

Tai Lue and Tai Ahom: Foreign Domination and Colonization

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Abstract: This work deals with two ethnic groups: the Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna, South Yunnan, and the Tai Ahom in the northeast Indian state of Assam. It has to be emphasized that for centuries these two minorities had no personal contact. The group known nowadays as the Tai Ahom migrated from the border area of Northeast Burma/Southwest Yunnan through Northern Burma to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam about 800 years ago. There was a successful Tai Ahom kingdom which lasted for 600 years from the mid 13th century until the end of the first Burmese-Anglo War in 1826. The Tai Lue established their first kingdom in South Yunnan in the end of the 12th century. Nowadays, the two groups live under different political systems: the Tai Ahom within the parliamentary democracy of India, and the Tai Lue under the socialist, one-party state of China. Both groups are, in the states in which they live, a social minority and are economically marginalized, without access to the sea and many hundreds of kilometers away from the capital of their state. They lived under massive restrictions on their cultures throughout their histories due to either foreign domination or as a result of assimilation to their respective environments. This fact has been held up in recent decades by various revitalization processes and led to new summits of traditional and religious practices including the Tai language and other cultural characteristics. Since the 1950s in South-Yunnan the district where the Tai Lue live has been called Autonomous Prefecture of Sipsong Panna. The monastery network of Keng Tung (Northeast Burma), Northern Thailand, Northwestern Laos and Sipsong Panna, contributed immensely financially and personally to restore the monasteries which have been demolished during the mid 20th century, so that the culture of the Tai Lue, especially the language and Theravada Buddhist practices have survived. The Tai Ahom in Assam and the smaller Tai minorities in northeast India are supported and regularly visited by representatives of the King of Thailand (Princess Sirindorn) as well as by delegates of the Thai government to promote Pan-Tai relationships over the South-, Southeast- and East Asian corridor consisting of Northeast India, Burma, South China, Laos and Thailand, and to foster economic and cultural cooperation between India and Thailand.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, identity, foreign domination, colonization, marginalization.

1. OVERVIEW

The research objectives of this article are, to argue what efforts the ethnic minorities Tai Lue and Tai Ahom have undertaken and what problems they were facing, during their incessantly attempts to maintaining their traditional culture while, as well as after being colonized or dominated by foreign forces. Furthermore it has to be accentuated, what requirements they made to the government in order to recognize their status as an independent minority including their particular identity, and to obtain their ethnicity with the same rights as all citizens of this state, to gain access to educational institutions, workplace and participation in the regional parliaments as well as in the central assembly of the nation.

Tai Lue and Tai Ahom exist as ethnic minorities in the Central Massif of South, Southeast and East Asia. They are fully integrated into the national structures of the countries in which they live, and the languages they speak belong to the "Tai Kadai" language family, which is dispersed all over mainland Southeast Asia, northeastern India and southern China.

The Tai Lue, who established their first kingdom in 1180 AD, live in Sipsong Panna the southernmost tip of Yunnan. For centuries, they have been subjected to persecution, conquest, exploitation and curtailment concerning their traditional culture: first by Burmese and Chinese dynasties, later by the Nationalists of Chiang Kai Check, and more recently by the Red Guards of Mao Zedong. Nevertheless, over the centuries they were able to succeed in preserving their religious practices, their traditional Tai Lue language and script as well as other cultural assets, particularly due to the support of the Theravada Buddhism monastery network of northeastern Burma (Keng Tung), northern Thailand, northwestern Laos and Sipsong Panna in China.

The Tai Ahom, 800 years after their migration from their homeland in today's border area of northeastern Burma/southwestern Yunnan to Assam, represent an established minority in this northeastern Indian state. After their arrival in the Brahmaputra Valley, during the mid-13th century, they founded a kingdom, which culminated in the 16th-17th century and existed until the occupation of Assam by the British East India Company in 1826, after the first Anglo-Burmese War. During this time, the kingdom of the Tai Ahom, along with the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya, was one of the largest and most prosperous in the South- and Southeast Asian mainland region. As a classical Tai ethnicity, the Tai Ahom live in river valleys and accomplish cultivation of wet rice for the production of their basic food. Over the centuries they adopted the Assamese language, and assimilated many cultural practices of the long-established inhabitants of northeastern India. Nevertheless, some traditional Tai rites have retained up to now, and furthermore, in the smallest detail are faithfully carried out according to the ancient Tai culture, especially during traditional religious customs. One of these customs observed on the occasion of the New Year celebrations is the so-called "Sonkranti festival" in mid-April. It is similarly held in Thailand, Laos, Burma and Cambodia as well as by many other Tai groups and also the Tai Lue under the name Songkran or akin names. In recent years, the Tai Ahom minority experienced vital processes of revitalization. Among them, there exist different groups who demand more concessions and recognition by the Indian state as an ethnic minority as well as the revival of their traditional Tai Ahom script and language. Among other issues, they fight for access to public office and for the strengthening of their traditional religious practices. These resistance groups have now established an extensive network of sympathizers among the Tai Ahom population, smaller Tai groups in the northeastern Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and in Manipur as well as on the Internet, and spearhead the enforcement of claims of Tai ethnic groups living in northeastern India to the Assamese State and the Indian Central Government in Delhi. It remains unclear why these Tai ethnic minority, who got the name Tai Ahom in Assam, had left the Tai Kingdom of Muang Mao in today's border area of northeastern Burma/southwestern Yunnan at the beginning of the 13th century and subsequently marched under massive efforts over the mountainous territory along northern Burma into the Brahmaputra Valley. Did this arduous march possibly had to do with the horsemen of the Mongols advancing farther south, or the threat posed by one of the Chinese empires? A clear answer to this question, despite intensive research, could not be found by the author in the dozens of monographs, anthologies and other publications on the topic of Tai Ahom he read.

