to look behind the Assamese terms and to draw attention to the Tai substratum were Gogoi (1968) and Phukan (1970/1) and their publications have paved the way for a more meaningful comparison. However, much of the information they provide is obviously late-Ahom.

It was decided to make an independent search through the collection of Ahom-script historical sources which were published under the title *Ahom Buranji* (Barua, 1930, hereafter AB). The sections apparently referring to pre-fifteenth-century material were picked out with the aim of noting all terms which might throw some light upon

the early hierarchy and social classes. The AB collection appeared all the more attractive since it provides the text in Ahom script as well as a parallel translation in English. However, what appeared at first to be a simple and straightforward task proved to be quite difficult and time-consuming. For the benefit of those who want to use this unique publication or similar sources for comparative purposes, some of the difficulties and their solutions are as follows.

In the first place, the Ahom printed text contains a large number of puzzling features : many words appear to be spelt in various forms, many suspected printing errors mar the text, wrong consonants have been printed, and the reader meets combinations of vowels wholly outside the Ahom repertoire. Secondly, the translator has found it necessary to introduce paragraphing, a practice not usually found in old Ahom manuscripts. The choice of where to break off the text and begin a new paragraph seems rather arbitrary and occasionally rather infelicitous. Thirdly, and more seriously, the parallel English text advertised on the title page as a "translation", may not be regarded as such. Whilst there are clear correspondences between the Ahom and the English, the English text contains many sentences which appear to be the result of intelligent guess-work, intermingled with doubtful readings and many obvious mistakes. With respect to the study of ranks and titles, the "translation" fails altogether in that often titles are not recognised and in the few places where they are, an Assamese equivalent is given.

It was therefore decided largely to ignore the English parallel text and analyze the relevant Ahom sections of the book, these being the chief primary source. In addition, fragments of early portions of hitherto unpublished Ahom manuscripts were used, together with the Assamese translation by Shri Damboru Phukan Deodhai, one of the few people alive truly at ease reading Ahom texts.

The next problem arising was that of identifying the appropriate words and meaning in the texts. The standard dictionary available, *Ahom Lexicons* (1964) proved another obstacle. It is based upon a late-eighteenth-century Ahom-Assamese word list, compiled at a time when Ahom was probably still a spoken language for much of the Ahom population (Grierson, 1966, p. 63, fn. 1), the original purpose of which seems to have been to give Assamese-speakers an idea of how to pronounce certain Ahom words and of what meanings to assign to each of these. Since Ahom script does not distinguish between different tones, sometimes a great variety of different meanings would be given for one Ahom rendering. Students of Tai languages can easily determine the fact that tonal distinctions must have formed an integral part of Ahom, just as they do in other Tai languages. This Ahom-Assamese word list grew into the first Ahom-Assamese-English dictionary simply by the translation of all the Assamese entries into English.

This dictionary was the basis for *Ahom Lexicons*. The chief drawback of *Ahom Lexicons* is the fact that all Ahom information first passes through Assamese before it reaches English, causing considerable distortion both in the attempt to indicate how Ahom may have sounded as well as in the manner in which certain consonants are spelt.

A single example ought to suffice to indicate the extent of the possible distortion. The Ahom word 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 which means amongst other things "elbow", is given in Assamese as 𑜇𑜡 and in the neighbouring column this is transliterated as "chak". Anybody familiar with Assamese will note, however, that the "ch" in this case is always pronounced "s", and that the vowel comes close to that in the English word "fall", so that a less misleading transliteration of the Ahom word for most English-speakers who are not familiar with Assamese would have been something like "sōk". When it is considered that, for example, the Siamese word for "elbow" is 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫, pronounced sōk, it becomes clear that all comparative-linguistic studies which rely upon *Ahom Lexicons* or its fore-runner, the Ahom-Assamese-English dictionary, have allowed a factor to creep in which may have obscured possible similarities between Ahom and other Tai languages.

