



Ahom Dynasty's Attire: A Window Into the Past

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ABSTRACT

The Ahom Dynasty, lasting from 1228 to 1826, was important for Assam's history. Led by Siu-ka-pha, they came from Mang Mao in Southwestern Yunnan and settled in Assam. Siu-ka-pha set up the capital in Charaideo, near present-day Sivasagar, starting a prosperous time for the Ahom Kingdom.

Despite being from far away, the Ahoms adjusted well to Assam's ways, learning about its climate, society, and culture. Siu-ka-pha's understanding of Assam helped him blend in smoothly. He also made efforts to write down Ahom and Assam's history in Buranjis, which are like history books. These writings keep the Ahom Dynasty's heritage alive and tell us a lot about medieval Assam's life and culture.

Through the Buranjis, we see how important clothing and ornaments were for the Ahom people. Their attire showed their culture, status, and taste. We're learning about Ahom clothing from various sources, like old records and modern research.

Our goal is to share the rich history of Ahom clothing and ornaments. By studying these details, we honour the Ahom Dynasty's legacy and its impact on Assam's culture. We want to make sure future generations know about this important part of Assamese history.

KEYWORDS : AHOM, ASSAM, DRESSES, ORNAMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Ahom dynasty held a significant reign over Assam, lasting for around six centuries, from 1228 to 1826. Founded by **Chaolung Sukaphaa**, a prince from Mong Mao, which is in present-day Yunnan, China, the dynasty marked its inception with the establishment of the capital at Charaideo in 1253. This capital city boasted the earliest tumuli, or burial mounds, of Ahom royalty, signifying the dynasty's deep roots in the region. Later, under the reign of Suhungmung, the capital was relocated to Garhgaon in 1540, further solidifying the dynasty's authority over the land.

Throughout its history, the Ahom dynasty witnessed the leadership of several notable rulers, each contributing in their own unique ways to the growth and development of the kingdom. Pratap Singha, also known as Burha Roja, made significant administrative reforms during his reign, introducing key offices like the Borbaru and the Borphukan, which played crucial roles in the military and judicial affairs of the kingdom.

Rudra Singha, widely regarded as one of the greatest Ahom kings, ruled with remarkable intelligence and foresight, despite being illiterate. His reign saw remarkable advancements and stability within the kingdom, earning him a place of honour in the annals of Ahom history.

Sudangphaa, also known as **Bamuni Konwar**, made significant strides in the propagation of Hinduism within the Ahom dynasty. His reign witnessed the initial stages of Hinduism's influence in the region, and he instituted important ceremonies such as the Singarigharutha, a coronation ritual followed by his successors.

Sukaphaa, the founder of the Ahom dynasty, is revered for laying the foundation of a kingdom that endured for centuries. His journey from Burma to Assam marked the beginning of a new era, and his vision and leadership set the stage for the dynasty's long and prosperous rule.

SCOPE, METHODOLOGY, OBJECTIVES

This paper explores Ahom clothing and ornaments, aiming to reveal the cultural significance of their attire. Through detailed examination, it uncovers the diverse range of garments and adornments worn by the Ahom people, providing insights into their customs and aesthetic choices. By analysing materials, styles, and symbolism, the study deepens understanding of the Ahom dynasty's socio-cultural landscape, illuminating their traditions and societal norms.

MAIN TOPIC

The Ahom period was characterized by a rich diversity of clothing and adornments, each reflecting distinct social classes. Attire and jewellery served as key identifiers of individuals and their societal status. Both men and women had access to a wide range of garments and ornaments tailored to their respective genders. One of the important features of the traditional customs both Tai Ahom men and women is that they are woven and cut at home; they weave their own clothes such as pha'-dai(riha)pha-chin (mekhela), pha-rem(churia) etc. These diverse clothing options enabled easy recognition of people's identities and social standing within Ahom society.

TRADITIONAL DRESSES OF AHOM IN ASSAM

DRESSES OF MEN:

During the time of the Ahom kingdom, people wore different clothes and jewellery based on their social status. The Buranjis, which were written in that period, tell us about the clothing worn by men. Royalty, like kings and princes, wore fancy clothes like chapkon, pakroi, jama, pagijar, cheleng, ijar, gomseng, and mejangkori. These were made of the finest silk.