In Scott's (2009) understanding Zomia refers to parts of South, Southeast and East Asia as a vast mainland massif, a region in which ethnic minorities flee in order to seek protection from state-building processes. The Tai Ahom migrated from the highlands of southwestern Yunnan to the Brahmaputra River in northeastern India, and there established a kingdom, which existed from the 13th until the 19th century. Perhaps the migration of the Tai Ahom to Assam from northeastern Burma/southern Yunnan and other Tai ethnic groups further southwards into today's states of Thailand, Laos, Burma, and even northern Cambodia in the 13th century, may be explained by the fact, that in the most likely suspected area of origin of the Tai, the coastal and border area of northern Vietnam and southern China, massive threats from Chinese conquerors or other armies existed. This fact, possibly gave rise to a mass migration of Tai ethnicities from east to west, and created an overpopulation in the area in northeastern Burma/southern Yunnan. Consequently several Tai groups may have had to continue to migrate as far as the southern Thai province of Songkhla for some. In such a case one could argue, that the Tai Ahom, who migrated to Assam long before some smaller Tai groups, who came to this area several centuries later, constitute an exception to the thesis commonly held by different scholars, who at first advocate for an East-West and later a North-South migration of the Tai. It should also be borne in mind that there are scientists who state the opinion, that there were already Tai groups in northeastern India, when in the 13th century the Tai Ahom arrived.

Tai Lue

Sipsong Panna, since its founding in the second half of the 12th century, has had close ties with the Tai kingdoms of northern Thailand, northeastern Burma and northwestern Laos. In 1292 AD, the Kingdom of Sipsong Panna, was

conquered by Kublai Khan and remained its tributary switching between the Mongols and the Chinese until the middle of the 14th century. It reached its golden age in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1570, the Tai Lue ruler, King Caw Saenwifa, in order to improve tax collection divided the thirty districts into twelve "muang".¹ It has to be taken under consideration, that the Yuan Dynasty awarded titles to the ruling aristocrats in Sipsong Panna that implied subordination to the Chinese Empire. The later conquests and the perennial wars of the 17th and 18th centuries in this territory forced some members of the Tai Lue to migrate to more southerly regions. A large number of Tai Lue, nowadays living in northern Thailand, were deported there as prisoners, in order to repopulate these zones, decimated by war. These residential areas of the Tai Lue in northern Thailand have been under direct Siamese administration since 1875. With regard to the political and ideological clashes between Chinese Nationalists and Communists, the Royal Tai Lue Family and the Tai Lue Government of Sipsong Panna were deeply split. The Nationalists, in 1911, in respect of more qualified management issues, transformed Sipsong Panna into new districts. Also, they founded the first ethnic minority and the first Han Chinese immigrant schools. By teaching the Chinese, the Nationalists expected to break the dominance of the nobility in Sipsong Panna as well as to eradicate the influence of the Theravada Buddhist monks. The name Sipsong Panna, for the first time was mentioned in historical documents of the Tai Lue in the 16th century AD (HASEGAWA 2000: 1). During the 18th and 19th centuries, the supremacy of Sipsong Panna altered between the three regional empires of the Chinese, the Burmese and the Siamese. In 1885, the French Government and the Chinese Empire signed a declaration to redefine the boundaries between French Indochina and Yunnan. Two of the twelve districts of Sipsong Panna became part of French Indochina, and nowadays belong to Laos. A small district on the right bank of the Mekong River opposite Huay Xai was subordinated to British control, and the rest of Sipsong Panna was integrated into the Chinese Empire. There, a reorganization was performed with the result, that the former number of twelve districts could be restored (SCHLIESINGER 2001a: 45). Some scientists claim, that at the beginning of the 20th century, the Nationalists of Chiang Kai Check² as the ruling party in this area, had no interest in the Tai Lue. They did not take seriously any claims on recognition of one's own nation by the Tai Lue. The Tai Lue Kingdom was small and weak, consequently no Chinese state was afraid of it. The Nationalists granted Sipsong Panna a status as a so-called "semi-independent tribal area". After takeover by the Communists in 1949, Sipsong Panna was reorganized into "Hsi-Shuang Panna Tai Autonomous Cho" with Cheli³ as its capital (SCHROCK et al 1968: 421). One has to take into account, that the culture and the local policies of the Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna, who have been worshipping Theravada Buddhism for many centuries, are linked more closely to the former Kingdom of Lan Na than to the nation state they belong to. (SUMITR 2008: 9). This also applies to their relationship with Laos and northeastern Burma.