For our purposes it was therefore necessary to adjust the transliteration of Ahom words, so as to eliminate the Assamese "colouring". It proved insufficient simply to transpose the "a" and "rom" and the "ch" and "s". Upon close examination it became clear that many Ahom vowels, and especially diphthongs which are clearly distinguished in Ahom script, had been rendered into various Assamese approximations, and often several distinct Ahom vowels were glossed under one Assamese sound.

Two different types of sources were used to set up a more satisfactory scheme of transliteration. The first was the taped rendering of Ahom by Shri Damboru Phukan Deodhai, who is possibly the chief custodian of what remains of the Ahom religion. Since his mother-tongue is Assamese, his pronunciation may well be at variance with Ahom as it was once spoken, but at the same time it is unlikely that any person still alive will come closer to what Ahom may have sounded like. Apart from this informant's vocal rendition, several early non-Assamese studies of Ahom have been taken into account (Jenkins, 1835; Brown, 1837; Grierson, 1904 and 1966). The present author has made a conscious attempt not to be influenced by his previous knowledge of Siamese, and has not imposed a preconceived Tai stamp upon the Ahom material. The results of comparing tapes and early studies are enumerated in Table 2.

The Ahom signs in Table 2 differ in some instances from the printed version in AB, notably in the presentation of the vowels "u" and "ū", and the consonants "t" and "r". In all these cases I have been guided by the Ahom as it was actually written in old manuscripts and tree-bark books.

Table 2: *A system of transliterating Ahom*

Part 1. Vowels and diphthongs

Sign	Syllable	Vowel	Approximate pronunciation
	ka	a	as in French "ami"
	kā	ā	as in English "father"
	ki	i	as in English "bit"
	kī	ī	as in English "meet"
	ku	u	as in English "bull"
	kū	ū	as in English "blue"
	k̄	̄	as in English "spot"
	k̄̄	̄̄	as in English "spot", but longer held
	ku'	u'	as in French "tu"
	kū'	ū'	as in German "Über"
	kae	ae	as in English "fat"
	kē	ē	as in English "late"
	keu	eu	not unlike Dutch "trui"
	kāi	āi	as in English "high"
	k̄ai	̄ai	as in English "boy"
	kāw	āw	not unlike English "how"
	kōw	ōw	not unlike English "mow" or "sew"
	kyū	yū	as in English "fume"
	kū'w	ū'w	as in Dutch "duw"

Part 2. Consonants

Sign	Transcript	Sign	Transcript	Sign	Transcript
	k		dh		s
	kh		n		y
	g		p		jh
	gh		ph		ny
	ng		b		r
	t		bh		l
	th		m		h
	d		ch		

Note : When a word is written as two consonants without vowel sign, the vowel “a” may be presumed between the two. The consonant “ny” at the end of a word is often pronounced “i”. Various exceptional signs and pronunciations are mentioned in Grierson (1966).

This system of transliteration is but a tentative reconstruction of what Ahom may have sounded like; I have refrained from the use of the symbols used in linguistic circles in order to avoid the impression that my transliteration could be regarded as an authoritative guide to the sounds of the Ahom language.

After these necessary preliminary steps, the evidence from the Ahom buranjis can now be presented. Just as with the evidence from Sukhothai inscriptions, ranks, titles and all words which may be indicative of class or social grouping are enumerated. Again, just as in Table 1, the expressions are broadly ordered according to hierarchy, beginning with appellations for the king and ending with those for the least privileged members of society. Altogether thirty-six terms were chosen and these are enumerated in Table 3.