Even the rich and important people had their special clothes. They wore things like chola, cheleng, tongali, paguri, dhoti, and paaturia. Sometimes they carried borjaapi and walking sticks with fancy gold and silver patterns. But regular folks wore simpler clothes like tangali, cheleng, paguri, and kopahisuria. Their suria couldn't be longer than their knees. They also wore the cheleng over one shoulder. These clothes showed who they were and where they belonged in Ahom society. They added to the variety of Ahom culture and tradition.

DRESSES OF WOMEN:

The attire of Ahom women was equally distinctive, serving as a marker of their social status. For royal Ahom ladies, their clothing was adorned with intricate designs, with paatgomseng or mekhela being the preferred choice. Exclusive accessories like ghuri and riha were also part of their ensemble. Similarly, women from aristocratic families distinguished themselves with garments like kingkhap, gomseng, and mejangkori muga riha, showcasing their elevated status. In contrast, common women donned handwoven riha mekhela sadar, reflecting their modest background.

During the colder months, they would opt for khaniakapoor or borkapoor to stay warm and comfortable. These various garments not only provided warmth and protection but also symbolized the wearer's position within Ahom society, adding to the colourful tapestry of Ahom culture and tradition.

Below are details regarding Ahoms attire-

MEKHELA (pha`-chin):

Mekhela is a traditional cylindrical dress worn by Assamese women, extending from the upper waist to the lower feet. It is often adorned with intricate designs depicting flowers, trees, animals, birds, butterflies, and vines, embellished with vibrant colours like black, green, red, pink, and yellow. While cotton remains the primary material for mekhela, other luxurious fabrics such as Muga, pat silk, and Eri silk are also used, particularly for special occasions like weddings and religious events. Cotton mekheles are favoured for their comfort and affordability, making them ideal for everyday wear at home.

In the past, skilled Assamese women handcrafted mekheles using traditional handlooms. However, modern machines have replaced these traditional methods, making mekheles more readily available in markets across Assam and even online. Despite the shift to mechanized production, the beauty and significance of mekhela as a symbol of Assamese culture and tradition endure, continuing to be cherished and worn by women in various settings and occasions.

CHADOR OR SADOR:

Chador or sador, a lengthy piece of fabric adorned with vibrant floral motifs, is draped over the left shoulder and crossed to the right, complementing the traditional mekhela in Assamese attire. Available in cotton, muga silk, and regular silk variations, the sador holds profound cultural significance for Assamese women, symbolizing their deep-rooted heritage and identity.

In Assamese society, the pairing of mekhela and sador is inseparable, forming the iconic mekhela-sador ensemble. This attire is not merely a choice of clothing but a profound connection to tradition and community, representing the essence of Assamese culture.

The mekhela-sador ensemble serves as a visual expression of Assamese identity, reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage and aesthetic sensibilities. Through its intricate designs and vibrant colors, it captures the essence of Assamese tradition, evoking a sense of pride and belonging among its wearers. As a symbol of cultural identity, the mekhela-sador ensemble transcends mere fashion, embodying the spirit and resilience of the Assamese people throughout history.

RIHA (pha`-dai):

Riha, an integral part of Assamese attire, is often worn in conjunction with the mekhela-sador ensemble. While it may not be a daily wardrobe choice, the riha holds significant cultural value and is reserved for special occasions in Assamese society. Traditionally, Assamese women don the riha during religious ceremonies such as prayers at the namghar, annual rituals of ancestor worship,

and seeking blessings from elders. Additionally, it is commonly worn during milestone events like anna prashanna ceremonies (rice feeding ritual for infants) and weddings.

The riha serves as more than just a garment; it embodies the cultural and religious traditions of Assam, carrying deep symbolic meaning in its intricate designs and usage. Its association with auspicious occasions underscores its importance in marking significant life events and religious observances. As part of the mekhela-sador ensemble, the riha contributes to the overall aesthetic appeal of Assamese attire, adding layers of cultural richness and tradition to each occasion it graces.

WIDE BLOUSE(siu):

The wide blouse, known as "siu", holds significant cultural significance for Assamese women. It is believed that Tai Ahom women also adorned themselves with a siu atop the riha, akin to other Tai women's traditional attire. From the elegant long-sleeved blouses worn by princess Ambika or Madmbika and depicted in 'Hasti Vidyarnav' to the attire of Narayani Handique in the early 20th century, the evolution of the siu into the 'Jakit Sula' reflects a dynamic cultural shift. Ahom men and women alike pay careful attention to colour choices in their attire, varying according to age. In traditional decades, unmarried girls and young women prefer brightly patterned blouses, while older women tend to opt for white. The queen's jackets adorned with exquisite embroidery on jute-free fabric.