The regions of origin

Regarding the area of origin of the Tai, various theories exist. These range for example from western central Asia, along the provinces in central China, the area north of the Yangtze River down to the coastal and border region of North Vietnam and southern China. The latter possibility, is the most favored cradle of the Tai culture and its language by scientists today. Nowadays, three to four million Tai related ethnic groups live in northern and northwestern Vietnam such as the Tay, Thai, Nung, San Chay, Giay, Lao and Tai Lue. Exact details about Tai groups living across the Vietnamese border in China, unfortunately are difficult to gather. Some of these Tai groups, have largely absorbed Chinese culture, and therefore are unaware of their Tai ethnicity. The Zhuang are however a noteworthy exception. The Tai people, who nowadays live in the northern and northwestern provinces of Vietnam, had already settled there before the Vietnamese arrived. Data collected in 1997, demonstrated that there was a community of approximately 3,700 members of Tai Lue in northwestern Vietnam. Outside of the Yunnan province, other smaller Lue groups can be found, in northwest Laos, northern Thailand and northeastern Burma. One might suspect that the Tai Lue community living in

¹ The Tai term "Muang" could denote a city, a country or a state.

² Chiang Kay Check (1887-1975), was the leading general and politician of the Kuomintang government in the Chinese province of Canton. In 1927, he terminated the cooperation with the Communist Party of China as well as the USSR; the entire Territory of South China was controlled by him from 1926 until 1928; in 1928 he became President of the Chinese Republic; after the capitulation of the Kuomintang troops (1948), with the remnants of his army he had to escape to Taiwan, in late 1949; there, since 1950 he held the position as President.

³ "Cheli" is an expression found in ancient Chinese sources of the Ming Dynasty. It stands for "Muang Rung" (or Muang Lue) the capital of Sipsong Panna.

northwestern Vietnam rejected the migration process into Yunnan's southernmost tip, where most of the Tai Lue ethnicity had established an independent kingdom during the 12th century. There may be various reasons for making for the decision of settling in northwestern Vietnam. One of them could be favorable environmental conditions for the development of irrigation for the cultivation of rice as their staple food and secure opportunities for a protected settling in inaccessible river valleys. The core area of this former kingdom nowadays forms the Tai Lue Autonomous Prefecture of Sipsong Panna. After the death of Mao Zedong and the takeover of state power in the People's Republic of China by Deng Xiaoping, the Tai Lue, from 1980 on, were able to carry out massive measures in respect of revitalizing their traditional Tai Lue culture, especially their Tai Lue language and Theravada Buddhism. These measures have been largely supported by the Theravada Buddhism Monastery Network of northern Thailand, northeastern Burma (Keng Tung) and northwestern Laos. In addition, they were granted concessions regarding their property rights, such as land ownership as well as the sale of their products due to liberalization measures of the new Chinese government. The fact is that due to geographical and political conditions, many ethnic Tai groups have been out of contact for a long time with one another. Nonetheless, even today, we are able to discover similarities of traditional practices and customs in many details. The thesis, concerning the region of origin of the Tai ethnicity, is still questioned by some well-known skeptical osteologists. In fact, it would be necessary to dig out the human remains (skulls and other bones) in areas, where, in accordance to scientific research reports, Tai groups had been dwelling or today reside again. Then it should be checked out, whether they (the bones) can speak any of the many Tai languages, because the expression Tai is associated with the fact that one is a spokesman of the Tai-Kadai language family. Unfortunately this is not possible, so that for experts, some significant questions remain open. The migration history of the Tai Ahom shows how a minority group, after years of marching for thousands of kilometers, arrived in a fertile river valley, the Brahmaputra Basin. They founded a new kingdom, which after eventually dominated most parts of northeastern India. Despite this achievement as an ethnic Tai group, the traditional Tai Ahom language, after several hundred years, faded away in favor of the Assamese language and the gradually adaptation to the prevailing religion in northeastern India: Hinduism of the Vishnu School.

Common features and religious continuity

A special feature in respect of the cultural aspects of wet rice cultivation is, like in most South, Southeast, and East Asian countries, an outstanding commonality between Tai Lue, Tai Ahom and all other Tai groups. Therefore, the vast majority of Tai groups prefer to settle in river valleys or on large plains (for example, the high plateau of Northeast Thailand - Isan), which are blessed with abundant rainfall. This ensures that there is enough water available for the ripening process of rice. Their houses are built on stilts, so that they are protected of the annually recurring flooding during the monsoon season. Today, it is believed that wet rice cultivation has been practiced northeastern Thailand for more than 2000 years. The traditional Tai culture is directly related to wet rice cultivation. Water forms the absolute key element and elixir of life of the Tai Ahom as well as of the Tai Lue. Where Tai groups predominate, the cultivation of glutinous rice is also widely practiced. It can be assumed that this rice varieties have been spread by the Tai throughout Southeast Asia and northeastern India. The wet rice cultivation of the Tai indicates a specific lifestyle and a special economy, with water being the key element. Similarly, lifestyle, weaving techniques, eating habits and construction of houses are largely identical among the Tai. It has to be emphasized that the cultural characteristics of the different Tai communities are quite homogeneous. The Tai Ahom settle on both sides of the upper Brahmaputra and the Tai Lue live in a vast valley on the banks of the Mekong. Both rivers are among the longest and most rich in water, in Asia and the whole world.