Table 3 : *Expressions indicative of rank, title and class in early Ahom Buranjis*

khun : the most common title of an independent ruler. It is also used for the great legendary ancestors, such as *khun* Lung and *khun* Lāi. A common Ahom expression for succeeding to a throne is *hit khun*, “to become *khun*”, which in historical times appears to be synonymous with *hit chāw* (AB, pp. 49-50). *Khun* is used in the early portions of the texts in combination with other distinguishing words, see entries below.

khun pū : “the lord grandfather”, a title sometimes used for rulers in legendary times.

khun thōw : an exalted title, see *thōw*.

khun klōng : title of a subordinate chief, first used in combination with the rank of *phū kin mū'ng* (AB, p. 24), but later on also with the prefix *chāw* (p. 29), or as the title *klōng* by itself.

chāw : throughout the early sections the term is used as “master, chief”. Occasionally it is also found as the title of a legendary king.

chāw lung : “great *chāw*” is a term used for the first time as a designation for the first Ahom ruler to reach Assam, King Sū'wkaphā.

chāw phā : only used as the title of a king, in some accounts as early as the period of Sū'wkaphā (AB, p. 34).

klōng : “subordinate chief”. In Ahom Lexicons (p. 104) it is translated simply as “title of dignity”. However, in the enumeration of Sū'wkaphā's retinue, the *klōng* titles all come between *khun* and *thōw*, which seems to indicate a relative high position for a *klōng*, at least in the early days.

chāw phrōng mū'ng : probably literally “chief-adviser-country”. This is the title of the most important dignitary to advise early Ahom kings, known in Assamese as the *burha gohain*. Gait (1963, p. 245) spells *phrōng* as two syllables: “phurang”, apparently taking the Assamese transcription for “a”.

phū kin mū'ng : literally “person-eats *mū'ng*”. *Mū'ng* is here taken as a subordinate town and its surroundings. *Phū kin mū'ng* was probably a vassal ruler. In the retinue of the legendary *khun Lung* and *khun Lāi* there was a person of *klōng* rank, named Khū'wmū'ng, who was the *phū kin mū'ng* of Yūnang, as well as the *klōng* Ngōn, the *phū kin mū'ng* of Lī. In later times the term is used as the equivalent of the Assamese *rajkhowa*, governor of a region.

thōw : an exalted title, indicating that a person belongs to the ruling classes.

yeu : suffix after the name of the legendary King *chāw* Chang, most probably meaning “the Great”.

thōw mū'ng : “city lord”, a title used for nobles accompanying Sū'wkaphā and for high dignitaries thereafter.

thōw mū'ng lung : or “great *thōw mū'ng*”, the title of the second-highest adviser to the Ahom kings, known in Assamese as the *bar gohain*.

lnk khun : “people of noble descent”, “nobles”.

ru pak : literally “head of a hundred”, used as a suffix to the name of one of the persons in King Sū'wkaphā's retinue (AB, p. 25).

phū kip sūi rai : tax-collector, literally “person-taking-tribute-farmland” (AB, p. 38).

tun : also spelt *tūn*, literally “tree”, used in the early Buranjis as “lineage”.

ru'n : literally “house”, used in the sense of “family”.

kun : also *kūn*, “person”, also used as a classifier for single people.

phū : a general word denoting “person”.

phū tang mō : Barua (1930, p. 35) translates this as “potters”, apparently relying upon the word *mō*, which probably means “pot”. However, the word *tang* remains a problem. It is possible that in the process of copying the vowel *o* was omitted and that originally it was *phū tōng mō*, “people casting iron pots”.

phū tak nam : “drawers of water”.

phū tat ya chang : literally “person-cut-grass-elephant”, someone punished by being given this chore, apparently a lowly status below *kun tai* (AB, p. 35).

chāw kai : “fowl-keepers”.

chāw yī : “store-keepers” according to Barua (p. 35), an odd and surprising group to accompany the Tai into Assam. Probably a meaning of “granary” is taken as a guide (Grierson, 1904, p. 209), so that food-store keepers may be indicated.

chang sa rī : a type of skilled person. Barua translates this as “physician”, even though the Ahom for “doctor” is usually taken as *oja* (Baruah, 1978, p. 18), possibly a corruption of *mō yā*. It is more likely that a priestly function is indicated, since *rī* means “temple” (Grierson, 1904, p. 226).

luk tai : a general word describing the Ahom people. From the fact that a miscreant *luk khun* once hid amongst *luk tai* (AB, p. 36) it may be inferred that the two categories were mutually exclusive, at least in that specific context.

