

Khamti Buddhism and Culture: An Observation from a Visit to Khamti Land in Arunachal Pradesh in 2006¹

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Abstract

Shan people live in Shan State, Myanmar; Dehong, Yunnan, China; northern Thailand and also in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India. Khamti Shan in Arunachal Pradesh, India are people who migrated from the northern part of Shan State, Myanmar at least 200 years ago. Very few Thai scholars have ever been to Arunachal Pradesh. It was in March 2006 that a small group of Chulalongkorn University scholars were invited to visit Khamti land in Arunachal Pradesh.

Being inhabited among many other ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh, e.g., Singpho, Monpa, Bengali, it is then worth exploring to what extent Khamti Shan have maintained their Shanness in the context of Arunachal Pradesh in India.

This paper provides field data about Khamti Shan Buddhist practices and their way of life, experienced from my short visit to Namsai Village, Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India, in March 2006.

From many villages and temples I visited, certain aspects of Buddhist practice have been observed, e.g., similar architec-

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ture of chedi, tiered roof temples, the worship of *Uppakutta*, the *Sangkaen* festival, the Buddhist tradition of *poi lu lik* (*dana Dhamma*) in which people offer *lik* (Buddhist script) to monks for special reasons; certain *lik* for certain purposes. This paper provides names of *lik* and their occasions offered to the monk, which will help us understand how Khamti Shan make use of Buddhism in their worldly life. It is also observed that Khamti Buddhism co-exists with Hinduism and also indigenous beliefs.

Other aspects of Khamti culture were also collected. Remnants of *Chaofa's* (prince's) families and Shan *chaofa's* political system can still be traced. Khamti Shan housing style, including rice barns and weaving looms were also pictured. Certain Khamti myths, folktales, folksongs and folklife were also collected.

Overall, it is fascinating to learn that the Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh retain, to a large extent, their Shanness as if they were still in northern Shan State where they departed a long time ago.

Introduction

Shan are Tai speaking peoples, called by Thai people in Thailand “Tai Yai” (ไทใหญ่) as opposed to “Tai Noi” (ไทน้อย), which refers to Thai and Lao people. However, Shan call themselves “Tai” (ไต), “Tai Loung” or “Tai Luang” (ไตหลวง หรือ ไตหลวง).

According to old Shan Chronicles, it is said that the Shan kingdom was the oldest Tai kingdom, known as the *Mawk Khao Mao Luang* Kingdom (อาณาจักรหมอกขาวมาหลวง), dated around the 6th century.³ Later, there was another center of Shan power called the Saenwi Kingdom

³ Sompong Witthayasakphan [สมพงษ์ วิทยศักดิ์พันธุ์], *Shan History* [ประวัติศาสตร์ไทใหญ่] (กรุงเทพฯ: สกว, 2544 (2001)).

(อาณาจักรแสนหวี) covering the land of the Shan State today. In the 13th century, a certain group of Shan migrated across *Khao Pad Kai* (Pad Kai Mountain Range-เทือกเขาปาดไก่อ) to settle down on the other side of the mountain, establishing the Ahom Kingdom in the area of Assam, in India today.

In the late 18th to early 19th century, a large group of Shan, e.g., *Tai Khamti* (ไทคำตี้), *Tai Ai-Ton* (ไทอายตอน), *Tai Pha-Ke* (ไทพ่าเก), from the northern part of the Shan State migrated to live in Assam and certain Tai Khamti groups migrated to live in part of Arunachal Pradesh (อรุณาจัลประเทศ), India. All of these so-called Tais of various names are Shan people who all share common Shan culture.

Today the majority of Shan people live in the Shan State, Myanmar, but they also live in Dehong Prefecture in Yunnan, People's Republic of China, which used to be the land of *Muang Mawk Khao Mao Luang* (เมืองหมอกขาวมาหลวง) in the old days, in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India and also in northern Thailand, particularly in Maehongson province.