Between the two ethnic fringe groups, focused on in this article, one also can find clear parallels in the field of religions. Pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices are, in some respects, consistent down to the smallest details, concerning these two ethnic groups as well as other Tai minorities. This fact can be observed, although the Tai Ahom left their home in the border area of northeastern Burma/southwest Yunnan about 800 years ago as a subgroup of the Tai Mao, and migrated across northern Burma to Upper Assam and since then, never had any contact with the Tai Lue in southern Yunnan. With regard to the pre-Buddhist beliefs that were common before the spread of Theravada Buddhism among the Tai around the thirteenth century, the "khwan rites", communal blood sacrifices, and obsession have to be emphasized explicitly. These practices still are widely practiced by both, Tai Ahom and Tai Lue. Also, one should not forget the homogeneity between the different Tai languages. Apart from various local terminologies, hardly any differences in terms of grammar, syntax and morphology can be found. An exception, as already stated, has been created by the Tai Ahom, who after their migration to northeastern India have adopted the Assamese language. As scientists of Chiang Mai University, after

research activities in Assam argue,⁴ the Tai Ahom are no longer able to communicate in their traditional Tai language. Even their priests (Deodhai), during traditional religious ceremonies, read off the traditional Tai Ahom scripts from a text template. The Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna, on the other hand, still conduct conversations with each other in their ancient Tai Lue language. Their documents and everything else, written today uses the modified Tai Lue writing system developed by Chinese and Tai Lue scholars during the 1950s. However, in Theravada Buddhist monasteries, traditional classical Tai Lue scriptures exist that go back several centuries. These are closely related to the language of northern Thailand (Kham Muang). In larger cities of Sipsong Panna, such as Muang Rung, Mengla and Menglai, most information signs, advertising boards and other signage have a bilingual caption in Tai Lue (New) and Chinese. Very rarely, we can discover documents or posters in three languages, where the official language from Thailand has been added. The academics from Chiang Mai were able to communicate with the Tai Lue in their old traditional language in lively conversations. Interestingly, nowadays, many Tai Lue are learning the official Thai language. This could be based on the fact, that the Tai Lue are interested in this language in order to be able to engage tourists in a more sophisticated way who largely derive from Thailand, and to establish business contacts with them. These financially mostly well-off Thai people often originate from the central plains of the Chao Phraya river basin or from provinces situated even further south. Unlike the inhabitants in the northern and northeastern provinces of Thailand, they are unable to understand the Tai Lue language. Except common and cultural traditional roots between Thai and Tai Lue, as well as mutual interests in a fruitful development in both countries with different forms of government, the visitors from Thailand represent a lucrative economic factor for the profit-searching Chinese businessmen in Sipsong Panna and for the Tai Lue.

SOMPONG,⁵ who visited the Tai Ahom together with other Thai scholars in 2009, clearly emphasizes, that the smaller Tai ethnicities, who migrated from Burma to Assam during the last 100 to 200 years, still communicate in their traditional Tai language. Due to many similarities with the language of North Thailand, he was able to carry out stimulating conversations with members of the smaller Tai ethnic minorities in Assam and the bordering Northeast Indian states. Also, the Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna have been visited by him several times. He explained that the old traditional alphabet of the Tai Lue is very similar to the writing characters of Lan Na, the ancient Tai kingdom of North Thailand. He underlined, that the characters of the new Tai Lue language, which have been designed in cooperation with Tai Lue experts and the Chinese government, have been introduced during the 1950s, in order to simplify the language. He also verifies, as mentioned above, that the Tai Lue just started to learn the official Thai language. Furthermore, he declares, that the Tai Yai in the area of Southwest Yunnan/Northeast Burma, 800 years ago, represented a buffer zone between the Tai Ahom and Tai Lue. The first group, at that time still settled there as a subgroup of the Tai-Mao and formed the western neighbors of the Tai Yai. The Tai Lue, who lived on the eastern border of the Tai Yai territory, established their kingdom in the area of their current Autonomous Prefecture Sipsong Panna in South Yunnan. Also RANOO,⁶ conducted several research trips to the Tai Lue and Tai Ahom. She strongly supports SOMPONG's argumentations.