lik chāw : “a chief’s man”, “servant”, (AB, p. 50).

bā : apparently a term indicating an inferior person, used in enumeration with *luk kha*.

kha : also spelt *khā*, “subject”, “servant”, “slave”. In the early texts the term is also used as a prefix for certain foreign people, indicating descent from non-Tai tribal people.

kha khun, probably “*khun*’s servant”, “people belonging to a *khun*”.

luk kha : “servant”, in early texts usually mentioned in the compound *luk kha khun*.

luk kha khun : probably a general term indicating people of lowly descent. In one place (AB, p. 34) it is recorded how *luk kha khun* conspired with *kun* (people) to stage an insurrection.

Comparison

Naturally, neither Table 1 nor Table 3 represents all the possible vocabulary in use during Sukhothai and early Ahom times for titles and classes. Also it cannot be expected that the range of words in Table 1 would be wholly the same as that in Table 3, because the sources used to compile the tables were not wholly identical. The material which found its way into inscriptions is likely to be somewhat different from

that which was written down in the Buranjis. The Sukhothai inscriptions reflect to a large extent matters related to Buddhism as well as legal matters, whilst the Ahom Buranjis are much more a chronicle of the ruling families.

Yet, Tables 1 and 3 make for interesting comparison. The Sukhothai words *khun*, *çhao*, *thāw*, *khon* and *khā* all have Ahom equivalents in *khun*, *chāw*, *thōw*, *kun* and *kha*, respectively, while the Sukhothai expression *lūk khun* has its parallel in the Ahom *luk khun*. Apart from these six instances of equivalent pairs, there are a number of cases where the same word occurs alone in one list and in a compound in the other, or in different compounds in each list. Thus *phu* for "person" in general is repeatedly used in Ahom. A further check of inscription material shows that in Sukhothai times it was used not only in the expression *phū yai*, which found its way into Table 1, but also in *phū kae* and *phū tao*, meaning "old people" (Ishii, 1972, p. 112). The word *chāng* (Sukhothai: "craftsman") has the same meaning in Ahom *chang*. The Ahom suffix *yeu* (the Great) is the same as the Siamese *yai* (big).

Furthermore, there are instances where features of Ahom titles can be found back in Sukhothai inscriptions, albeit not specifically as terms indicating class or rank. Thus the Ahom suffix *lung* (great) is found in early Siamese inscriptions as *luang*, meaning "royal, official, big" (Ishii, 1972, p. 208). *Tun*, the Ahom "lineage", has its parallel in Sukhothai *ton*, "beginning, source; tree, trunk" (*ibid.*, pp. 55-6); and Ahom *ru'n*, "family", corresponds to Sukhothai *rū'an*, "house" (*ibid.*, p. 160). The Ahom word *mū'ng*, "town "or" country", is the same as Sukhothai *mu'ang*, "country, land, nation" (*ibid.*, p. 145); whilst the Ahom expression *kin mū'ng* is used in Sukhothai in the form *kin mu'ang* also meaning "to govern, to rule". The latter expression is apparently used for the first time in EHS, No. 11, p. 93.

A few terms which at first sight might appear to be related, may actually have separate backgrounds. Thus it would be attractive to equate the Ahom *klōng*, "subordinate chief", with the title *khlōng* found as part of a name in Sukhothai Inscription No. II. However, the spelling of the final consonant in the latter word indicates a Cambodian influence, and indeed in early Cambodian administrative terms the word is frequently used for "chief" (Sahai, 1970). In this instance it would appear more likely that the Ahom *klōng* was related to the Sukhothai *kōng*, "a heap, a multitude, military forces" (Ishii, 1972, p. 5). Although *kōng* does not appear in the early inscriptions as a specific title, it does emerge in Ayutthayan times as part of military titles.