In May 2005, there was a conference on Tai Studies at Muang Mao, Dehong, Yunnan. The conference was held in the context of the *Pao Po* festival on which occasion the Chinese government allowed the Shan people in Shan State to cross the border at Muang Mao to meet the Chinese Shan in Dehong and Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China. There, we met Chow Na Mein, a Khamti Minister of Education of Arunachal Pradesh, who kindly invited us to visit Arunachal Pradesh. This then provided a chance for a group of Chulalongkorn university scholars⁴ to visit the Khamti land in Arunachal Pradesh in March 2006.

⁴ Professor Dr. Prakong Nimmanahaeminda, Professor Dr. Siraporn Nathalang, Associate Professor Dr. Suchitra Chongstitvatana and Associate Professor Sukanya Sujachaya, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The trip was under the care of Minister Chow Na Mein of Arunachal Pradesh with Professor Puspadhar Gogoi from Dibrugarh University, Assam as an honorary guide.

This paper is then inspired by my visit to Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India in March 2006. Hardly anyone in Thailand is familiar with the name “Arunachal Pradesh” or can tell where it is. Very few Thai scholars have ever been to Arunachal Pradesh. Dr. Boonyong Ketthet, the first Thai scholar, went to do his Ph.D fieldwork about Khamti people in Arunachal Pradesh in 1984. But ever since, no or very few Thai scholars have been there again until in March 2006.

It was then interesting to ask and worth exploring to what extent Khamti Shan have maintained their Shanness in the context of Arunachal Pradesh in India. Being inhabited among many other ethnic groups, e.g., Singpho, Monpa, Bengali, how have Khamti people tried to preserve their Shan identity and through what kind of cultural mechanism, e.g., their language, their folklore, their Buddhist practice, etc.?

This paper will provide field data about Khamti Shan Buddhism and culture collected from observation, participant observation and interviews gathered and experienced from my short visit to Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India between 22-29, March 2006.

Village Setting

To get to Arunachal Pradesh, we flew from Bangkok to Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. In Assam, there are many ethnic groups, e.g. Bengali, who are Hinduist; Tai Ahom, Tai Phake, Tai Ai-Ton who are Theravada Buddhist, etc. From Guwahati, we flew to Dibrugarh, a border town between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It took about three hours by car from Dibrugarh to approach the borderland of Arunachal Pradesh, entering Lohit district where the Khamti live.

Lohit district is situated by the Lohit River which flows into the Brahmaputra River in Assam. In Lohit district, there are 42 Khamti villages with approximately 28,000 Khamti people. The Khamti live among several other ethnic groups, e.g., Singpho, like the Khamti, are Theravada Buddhist; Monpas, Membas, Tsanglas and Khampas who are Tibetan Buddhist or Mahayana Buddhist; and Mishmis whose beliefs and rituals are indigenous in the worship of nature.



Picture 1 Khamti house and its surrounding with bamboo and other trees.

We visited about 10 Khamti villages: Namsai (น้ำทราย), Mo Mong (โมมิ่ง), Mak Mo (หมากโม), Chong Kham (จองคำ), Saen Sap (แสนสาบ), Kherem (เคเรม), Um-pong (อิมปอง), Wing-go (วิงโก), and Phanaeng (ผาแดง).

Like any other Shan or Tai villages, these Khamti villages, are settled by a small river, the water of which is used for rice growing. Each village has a temple which is used as the common ground for community religious and social gatherings. Khamti houses are made of bamboo or wood. A rice barn storing rice paddy is located nearby. A textile weaving loom is placed under the house. The living grounds are surrounded by bamboo trees, palm trees, coconut trees or mango trees and small vegetable gardens.



Picture 2 Rice barn nearby the house.

Khamti Buddhist Belief and Tradition

A week before we arrived in Arunachal Pradesh was the time for the celebration of the *Buddha Mahotsava* festival in which Arunachal people worship the relics of the Lord Buddha for their prosperity and happiness. The host of this festival takes turns from one district to another and this year it was held at Chongkham, Lohit district. Accordingly, it can be seen that the Buddhist festival is used for promoting Arunachal tourism and for harmonizing all the ethnic groups, since everyone will be present in this festival to participate in cultural shows, traditional games and sports, festival food, elephant safaris, boat safaris, music and seminars.