The so called Pi-Nong system⁷ is a traditional way to show respect for elderly or high ranking people. It is practiced by all ethnic Tai minorities. Younger people, especially within the family, but also throughout daily life, have to present honor for the elderly. This trait is the basis of the philosophy of life of all Tai groups. This cultural feature, which is also recognizable to foreigners in the Thai public sphere, is handled by ordinary day laborers employed in the agricultural area up to executives working in the highest circles of economics, politics, education, and military, and is consolidated by the traditional Wai⁸. Despite the influence of the globalized media on the Tai World, there is an uninterrupted, permanent continuation of Tai culture in many areas, especially in the rural provinces, by preserving traditional values, ideas, and morality in order to counterbalance the negative influences of modernism.

⁴ See footnote no. 5 and no. 6.

⁵ Interview on December 14 and 19, 2010, University of Chiang Mai.

⁶ Interview on December 16 and 19, 2010, Chiang Mai University.

⁷ "Pi" means an older brother, an older sister, an older colleague, friend, neighbor or so. The term "Nong", however, refers to a younger brother or a younger sister, colleague or other.

⁸ "Wai" means to fold the two palms in front of the upper body. The height of the hands depends on the rank of the person to be greeted.

Networks

Networks among the Tai ethnic groups of South, Southeast and East Asia for joint efforts, to revitalize their traditional culture and recognize their identity as an independent Tai ethnic minority, such as Tai Lue, Tai Ahom, Tai Yai (Shan), and others, have yet not been discovered at the institutional level. However, the smaller Tai groups, living in the northeast Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, fully stand behind the revitalization efforts of the Tai Ahom. In contrast to the Tai Ahom they still communicate with each other in their traditional Tai language, and mostly belong to Theravada Buddhism that has been established in Southeast Asia since the 13th century. They respect the numerically strong Ahom as a leader in the struggle for recognition of their identity as an autonomous ethnic minority, and a clear strengthening of their role in the Indian State. Tai groups like the Tai Lue in the Autonomous Prefecture of Sipsong Panna or the Tai Ahom in Assam, already have constructed internet platforms of considerable scale, in which they recruit members for their fight of recognition as an explicit Tai minority within their Nation State. So far, however, no cooperation among the various Tai minorities on the Internet is visible.

2. FOREIGN DOMINION, COLONIZATION, INDEPENDENCE, AND AFTERWARDS

Tai Ahom

When asked how and to what extent the Tai Ahom are integrated into the Indian state, some scholars argue, that since Britain's colonization they have become a backward social class in regards to education, social, economic and political issues (PHUKON 2010: IX; GOGOI, Sangeeta 2012: 2). They were barred from occupying higher posts in the British administration, seized either by ethnic Bengals or Assamese of the higher castes. The Tai Ahom disapproved, that leadership positions at all levels in Assam, under British rule had slipped out of their hands. They were degraded to henchmen of the Hindus. Due to this situation, they began to reorganize and articulate themselves. Prior to India's independence in 1947, the Ahom were struggling for constitutional security in terms of their explicit sociocultural Tai identity. Decades after India's independence, they still maintain their traditional identity unabated, and continue to demand an end to cultural as well as political domination by the elite of the higher castes. A considerable number of Tai Ahom organizations, such as "Ahom Sabha" (1893), "All Assam Ahom Association" (1910), "All Assam Ahom Students Federation" (1944), "Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad" (1967), "Purban Chal Tai Sahitya Sabha" (1981) and the "Tai Ahom Council" (2005), so far, fight tirelessly to ensure an appropriate establishment for ethnic minorities within the Assamese society (PHUKON 2010: X).⁹ It is undisputed that the Tai Ahom have always been a political force due to their population number and organizational skills. They were able to influence current policies in Assam, and thereby also the Indian central government in Delhi. For example, in the mid-1960s, the "Tai Historical and Culture Society of Assam" (THCSA) has been founded. Their goal was to create a public sustainable awareness for the Tai Ahom culture. Accordingly, they organized seminars, symposia and discussions in terms on the Ahom and their traditional Tai features. They also published two journals, "Lik Phan Tai" and "Tai Sanskriti", in English and Assamese language, with regard to a more effective implementation on targeted research actions of the Tai culture, especially its ancient languages. In the wake of their tireless efforts to revitalize their culture, the "All Assam Tai Students' Association" (AATSA), at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, mobilized all Ahom students, to successfully claim various issues concerning their community at the provincial government of Assam. A tremendous awareness of strengthening the Ahom identity was created in 1997-1998 on the occasion of the anniversary of the arrival of "Lord Siu Ka Pha" and his Tai Mao warriors from the Southwest Yunnan/Northeast Burma border area in upper Assam, 770 years ago. As recently after their arrival in Assam, the still common name Tai Ahom has been developed. The celebrations, called "Chao Lung Siu Ka Pha," lasting for one year, offered a comprehensive cultural program in respect of the ethnic identity of the Tai Ahom (PHUKON, Girin 2010: XIX). Due to the spin-off from Burma in 1937 and the secession of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1947, Northeast India emerged as the unique region, we still know today. These events had far-reaching consequences. So, the region of Northeast India barely was involved in the struggle for independence across India. The British-constructed mix of autonomy and neutrality in which the Tai Ahom were integrated, at that time prevented any kind of collision and protected the ethnic minorities of the mountain regions of North East India from influences from the rest of India (ABHISEK 2010: 1). However, there were also minorities who led power struggles against British expansionism and oppression, to protect their freedom and territory. It should be noted that this quest for ethnic independence took place separately from India's