The use of the term *chāw phā* in early Ahom texts as a title of the king is of great interest. The first sign of the use of the Siamese equivalent, *çhao fā*, dates from the reign of King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605). It is just possible that the term was first coined amongst the Ahom people, and that various Shan groups of northern Burma

subsequently adopted the term, eventually to pass it on to the Siamese. However, whilst contact between Ahom and Shan cannot be ruled out, this is more likely to have been through the Shan moving to the Brahmaputra Valley, rather than any movement in the opposite direction. It seems more probable, therefore, that the title *chao fā* belongs to the Tai tradition of pre-Sukhothai times, as has been suggested by Vickery (1974, p. 162). The early use in Ahom texts strengthens that hypothesis.

The rare and as yet unexplained term *khun yi* of Sukhothai times does not seem to be equivalent to Ahom *chāw yī*. From the respective contexts it appears that different words are used. If the Sukhothai *yi* is a Tai word with an Ahom equivalent it could be speculated that Ahom *nyī*, in the meaning of "to plan, to consult", might indicate a parallel which would at least fit the Sukhothai context (Grierson, 1904, p. 220).

For the Ahom *phrōng* in the compound *chāw phrōng mū'ng*, no obvious Siamese equivalent was found. By way of speculation it could be put forward that *phrōng* is a contracted form of *phū rōng*, as indeed is suggested by Gait's transcription (1963, p. 245). To a Siamese-speaker, *phū rōng* would mean "supportive person" or "second-in-command". At this stage of my research this possible connection is only put forward tentatively, the Ahom combination of *chāw* with *phū* seems unlikely unless the contracted form had come to be used as a word by itself.

The Sukhothai term *pua* does not occur in the sections of the Ahom texts studied, and neither does an examination of word lists assist in giving a possible parallel. The existing Ahom word lists are not, however, suited for detailed and authoritative searches of this kind.

Bāo, in the Sukhothai term *lām bāo*, may have meant "young", "little" or "junior", for it seems to have been the lowest of the Sukhothai *lām* ranks. The word *bāw* occurs in Ahom in the meaning of "young man", or "young unmarried man" (Grierson, 1904, p. 204).²

The Ahom term *ru pak*, "chief over a hundred" (*ru* literally means "head"), is one of the most intriguing entries in Table 3. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this rank is only mentioned once in the early parts of the Ahom Buranjis. If it is not an anachronism which has slipped in during one of the periods of copying, it would indicate that the system of appointing a *ru ring* (Assamese *hazarika*), chief over a thousand, *ru pak* (Assamese *saikia*) chief over a hundred and *ru seu* (Assamese *bora*),

2. Upon reading an earlier draft, Dr. A. Diller of the Australian National University added that in present-day Southern Thai *baō* means "young man, generally before Buddhist ordination". It is also a common word to call boys one does not know.

chief over twenty, goes back to the beginning of the thirteenth century. This, taken together with the fact that in late-Sukhothai times there is evidence of a system which distinguishes chiefs over 100,000, 10,000, 1,000, 100, 50 and 10, opens the possibility that here we are dealing with a type of system shared amongst early Ahom and Sukhothai peoples which may go back to pre-Sukhothai times. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that I have not yet been able to find any trace of such a system based on decimal divisions in early Mon or Khmer administrative terminology.

At this stage it is not clear whether the Tai evolved the system, based upon factors of ten, by themselves, or whether they adopted it from one of the neighbouring cultures at an early stage of development. It has been suggested (Wood, 1933, chapter 2) that exactly the same system was used in the kingdom of Nan-Chao, but, like many other supposed links between Nan-Chao and Tai peoples, upon closer examination the similarities prove less impressive. The Nan-Chao administration distinguished leaders over 100, 1,000 and 10,000, but this was apparently calculated in numbers of households, and used particularly in the non-military context (Stott, 1963, p. 210). The Tai early system, on the other hand, has individual persons as the basic unit, and seems to have been developed primarily as a feature of military organization.

