



A study on the Tai-Ahom dragon *NgiNgao Kham*

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Abstract:

The *NgiNgao Kham* is a winged dragon-like figure. Traces of *NgiNgao Kham* is found in the ancient copper plates and coins which reveals that the Tai-Ahom sovereigns once used *NgiNgao Kham* as their royal emblem. Looking back at the history of migration of the Tai-Ahom people, it is undeniable that the affinity to dragons in the Tai-Ahom culture can be traced back to the cultural traditions prevalent in China. The present work focuses on the similarities that the Chinese dragons and the *NgiNgao Kham* share along with the cultural implications.

Keywords: Tai-Ahom, *NgiNgao Kham*, Pixiu, dragons

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I. Introduction

NgiNgao Kham is a winged dragon-like figure that has a body of a lion prevalent in the Tai-Ahom tradition. This mythical animal appears as a hybrid of a snake, a lion, a tortoise, a horse and a bird. The figure is often placed in temples, prayer halls and entrances. In most of the ancient archeological sites relating to the Tai-Ahoms, one can observe the *NgiNgao Kham*, a winged lion - dragon. Traces of *NgiNgao Kham* is found even in the ancient copper plates and coins which reveals that the Tai-Ahom sovereigns once used *NgiNgao Kham* as their royal emblem.

Tai, a large ethnic group, belongs to the Tai-Kadai group of languages. They are currently scattered across parts of South-east Asia and South Asia (especially, Northeast India). Having followed different paths of migrations, their original homeland is believed to be in Yunnan Province, China.

It is believed that after the Han Period, the Tais moved to various parts of Southeast Asia and South Asia- Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and India. They are recognized as Thais, Laos, Shans, Lus and so on. Having migrated to different far-away lands, these people share a common socio-cultural and socio-political legacy through the generational practices of their ancestral culture and social systems and conventions. In maintaining these, they have been able to preserve their distinct ethnic identity while being assimilated into the customs and traditions of the places they had migrated.

Having shared common ancestral grounds, many of their customs and conventions reflect a rich cultural heritage still prevalent in various parts of South-east Asia.

There are six Tai communities in North-east India: Tai-Ahom, Tai-Khamti, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamyang, Tai-Turung and Tai-Aiton. These communities are mostly present in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in North-east India.

***NgiNgao Kham* as a Royal Emblem of the Tai-Ahoms**

History is replete with identity markers that are associated with a specific group or communities. For the Tai-Ahoms, it is the *NgiNgao Kham* that marks their distinct identity from the other Tai groups of Assam.

The Tai-Ahoms migrated to Assam 1228 AD with King Sukapha from Mong Mao, presently in Yunnan Province of China. He established his headquarters in Charaideo, located in Sibsagar district of Assam. Ahom monuments like *Karengghar* (Royal residence), *Rang Ghar* (Ampitheatre), *TalatalGhar* (House for military affairs) used the symbol of *NgiNgao Kham* to mark their presence.

It has been observed that *NgiNgao Kham* is used in the Ahom flags called the *Khringfra*. The Tai Ahom people use the *khringfra* for every occasion, including religious, cultural, and royal events. Before going to war during the reign of the Ahom dynasty, the Tai king and his people hoisted *khringfra*. When the king leaves for

war and when the ambassador leaves for another country, they take *Khringfra* with them. Even today, the *khringfra* tradition is observed in various social and community activities.

Usually painted in red, the *NgiNgao Kham* is in the middle of the *khringfra* which is in white. It is believed that *khringfra* is God's close friend. So, the Tai-Ahom believe that wherever *khringfra* is hoisted, God appears. According to Tai-Ahom belief, whatever they ask of *khringfra*, they receive.

According to Tai Ahom belief, the creation of the world and the *NgiNgao Kham* is based on an evolutionary theory. *Fura along or Farlong*, according to this theory, is the creator. There existed only a black hole prior to the creation of the world. Initially, *Furalong* 'the creator' created a jelly-like material. From this material was created Goddess *Ai Sang*. The jelly material then gave birth to *KhunTheu Kham*. *Furalong* then sent some gods through vomiting.