⁹ The numbers in brackets indicate the year the association was founded.

freedom movement. At the end of the Second World War, as it turned out that the time of colonization by the United Kingdom was coming to an end, the minorities in Northeast India feared, that the rule of the British East India Company could be replaced by the Indian motherland. For this reason, they became politically active, and formed associations, in order to be able to constructively participate in the upcoming political process in terms of their ethnicity. Besides the two above already mentioned Ahom associations, federations such as the "Hill Leader Union"¹⁰ (1945), and the "Hills of Assam" were formed in the same year. Unfortunately, in contrast to the Ahom organizations, both dissolved after a short time.

The idea of an independent Assam called "Swadin Asom", already emerged after the annexation of Assam by the British. The subsequent peasant uprising (1857-1858), due to excessive taxes resulted in a linguistically shaped Assamese nationalism. Its central message was, that Assam had always been a free state, and the annexation to the British colony of India was carried out with the help of deception and fraud. The efforts for independence in Assam intensified massively, as the migration of refugees from East Bengal and their occupation of cultivated land increased in Assam. Due to the fact, that the Congress was unable to curb the infiltration by the newly established state of East Pakistan, an organization called "Jatiya Mahasabha", at a conference on January 1, 1948, demanded the separation of Assam from India and the declaration of an independent Assamese state. In this process, the associations of the Tai Ahom, their student unions and other Ahom organizations played a leading role that was constructive, unifying, and sustainable. Nevertheless, the efforts of the diverse groups have not been taken into account by the provincial government of Assam. The result is, that up until now violent disturbances continue to flare up unexpectedly in Northeast India, and despite efforts by the police and military to control the violence (which might even be a contributing factor), there is no end in sight. Intellectuals accused the Assamese involved with educational institutions of betraying the affairs of Assam. This argument matches the current conviction of the "United Liberation Front of Asom's (ULFA)", that the intellectuals in Assam are agents of the Indian central government in Delhi. During its early years, the ULFA sought to establish a clear trans-ethnic solidarity as a bulwark against internal colonialism from the Indian motherland. Repeatedly, the leadership of the ULFA accused the intellectuals of the Tai Ahom of acting as spies for Delhi. This general dissatisfaction was based on the loss of self-determination, internal colonization through Delhi, deprivation, as well as the simultaneous neglect of nature reserves, alienation from one's own culture caused by influence from outside, and the approval of illegal immigration. Tai Ahom associations such as the "Assam Literary Association (Asam Sahitya Sabha)", "Eastern Tai Literary Association (Ban Ok Pup Lik Muang Tai)", and others are still as ever the engines of the revitalization efforts in Assam. Up to this day, they never have lost their momentum, and still incorporate into their agendas the aspirations of self-determination for the Tai Ahom since the end of the Burmese Anglo war in 1826 (ABHISEK 2010: 3). It has to be pointed out, that after the colonization by the British, the independence of India and a quasi-colonization of Northeast India by the Indian central government, the emergence of new resistance groups among the numerous ethnicities of Northeast India lasts until today (GOGOI, Sangeeta 2012: 1). During the subsequent years, the Ahom didn't let up demanding more rights and benefits compared to the Hindu caste. The most extreme groups of the Ahom federations founded religious movements as a sign of their identification with the Tai culture, in order to be able to carry out a convert to Theravada Buddhism. They went so far as to emphasize the unity of all ethnic Mongolian minorities, to claim their own Northeast Indian state and to highlight the close ethnic relationship with the Shan states in Burma.¹¹ It should be pointed out, that the policies of the Ahom have played a vital role in Assam since the days before India's independence. They could have been absolutely significant in Assamese policy, if the Ahom community had entered into a common platform and a unified agenda. Unfortunately, all efforts ultimately ended in a fiasco. Their minority status as a Tai Ahom ethnic group was not recognized, they were disillusioned and asked all relatives and supporters of the Ahom to boycott the official celebration of the Independence Day of India, and out of protest, hoisted a black flag. This event has to be taken into account in respect of the history of the Ahom policy, after independence. Due to the block-off from socio-economic and political power they organized themselves, especially with their brothers and sisters from Burma and Thailand into a Tai community, based on their cultural identity and ethno-political kinship. It strongly needs to be emphasized, that the Tai Ahom, although they had been losing their political power, have played an effective, sustainable part in the history of Assam. The current policies of the Tai Ahom should be seen as a result of the incidents of that time.

¹⁰ Another name for this federation is "Tribes and Races Association of the Plains".

¹¹ In the state of Burma all Tai groups are summarized under the term "Shan".