The preoccupation with numbers apparent in early Ahom and Sukhothai data, is even more apparent in post-fourteenth-century descriptions of Ahom and Siamese society. Amongst the Ahom there was the so-called *paik* system, whilst the Tai of Ayutthaya are well-known for their elaborate *sakti nā* hierarchy. It is as yet not known when the *paik* system was first used, but there is evidence that the *sakit nā* system was already part of Ayutthaya's legal system near the end of the fourteenth century (EHS, No. 4, pp. 111-2). Here is not the place to juxtapose both systems, which at first sight have much in common; it suffices to state that a careful reading of Hamilton's account (Bhuyan, 1963, pp. 22-4), upon which many later summaries are based, reveals that the dissimilarities probably outweigh any common features. Thus, in the Ahom system, the king granted many officers the right to direct the work of one man out of every twenty on their private concerns, leaving the remaining nineteen to toil for the monarch. In the Ahom system, four *paiks* formed a unit of corvée, each working three months per year for the state. These rather basic principles of the fully-fledged *paik* system have not been encountered in the complex systems of administration of the Siamese. *Paik* and *sakti nā* systems developed only after Ahom and Siamese had been effectively separated and it may well be unrealistic to expect a large number of comparable features.

A further Ahom category deserving comment is that of the Ahom *phū kip sūi rai*. The term *sūi* in sound and meaning seems to correspond with the Siamese *suai*, "levy", which occurs in the Ayutthayan categories of *phrai suai* and *lĕk suai*,

“levied commoners”. The translation of *rai* as “farmland” is conjectural; none of the available word lists provide a meaning which suits the context. I have taken the Sukhothai use of the word *rai* as providing a logical solution of what the term may have meant.

The word *phrai*, which features so largely in Sukhothai inscriptions, and which forms the basis for various important sub-categories, could not be found in the early Buranjis. The *Ahom Lexicons* (p. 76) and Grierson (1904, p. 222) give a word *phai* meaning “a strong person”. Shan has *phai* in the sense of “a subject or servant of a prince” (Cushing, 1914, p. 458), and in White Tai, *pāy* is given as “the people, citizens, as opposed to nobility, officials, etc.” (Dieu Chinh Nhim and Donaldson, 1970, p. 280), so that there seems reason to take it as part of the shared-Tai tradition from which both Ahom and Sukhothai-Tai developed. The Ahom evidence checked thus far does not help determine whether or not my tentative translation of *phrai fā nā sai* and *phrai fā nā pok* in Table 1 was correct.

The Ahom word *lik chāw* as a term for “servant” is of some comparative interest, because the word *lik* as a designation for the lower classes corresponds to the Siamese *lĕk*, the use of which goes back at least to Ayutthayan times. In Siamese there occur the words *lĕk*, “commoners”, *lĕk thāt*, “slaves”, and *lĕk suai*, “commoners levied instead of working corvée”. From the Ahom evidence it seems that a word related to both *lik* and *lĕk* in the meaning of “ordinary people”, or “lower-class people”, goes back to pre-Sukhothai times.³ In Siam, the adoption of a term *lĕk* for “scribe” from the Sanskritic traditions, has resulted in some confusion in spelling and meaning. The Ahom evidence ought to assist in separating the different origins of *ເລກ* and *ເລຽ*.

The category *phū tat ya chang*, “persons cutting grass for the elephants”, was apparently used by the Ahom for a category of people being punished for some misdeed. This corresponds neatly to the Siamese term *phū tat yā chāng* for a class of people punished in the same manner. This could be taken as an indication that the logistic problem of providing captive elephants with fodder goes back to pre-Sukhothai times and was solved by employing criminals.