KhunTheu Kham came to earth and began to meditate, touching water. The myth associated to the birth of *NgiNgao Kham* is as follows: When you touch the water, it begins to flow, and one crab (i.e. god) blocks the flow. As water cross nearby, and another god, in tortoise form, stopped it. The water is still flowing. Another god, Ananta Nag (King of Snakes), stood in the way of the crossing. Through his tail, the Ananta Nag made contact with the crab. And the earth or soil appeared between the crab and Ananta Nag, and this soil was the first earth in this world. Again, some soil extends to the ground, and another white elephant (another form of god) blocks the earth or soil. Following that, the soil or earth under the control of the Ananta Nag became the world. One god lived in the pole of the world as a large spider. The large spider spins a large web. The lovely Goddess *Fukaokham*, the owner of heaven, passed through that route one day. When they met, they had sexual relations, and *Fukaokham* laid four eggs as a result. *Thao Lungam* was given responsibility for incubate by *Fukaokham*. *Thao Lungam* was unable to give birth. They then sprinkled holy water on the eggs, which transformed them into four gods. The first was *Saw-Ai-Kofa-Sang-Din*, who looked at the world, the second was *Sing-Sofa-Fa-Kham*, who looked at eight million Nag, the third was *Sing-Kam-Fak*, who looked at the thunderstorm and stayed in heaven, and the last was *NgiNgao Kham*, who was in charge of spreading the Tai Ahom religion. This is how *NgiNgao Kham* came to be. (Gogoi 1994; 33-35)

In the present society, the motifs of *NgiNgao Kham* are adopted for various purposes. Several cultural organizations and political movements have adopted the icon as a part of their emblems. Some even revere *NgiNgao Kham* as one of the Gods along with the Hindu Pantheon as most of the Tai-Ahom people have adopted Hindu religion. The *NgiNgao Kham* has therefore become a dominant symbol of the Tai Ahom in their current process of re-building collective consciousness. This phenomenon along with the revival of Tai-ness in other aspects (e.g., myths, history, language and rituals) aim at reformulating the Tai Ahom ethnic identity in order to distinguish themselves from the Assamese and to define their identity amidst ethnic diversity in Modern day India.

The Chinese Pixiu and the other mythical creatures

Dragons are a major part of Chinese culture. In the Chinese culture, *Pixiu* is a mythical hybrid creature that resembles a winged lion. In fengshui, *Pixiu* is associated to wealth as it has a voracious appetite for gold, silver and jewels. Traditionally, in the Chinese culture, *Pixiu* possess mystical powers that draws wealth from all directions. (Lim, 2018)

Legend of the *pixiu* has been passed down through 2000 years of Chinese lore that talks about a dragon with the body of a lion and antlers on their head. In fact, during the Qing dynasty.

In the Chinese mythology, there are numerous narratives about the *Pixiu*. However, one story describes the *Pixiu* as the youngest son of the dragon King. It is believed that *Pixiu* can guard its master against diseases and ward away evil spirits. It is also said that a *Pixiu* guards its masters even after death. (Bates, 2008)

The first mention of *Pixiu* occurs in the Han dynasty (206-220 AD). Originally called *Tao ba*, they have both male and female variants. The male variant is called *Tiā nlù* and the female is called *Bixié*. The *pixiu* became synonymous with the army in ancient China. The word *Pixiu* meaning "fierce beast" and also "brave warrior" was used as a symbol on battle flags and banners in ancient China.

The mythical creature *bixié* is a mix of a dragon and turtle. *Bixié* is one of the nine sons of the Dragon King and is depicted as a dragon with a turtle shell. For centuries, *bixié* has been used to mark commemorative events and to bring in good luck. It is also used as a decorative plinth for tablets and bases of bridges or archways. The use of *bixié* is found throughout East Asia.

Cultural significance of the Chinese Pixiu and NgiNgao Kham

Looking back at the history of migration of the Tai-Ahom people, it is undeniable that the affinity to dragons in the Tai-Ahom culture can be traced back to the cultural traditions prevalent in China.

Tracing the importance of the Tai-Ahom symbol of *NgiNgao Kham*, it can be assumed that it is a variation of the Chinese *Pixiu*. As stated earlier, the Tai-ahoms use the *NgiNgao Kham* with the *Khringfra* to symbolize prosperity. Even before going to war, the King hoists the flag '*Khring Fra*' that bears the image of

NgiNgao Kham to usher in success and wealth. Even legends of ancient China narrate the use of *Pixiu* in banners and flags to bring success in battles.



Fig.1 Pixiu



Fig.2 NgiNgao Kham

The symbol of Tai ethnic Assamese is a major contemporary dragon lion with wings called *NgiNgao Kham* that appeared in various forms. The *NgiNgao Kham* figure is available in the some of the Vaishnavite monastery of Assam like Barpeta, Barduwa etc. (Sarma, 2017) It shows the cultural assimilation in the greater Assamese society. In fact, modern adaptations of *NgiNgao Kham* can be observed in dress patterns as well.

II. Conclusion:

The presence of *NgiNgao Kham* and its significance among the Tai-Ahoms are the traces of the Chinese culture and traditions on the Tai-Ahoms who migrated to North-eastern India from Yunnan Province in China. Even though, a few structural changes might have occurred in the interpretation of the dragon-like figure, the interpretation of the symbol remained the same across the two cultures. The interpretation of these two symbols i.e., the *Pixie* and the *NgiNgao Kham* are extensions of the Chinese Cultural tradition.

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