CHURIA OR DHUTI(pha`-rem):

Churia or dhuti holds a significant place in the traditional attire of Assamese men, serving as the primary garment worn around the waist, draping down to the knees or below. Historically, during the medieval period, churias were crafted from luxurious materials like silk muga or cotton, reflecting the social status and prestige of the wearer. Reserved for esteemed individuals such as high-ranking officials, leaders of satras (religious institutions), and members of the Brahmin community, the churia long symbolized authority and dignity.

In religious ceremonies and worship rituals, coloured dhutis, particularly those in vibrant shades like red, or crafted from silk, were favoured choices. These special dhotis were meticulously selected to enhance the sacred ambiance of religious functions and to demonstrate reverence towards the deities. The preference for silk dhotis or those in auspicious colors underscored the spiritual significance attached to ceremonial attire, emphasizing the solemnity and devotion inherent in religious practices.

Through the churia and dhuti, Assamese men not only adorned themselves but also conveyed their social standing, religious piety, and cultural heritage, contributing to the rich tapestry of Assamese traditions and custom, comfort and style for various formal and ceremonial events in Assam and beyond.

TONGALI(pha`-bin-ba`i-ra`m):

Tongali or Kakalbandha, holds a special place in Assamese culture, primarily worn during the Bihu dance, especially by young boys. The Tongali divided into various categories like cotton tongali, gunadia tongali, jabdar tongali, Kuhumia tongali, bihu tongali. It serves a functional purpose, akin to a belt for securing the dhoti, but its significance extends beyond mere utility. Linked intimately with the dignity and tradition of the Bihu dance, tongali carries a profound cultural resonance among the Assamese community, embodying the essence of their rich heritage and cherished customs.

Paguri, or turban, holds significant cultural importance among the common Assamese folk. Crafted from a variety of silks and cotton, it serves as a distinctive headgear, symbolizing tradition and identity. Typically worn by everyday people, the paguri is more than just an accessory—it represents a connection to heritage and community. Its diverse materials and styles reflect the rich tapestry of Assamese culture, while its prevalence underscores its integral role in daily life. As a symbol of pride and tradition, the paguri stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Assamese customs and values.

GAMUSA OR GAMOSA(pha`-cit)

The traditional Assamese Gamosa/Gamusa, also known as Gamucha, is a cherished symbol of Assamese culture, instantly recognizable by its white rectangular shape adorned with vibrant red borders known as the "anchu." These red borders, steeped in symbolism, are believed to represent the strength of the Ahom dynasty. The Gamosa holds deep cultural significance and plays a significant role in various social, cultural, and religious ceremonies in Assam. The Gamucha, an important cloth of the Ahom people, is divided into several categories and these are -Bihu Gamucha, Pani Gamucha and Futuki dia Gamucha.

Beyond its ceremonial importance, the Gamosa embodies values of hospitality, friendship, and respect. It is often presented as a token of warm welcome to guests or as a gesture of honour to esteemed individuals, reflecting the spirit of camaraderie and reverence within Assamese society. As a symbol of tradition and goodwill, the Gamosa transcends its material form, fostering connections and preserving the rich heritage of Assam.

CHELENG AND KHANIA(pha`-toup)

In the Ahom period, two types of wrappers were prevalent: the cheleng and the khania. The cheleng, a plain cloth measuring around 6 cubits in length and 3 cubits in breadth, featured embroidery on its two ends using muga thread or other coloured threads. This decorative touch added an elegant flair to the garment. There are many different types of cheleng clothes, including blank cheleng, tear cheleng, dariyali cheleng, jari nia seleng, muga guti dia cheleng. On the other hand, the khania was double folded, totalling 12 cubits in length and 3 cubits in breadth. Like the cheleng, it also boasted ornamental work at its two ends. Khaniya are divided into various types like uka khania, buta dia khania, uriyali dia khania, narakata khania, muga guti bulua khania.

Both officials and noblemen, regardless of gender, favoured the khania for its sophistication and grandeur. These two cloths served the purpose of wrapping around the upper part of the body, offering both practicality and style. Whether worn for ceremonial events or everyday attire, the cheleng and khania added a touch of refinement to the wearer's ensemble, reflecting the cultural and aesthetic sensibilities of the Ahom society.