Tai Lue

One has to take into account, that the revival of Theravada Buddhism for the Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna, is seen as an important point to rehabilitate social order and society in an effective way. According to DAVIS (2006: 88), the Tai pan-ethnicity in Southwest China is largely formed and maintained by the monastery network of the Theravada Buddhist ethnic minorities. The monasteries serve as schools, political centers and accommodations for traveling monks. This local temple network once encompassed several independent Tai kingdoms and principalities. Therefore we can argue, that this multi-centered, consensus-based political system is held together by a horizontal web of mobile intellectual monks. Tai Lue monks, who have been living or studying in Thailand, highly appreciate a Thai folk music genre called Lug Tung.¹² The written song texts not only tell of daily life but also political issues. The songs are performed in the Tai-Lao-Isan language of their area of origin, Northeast Thailand (Isan), which has similarities with the Tai Lue language. The monks of Sipsong Panna are enthusiastic fans of these songs, because the real life, especially those of rice farmers and simple workers in South, Southeast and East Asia is projected in them. Verses like this, have never been heard in the Chinese language by the Tai in Sipsong Panna. One monk, on his return home to Sipsong Panna, started to write songs with socio-critical texts in the Tai Lue language. Not long after that, the first rock concerts were performed in monasteries, and music tapes with Tai folk rock have been distributed all over Sipsong Panna, as well as other Tai groups in Yunnan. The organizing manager of one of those concerts announced in 1998, "We are waiting for the day, on which we will be able to catch sight of the old traditional Tai Lue fonts within a modern karaoke clip." The Autonomous Prefecture of Sipsong Panna, at the present time encompasses a total area of about 20,000 square kilometers, and their share of the total population in this prefecture amounts to 34 percent.¹³ It must be greatly appreciated that the Tai Lue, an ethnic minority, were able to maintain their traditional culture until the 21st century. In particular, they were able to keep the old Tai Lue language and pre-Buddhist beliefs. They accomplished this despite being subordinates to different empires, especially the Burmese and Chinese in the course of their long history. In addition, since the 1980s, due to clandestine actions of the monastery network of Northern Thailand, Northeast Burma, Northwest Laos and Sipsong Panna, again, they were able to carry out their, since the 13th century in this region spreading Theravada Buddhism, like they did before the 1950's.

The promotion of mass tourism has successfully been supported by the Chinese government since the 1980's in Sipsong Panna and in other provinces of China, dwelled by ethnic minorities, for the purpose of integrating and the pacifying border regions. Every year many tourists from China and abroad, are impressed by the restored and rebuilt monasteries and other tourism related attractions in Sipsong Panna. Moreover it has to be underlined, that the very latest accommodations in the capital Chiang Rung provides a comfort, which is able to compete with the luxury hotels in Bangkok. The result of these improvements are, that the Tai Lue, as far as they are involved in the tourism industry, are doing reasonably well, and the Chinese business people as well as the government-related organizations in Sipsong Panna render the decisive profit.

Sustainable Assistance and Support

Members of the Royal Thai Family, especially Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindorn, regularly travel to Northeast India, in order to visit the Tai Ahom in Assam, as well as smaller Tai groups in the adjacent Northeastern provinces like Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, in respect to instituting projects, revitalizing traditional Tai culture, and providing other support, particularly financial. The visits of the Royal Thai Family in Assam greatly contribute support and empower the unity of ethnic Tai minorities in South, Southeast and East Asia. (Royal) Guests from Thailand, like Princess Sirindorn¹⁴ who were visiting Tai ethnic minorities in Northeast India, are received with full honors of a royal majesty. Such as when she landed in that region in a Royal Thai Air Force Helicopter on February 02 and 03, 2009. One gets the impression, that

¹² Lug Tung, originally descended from Northeast Thailand (Isan), nowadays represents a popular classical Tai Isan Lao folk music in all parts of the country.

¹³ This figure is equivalent to approximately 360,000 members, so that within the Prefecture, the Tai Lue still account for the most numerous ethnic group, ahead of the Han Chinese.

¹⁴ See related videos and more news on this topic at the end of the article.

the princess pays a visit to a far remote province in Thailand.¹⁵ Also, the royal highness is often accompanied by other senior members of the royal Thai court or official representatives of the Thai government. These activities promote and preserve the commemoration of conjunct Tai roots, and strengthens relationships between the Tai ethnicities in Northeast India and Thailand. Beyond those, excursions to Tai groups in Northeast India are carried out, in respect of donations on behalf of the royal family to the local monks and their Theravada Buddhism monasteries. These presentations take place in the form of new robes, other religious utilities, gratuities, and even successful renovations of monasteries. The goal is continue the process of revitalization of the traditional culture, especially Tai languages, religious practices, and other classical rites. Moreover, the purpose of such occasions are, to foster relations between India and Thailand, by subsidizing Northeast India as a conjunctive and economic corridor between Southeast and South Asia. The visitations from Thailand as well as the continual field research of young Thai scientists, since the 1960s, have been highly regarded as catalysts of revitalization of traditional cultural relations between the Tai in South and Southeast Asia.