Architecturally, the Khamti Buddhist *chong* (จອງ-temple), *kong mu* (เจดีย์-*chedi* containing the Buddha's relics), has a similar style to other Shan *chong* and *kong mu* elsewhere, e.g., in Dehong, Shan State or in Maehongson, Thailand.



Picture 3 Kongmu at Namsai.

In Namsai Village, at the temple we observed the presence of the image of *Phra Uppakutta* sitting in a shrine surrounded by water. The Khamti call *Phra Uppakutta*, *Chao Sang Uk Puk* (เจ้าสว่างอุกปุก). Also in Um-pong Village, there is an *Uppakutta* shrine situated by the river. It was explained by the Khamti people that *Phra Uppakutta* is the God of Protection or a protective guardian. The belief in *Phra Uppakutta* and the cult of worshiping *Phra Uppakutta* as a protective guardian is widely found in Shan and Burmese popular Buddhism and also in northern Thailand and Laos.⁵

At the Kherem temple in Kherem Village, we met a *sala* (สล่าช่างแกะพระพุทธรูป), one who makes Buddha images. He showed us a very beautiful, kind and peaceful looking Buddha image. This indicates the peaceful mind of the Khamti *sala*, who must be a devout Buddhist. Also in this temple, we saw a *hang hod song* (หางหอดสง-หางรดสง),

⁵ John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).



Picture 4

Phra Uppakutta, sitting on lotus leaves in the shrine in the water.

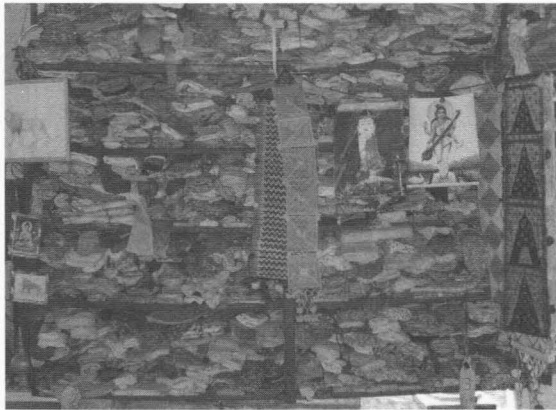
a long wooden naga shaped pipe used for pouring water over the monks in the *Sangkaen* ceremony (ปอยต้งแจ๋น/ปอยต้งแก่น/สงกรานต์/ Shan New Year ceremony).



Picture 5 *Hang hod song* used in *Sangkaen* ceremony.

The celebration of *Sangkaen* is practiced by both Khamti and Singpho in Lohit district. It is reported that in the New Year celebration, people would sprinkle clean water over the image of the Buddha to evoke his blessing for protection against evil spirits.⁶ People also pour water over the hands and feet of the monks and elderly people seeking their blessing.

An interesting Khamti Buddhist tradition that we learned about from visiting the Khamti temples is *poi lu lik* (ปอยลูลิก), the tradition of *dana dhamma* (ทานธัมม์) in which people offer the *lik* (ลิข-a literary script made of palm leaf) to the temples. Whichever temples we visited, we would see tremendous amounts of *lik* placed on top of one another in special shelves. Each *lik* is the script of certain Buddhist literature. Its first page tells who had such literature written, for what purpose and for the benefit of whom. Actually, the tradition of offering Buddhist scripts to the temple is commonly practiced by any Theravada Buddhist Tais, whether they are Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna, Tai Khoen in Chiangtung, in Shan State or Thai in northern and northeastern Thailand.



Picture 6 Shelf storing *lik* offered to the temple.

⁶ Obang Tayeng, “*Sangkaen*” *Buddha Mahotsava Chongkham 2006* (Chongkham, Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India, 2006).