GHAGRA OR GHURI:

In Assam, the ghagra or ghuri found its place not only in everyday wear but also in various cultural performances like bhaona, music, and dances. It served as a versatile garment, often wrapped around the waist, especially by the sutradhar during theatrical presentations. This traditional attire added authenticity and charm to performances, enhancing the visual appeal and cultural richness of Assamese art forms.

Whether worn as part of a traditional ensemble or adorned for theatrical roles, the ghagra played a significant role in preserving and showcasing the cultural heritage of Assam through its timeless elegance and versatility.

SULA AND CHAPKON(pha`-chu):

Chapkon, a distinctive surcoat or robe extending to the knee, was exclusively reserved for officers during the Ahom era. This garment symbolized authority and status, distinguishing those in positions of leadership and responsibility. Worn over traditional attire, the chapkon added an element of formality and prestige to official appearances.

Similarly, the chula emerged as a popular choice of attire among men during the reign of Ahom King Rudra Singha and subsequent rulers. Influenced by Mughal styles, ministers and high-ranking officials adopted shirts known as chuga and chapkon. These garments mirrored the sartorial preferences of the Mughal court, reflecting a fusion of cultural influences and diplomatic interactions.

The adoption of Mughal-inspired attire by Ahom officials signalled a shift in fashion trends and cultural exchange during this period. The incorporation of chuga and chapkon into traditional Ahom attire highlighted the dynamic nature of Assamese society, where diverse influences converged to shape clothing styles and expressions of identity.

ORNAMENTS(ci-ching) DURING THE AHOM RULE

During the Ahom rule, ornaments were not merely accessories but integral components of the Ahom personality, complementing their attire and reflecting their social status and cultural heritage. The Buranjis, historical chronicles of the Ahom era, provide detailed descriptions of the ornaments worn by individuals across different strata of society, including royalty, aristocrats, and commoners.

For Ahom royalty, ornaments were lavish and intricately crafted, often adorned with precious gemstones, gold, and intricate designs. These ornaments served as symbols of wealth, power, and status, distinguishing the royal family from others.

Aristocrats also wore ornaments that were elaborate and elegant, though perhaps less opulent than those of the royalty. They too adorned themselves with necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and other jewellery, showcasing their social standing and prosperity.

Even common folk embraced ornamentation as a means of self-expression and cultural identity. While their ornaments may have been simpler in design and made from more modest materials, such as silver or brass, they still held great significance within the community.

ORNAMENTS(ci-ching) OF MEN

During important ceremonies like the coronation, the Ahom kings were adorned with a splendid array of jewels, as recorded in the Buranjis. These jewels, crafted from gold, diamonds, and other precious metals, added to the regal splendour of the king's attire.

Among the ornaments worn by the king were the karnavusha (earrings), makorkundal (ear studs), kiriti (crown), lokapar (necklace), mukut (crown), nohorhaar (necklace), nepoor (anklet), gaamkharu , bajubandhan , as well as various rings and headgear.

Similarly, the aristocrats adorned themselves with opulent ornaments, including golden lokapar, kundal, and keru, among others. These ornaments, made from precious metals and gemstones, reflected their elevated social status and prosperity.

Even common men embraced ornamentation, albeit with simpler designs and materials. They typically wore long keru (earrings) and lotamoni (necklaces), which were more modest compared to the ornaments worn by royalty and aristocrats.

ORNAMENTS(cí-ching) OF WOMEN

The Buranjis provide detailed accounts of the ornaments adorning Ahom women, encompassing both royalty and commoners. Royalty flaunted lavish ornaments such as gezera , madoli , biri , dugdugi , bala (armlet), and gamkharo , crafted from gold, diamonds, and other precious materials.

Common women adorned themselves with simpler ornaments like keru (earrings), thuria , golpata (pha`-la`i-leng-ha`n-kha), gezera , dugdugi , and muthikharu . While not as extravagant as those of the royalty, these ornaments still held cultural and aesthetic significance in Ahom society.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the attire and adornments of the Ahom dynasty offer a fascinating glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of Assam. From the intricate garments worn by both men and women to the exquisite ornaments adorning their attire, each element reflects the social, cultural, and historical context of the era.

The Buranjis serve as invaluable sources, providing detailed accounts of the clothing and ornaments prevalent during the Ahom rule. Through the study of these artifacts, we gain deeper insights into the customs, traditions, and societal norms of the Ahom people, enriching our understanding of Assamese history and culture.

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