3. CONCLUSION

Ultimately once again it has to be accentuated, that the Tai Ahom and the Tai Lue, who live in different systems of government, did not have any personal contact for centuries. The first group within the parliamentary democracy of India and the last one in the authoritarian socialist one-party dictatorship of China. Within the state they inhabit, both ethnicities represent a social minority. They are marginalized, without access to the sea, and subsist many hundred kilometers away from the capital of the nation state, on the spatial periphery of the country. As a politically and economically marginalized minority, both live in a frontier zone, where varied natural and abundant resources are available. Actually, Tai Lue and Tai Ahom do not benefit from the marketing of the products of their homeland. The economic advantage and the profit of these products, does not take place neither in favor of the Tai Lue nor the Tai Ahom, but is extracted by the governments of the respective nation states, here India or China, or companies appointed by them. In the course of their history, due to alien domination and colonization as well as assimilation to their environment, they had to accept massive restrictions with regard to their archaic Tai culture. In recent decades this process has been halted, partially by various revitalization activities, and has led to a resurgence of traditional and religious practices, especially the Tai languages and other cultural manners. The culture of the Tai Lue in the so-called Autonomous Prefecture of Sipsong Panna, survived due to the assistance over many centuries of the monastery network of Keng Tung in northeastern Burma, northern Thailand, northwestern Laos and Sipsong Panna. It has contributed significantly to revive, maintain and improve the identity of the Tai Lue, in particular their ancient language and Theravada Buddhist practices. All these network-operations were feasible, despite the seizure of power by the Communist Party of China (CCP) in 1949, the "Great Leap Forward" in 1958, and especially the "Cultural Revolution" between 1966 and 1976. At this time most monasteries were destroyed, and many monks had to cross the border to Southeast Asian countries, in order to seek shelter in the Theravada Buddhism monastery network. Otherwise they ran the risk of being deported to conduct forced labor. Nowadays again, the Tai Lue are capable to connect onto their extraordinary traditional culture to the stand before 1949.

At the end of this article it should be emphasized, that minority groups in respect of ethnicity and history all over the world, due to colonization and foreign domination have faced similar developments and challenges like the two Tai ethnicities, focused in this paper. In particular this applies to the cultural characteristics of the language, religious practices and the traditional way of life, within their classical social and political community. The use of their indigenous languages, is often prohibited by their nation state. A violation of those proscriptions can be punished by severe inflictions. In various regions of the world, the emergence of organizations aiming at the revitalization of ancient cultures among these oppressed ethnic minorities, whose perceptions are passed down from generation to generation, has been documented. Unabated, they maintain their desire to revive their archaic habits and often try to get a public hearing in the community by violence. The policy of frequently altering governments of the affected nation states, with concessions on one hand and brutal military cleansing on the other hand, has until today for example, neither in eastern Turkey (mainly populated with ethnic Kurds), nor in northwest China (Xinjiang: predominantly inhabited by Muslim Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz), led to a mutually satisfactory solution or an end of the conflict. In fact, those policies empowered ethnic minorities in their motivation to continue to fight for rights and concessions as an independent ethnic group, and to be able to live their traditional culture. The former kingdoms of the Tai Ahom and the Tai Lue, during the 19th and 20th century, finally disappeared due to the colonization processes of Britain and China. Since then, they belong to the fringe

¹⁵ THE TELEGRAPH, Kolkata, India, February 03, 2009, www.telegraphindia.com, last access: January 06, 2016; THE HINDI, November 07, 2013, www.thehindu.com/news/national/, last access: 06.01.2016.

groups of the respective nation states, and like many other minorities in other continents, are fighting for the recognition of the rights, of their cultural identity and equality in their entitlement to work. Furthermore, they demand access to secondary schools, universities, public offices and member seats in the regional parliaments, as well as in the Assembly of the Central Government.

A solution to clarify the differences between ethnic minorities and nation states seems to be very difficult. The politicians of the countries concerned are called upon, to work together with the ethnic groups living on their territory, to develop legally binding and practicable provisions, which enable the disadvantaged groups to live their traditional, cultural peculiarities freely and without discrimination. Also should be granted and implicated by law, unrestricted access to educational institutions, state service and the labor market. However, the events in recent years show, that in many regions constructive cooperation between ethnic groups and the state is not yielding, and finally the usage of military force is considered as indispensable. This in turn, leads to armed reactions by the opposing parties, causing an endless spiral of senseless destruction. Thereby, the civilian population is harmed, and an opportunity to strive for a common approach to each is becoming increasingly problematic, leading to more and more difficulties to initiate effective peace negotiations.

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Appropriate videos and further news, suitable for this article

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqKexaLsDRM>, last access: July 12, 2018.

About 30 min. visit of Her Royal Highness Princess of Thailand Sirindorn, at Tai Phake in Namphake, Dibrugarh District, Assam. February 02, 2009.

See also: <https://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20090202/1167389.html>, last access: July 12, 2018.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsAO-Td5VQs>, last access: July 12, 2018.

About 3 min. visit of Her Royal Highness, Princess of Thailand Sirindorn, at the Tai Ahom in Patsaku, Sivasagar District, Assam. February 03, 2009.

See also: <https://www.assamtimes.org/node/2552>, last access: July 12, 2018.