Both the Ahom and the Sukhothai Tables contain entries with the prefix *luk* and *lūk* respectively. The Sukhothai inscriptions use *lūk chao* and *lūk khun*, for high-born people, whilst the Ahom have *luk khun*, *luk tai*, *luk kha* and *luk kha khun*, ranging from nobles to the class of slaves. The literal translation “child of. . .” in the sense of someone younger than the category to which the word is attached, does not fit the context in which these compounds are used. Often it is quite clear that the category of people indicated are all adult. The combined evidence from both Tai groups

3. Dr. Diller’s comment: “The Ahom form is probably cognate with the Ancient Chinese **liek*, “number, item, unit”.

supports the idea that the word *luk* or *lūk* as prefix for a class of people has the specific connotation of "class" or "type of person". It may be a reflection of low social mobility that the meaning of "child" or "descended from" has disappeared, or is at least taken for granted when reference is made to types of people.

One of the most interesting observations which can be made from a comparison of the two tables is that almost all entries in Table 3 are immediately recognizable as Tai words by speakers of Tai languages, and that the meanings of these are self-evident, using the vocabulary of Sukhothai inscriptions. The same cannot be said for the list collected in Table 1, even though it omits various titles such as *kamraten*, which had long been used at the Cambodian court. From the Ahom perspective, and using the existing Ahom vocabularies, many of the words in Sukhothai inscriptions for class and rank appear rather alien. With our existing knowledge of Ahom it is difficult to grasp the meaning of *phrayā*, *phrayā phang*, *phra*, *khun nāng*, *lām*, *nāi*, *mun nāi*, *mun tawān*, *pua*, *nāng* and *khom kwān*. Some of these words, such as *lām*, *pua* and *nāng*, could form part of a typically Tai vocabulary, and the failure of our Ahom word lists to provide equivalent terms may simply be a reflection of the incomplete knowledge embedded in such lists. With respect to other terms in Sukhothai inscriptions, however, it appears that various local words for titles, ranks and classes of people have found their way into the vocabulary. A case could be made for the notion that *phrayā* (or *phayā*) was used by peoples in what is now northern Thailand before the Tai peoples entered that region (Vickery, 1974, p. 169), though the evidence from Mon inscriptions appears rather late and may not be taken as firm proof (see Shorto, 1971, p. 258). The term *phra* has been accounted for in early Cambodia (Sahai, 1970), and the lack of an Ahom equivalent fits in with the idea of a Cambodian borrowing. *Nāi* seems to be ultimately derived from the Pāli *nāyaka*, and appears to have been used in both Mon and Khmer traditions before Sukhothai times. *Mun tawān*, as was already argued in Table 1, may have been a Mon borrowing, and the same appears to be the case with *kwān* (Shorto, 1981, p. 178).

Whilst the Ahom list contains no apparent recent foreign borrowings, the Sukhothai evidence indicates the considerable influence of non-Tai cultures. This divergence shows that the Tai of Sukhothai had already by the end of the fourteenth century absorbed many features which were basically Mon and Khmer, whilst the Ahom had remained relatively isolated. The Assamese influences upon Ahom culture occurred during a later period. It could be argued, therefore, that the Ahom evidence reflects early Tai culture in a slightly more "pure" form than that of Sukhothai.⁴ Ahom sources must be seen as a valuable tool for students of early Tai history.

4. The position of the Mangrāisāt has not been taken into account in this estimate of "relative purity" of sources.

What has been presented in this paper is only a demonstration of the usefulness of comparing Ahom and Sukhothai data. It does not represent a full and complete study of Tai terms of rank and class, which would be a massive undertaking, involving full descriptions of the complex later Ahom and Ayutthayan systems, as well as of those of the whole range of Tai peoples. This limited attempt to juxtapose thirteenth and fourteenth-century material was intended to prove that in the Ahom Buranjis there is a collection of data which has remained largely unexplored. It has been pointed out that access to these Buranjis has been made difficult, and that no authoritative compilation of relevant Ahom texts is available. The translation hitherto published is inadequate, and the transcription of Ahom commonly used is deceptive. It has been shown that with the assistance of a less Assamese-influenced system of transcription, Ahom proves to fall much more within the family of Tai languages than has often been assumed. If the material collated in this paper stimulates more researchers to take note of Ahom, it has served its purpose. If it results in a concerted effort to compile more Ahom texts and work towards more reliable translations, so much the better.

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