What is interesting is the Khamti tradition of selecting a certain story for a certain purpose to offer the *lik* to the temple. The selected Buddhist literature, based on its content, has a correlation with the purpose of the host. For instance, if one is sick and wishes for good health, one will offer the story of *Sang pha ku* (แซงพากู) to the temple. We asked for the reason and the Khamti explained that this story has a certain part about a woman who built a toilet for the temple and it is believed that offering this story to the temple would help heal the sick person. To wish for good health, one would offer the story of *Susilakhantha* (สุศีลขันธ), since, it was explained, this story has a part about how Indra transforms somebody from an old man to a young man. The logic behind this is probably because to be younger indicates better health. Or, if one wants his children to be clever or wishes for wisdom, one would offer the story of *Chao Sang Nagasen Pa Maleng* (Milindhapanha - มิลินทปิฎก) since this story is the dialogue on dhamma issues between Nagasen Monk and King Milindha. If one wants long life, one would offer *Su Mahavara* (สุมหาวาร). If a woman cannot have a baby, she would offer the *tripitaka* by walking under an elephant.

Accordingly, what we learn here is the function of Buddhist literature in Khamti Shan social context. It indicates how Khamti Shan use Buddhist literature for worldly purposes. The tradition of *poi lu lik* can then be seen as the mode of transmission of Buddhist literature. Hence, we can see how Buddhist literature is transmitted through Buddhist ritual.

At Phadaeng Village, we saw another example of how literature is associated with ritual. The Khamti believe that Phadaeng temple has the oldest Buddhist text called *dhamma sangkhani* (ธรรมสังคณี). The Khamti believe that this Buddhist text can be opened to be read only on *Sangkaen*. On every *Sangkaen*, New Year's day, the text will be opened and the woven cloth that is used to tie around this sacred text will be changed. It is also believed that anyone who opens this text on other days will bleed. This reflects Khamti Shan folk belief, their pride of possessing and their means of protecting and preserving their more than 200 year old Buddhist text that was brought when migrating from the Shan State to Arunachal Pradesh.

Overall, we have the impression that Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh are very good Buddhists. Their way of life is closely tied with Buddhist tradition. When we went to any villages, the monks and old people would take us to the temple and show us the *lik* they had. At Wing-go Village, the abbot showed us *Lik of the Five Buddhas* (ลิขพระเจ้าห้าพระองค์). At Mo-mong Village, the monk showed us the *Lik of Vinaya pitaka* (พระวินัยปิฎก). Old people wear white blouses with proper white cloth over; this white cloth will be placed down when they pay respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangkha.



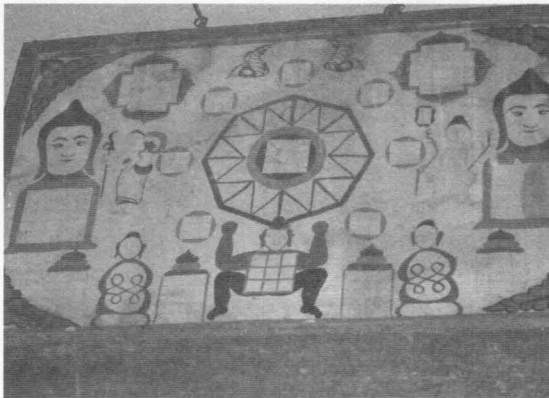
Picture 7 Old people wearing white blouse with proper white cloth over.

However, as it has been observed, wherever Buddhism reaches, it will mix with the indigenous or other religious traditions in the area. Here we also observed the co-existence between Buddhism and Hinduism, e.g., the co-presence of the pictures of the Buddha and Goddess Sarasawati in the temple at Um-Pong Village. Goddess Sarasawati is the Goddess of Liberal Arts. At the temple, we saw Goddess Sarasawati hang over the *lik* and on the left side is a picture of the Buddha.



Picture 8 The Buddha and Goddess Saraswati standing on *lik* showing the co-existence between Buddhism and Hinduism.

Also, in one of the villages we visited, there was some kind of *pha yantra* (ผ้ายันต์), called by the Khamti *Ung*, which is a magic cloth placed on the top part of the door. The pictures on the cloth reflect various figures, e.g. the Buddha and Phra Sivalee representing Buddhism; two Nagas, the frog-man; and gourd symbolizing the indigenous beliefs in Gods of Fertility.



Picture 9 Magic cloth reflecting various kinds of beliefs.

Thus, what we experienced in the Khamti land in Lohit district is the dominance of Theravada Buddhism with the co-existence and, probably in certain rituals, the syncretism with animism and Hinduism or any other indigenous beliefs. We can probably call such religious practices, “Khamti Shan Buddhism.”

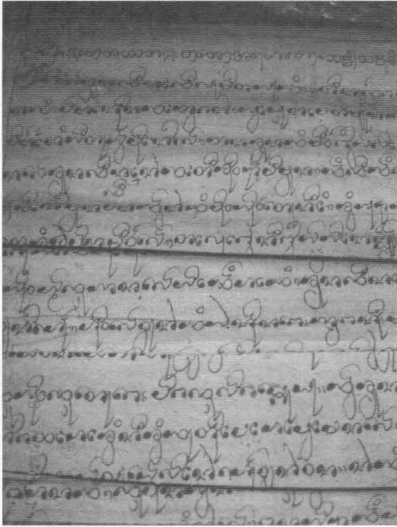
Khamti *Chaofa* Political System

Shan people have a unique political system called “*chaofa*” (ระบบเจ้าฟ้า). The word is pronounced as *chao bha* (เจ้าฟ้า) or *sao bha* in Shan. According to the myth of *Khun Lu Khun Lai*, the Shan believe that the king or people, who are at the head position of the kingdom and also the head of the town level, are *chaofa*, descendants of heaven.

Sumitr Pitipatra, et. al., reported that the Khamti in Shan State live on the land called *Khamti Luang* (คำตี้หลวง/คำตี้โหลง) in northern Shan State.⁷ *Khamti Luang* is composed of 7 muang (towns), e.g., Muang Kong (เมืองคอง), Muang Meed (เมืองมีด), Muang Yang (เมืองยาง), Muang Sua (เมืองเสื่อ). According to Khamti myth, these muangs were built by brothers who are *chaofa*. These brothers were believed to be descendants of *Chao Luang Sua Khan Fa* (เจ้าหลวงเสื่อขานฟ้า), the great king of *Mawk Khao Mao Luang* kingdom. It is also believed that people in the land of *Khamti Luang* migrated from Muang Mao and they continued their *chaofa* political system. When the Khamti migrated to Arunchal Pradesh and Assam, they divided their territory into towns, each town has a *chaofa* as its head. The position of *chaofa* is transmitted through their sons. Such is how the *chaofa* political system has persisted where ever the Shan live.

Accordingly, Shan in Shan State, Myanmar, in Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan, as well as in Arunachal Pradesh, have their political structure governed by the *chaofa* system. In Lohit district, there are *chaofa* of Um-Pong, Kherem, Mo Mong and Chongkham.

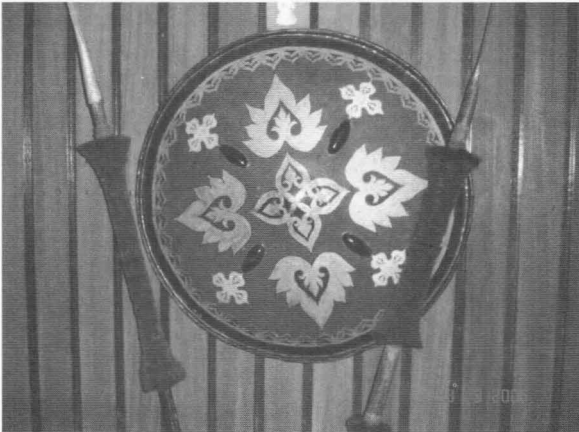
⁷ Sumitra Pitipatra et al [สุมิตร ปิติพัตร และคณะ], *Shan Communities in Northern Myanmar: Southern Shan State, Mandalay and Khamti Loung* [ชุมชนไทในพม่าตอนเหนือ: รัฐฉานตอนใต้ ภาคมีนตะเอย์และคำตี้หลวง] (กรุงเทพฯ: สถาบันไทยคดีศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์, 2545 (2002)).



Picture 10 *Lik* of Dhammasatra.



Picture 11 *Chaofa* at Um-Pong.



Picture 12 Shield and swords of *Chaofa*.

When we visited Um-Pong, we were invited to the house of the *chaofa*. He showed us his hat, sword, and the *Lik* of *Dhammasatra*—the symbols of a *chaofa* as ruler. *Chaofa* at Mo Mong showed us an old *lik* recording the history of their migration from Shan State to Arunachal Pradesh and the history of the ancestors of the 8 major clans in Arunachal Pradesh. At Chongkham, we met Chao Khamune who is the *Chaofa Luang* (เจ้าฟ้าโหลง-เจ้าฟ้าหลวง), the King of the *chaofa*, who is the oldest *chaofa*—85 years old. He has his own temple and *kong mu*.

Thus, it can be seen that, although the Khamti migrated to Arunachal Pradesh over 200 years ago, they retained their *chaofa* political system and respect the royal blood of their *chaofa*. Shan people look up to their *chaofa* with respect and believe in their *chaofa*'s royal blood.

Khamti Folklore and Folklife

Apart from the Buddhist literature mentioned above, Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh have many myths and folktales. We tried to explore the names of the myths and folktales commonly known among the Khamti and other Tai speaking peoples.

For myths, they have a creation myth, the story of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai*, about Shan ancestors who climbed the ladder from heaven to settle down on earth together with the Shan people. The story of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai* is also told among Dehong Tai in Yunnan, Tai Phake and Tai Ahom in Assam and Shan in Shan State; wherever the Shan live, they are all descendants of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai*.

In addition, the Khamti have the *myth of Sangkaen* to justify the Songkran festival similarly told among other Theravada Buddhist Tais. In Thailand, the story of Kabilaprom is told, who has seven daughters who have to take turns carrying the father's head for fear that if the father's head falls, it would cause fire. The Khamti version is similarly told since the head of Khun Sang who is the Chief God, cannot fall to the ground for the same reason; thus, his four daughters have to take turns carrying their father's head.

For folktales, the Khamti have many stories which can be categorized as folk jataka, e.g., *Along Hoi Khao* (อสงโสมทอชขาว), *Along Khao*

Hom (อะลองข้าวหอม), *Along Nu Phuek* (อะลองหนูเผือก), *Along Chang Phuek* (อะลองช้างเผือก), *Along Ngo Luang* (อะลองงัวโหลง), *Along Nok Yung* (อะลองนกยูง). In addition, the Khamti here, as well as the Shan elsewhere, have the known well legend of *Upam Samlo* (อุปม สามลอ), the story of the tragic triangle love between one woman and two men ending with the death of all the leading characters.

While sitting and talking in the village one day, we began to ask the Khamti about their folksongs. They told us about songs accompanying rituals, such as “*Ey Sangkaen*” (เอี้ยสังแก่น), which people sing during the New Year celebration. Also, there are songs sung while weaving new robes for monks for *poi kathin*. They said that the song is about the wish to finish weaving the robe in one day and night in order to be offered to the monks in the *Kathin* ceremony.

When we asked about a Khamti favorite song that every Khamti would know and sing, they sang a song which touched us deeply. Here is the song:

แสนโหลงนำ เมืองเขาไต ไวสาลี พาราภิรมย์ จงกั๊ยยัง ดาราภิรมย์ เมืองเขาไต....

which can be translated as follows:

Our Muang Tai, Waisali, is beautiful. In our Muang Tai, there are always monks, temples and dhamma, our good muang Tai.....

The song impressively reflects the pride of being in a Buddhist Land. Although the Khamti are far away from their motherland, the Shan State, what is left in their mind is their memory and their ongoing Theravada Buddhist practice in their normal daily life. My impression is that, living among other ethnic groups, the Khamti Shan express their identity through their being good Buddhist, as if they want to say, “*To be Khamti is to be Buddhist.*”

Concerning “being Shan,” there was another interesting thing that we learned from the field. One of the Khamti showed us DVDs of a Thai television drama dubbed in the Shan language. We were told that popular drama series on Thai television are made into DVDs dubbed in Shan. These DVDs are widely sold in the Shan land in Shan State and also cross the border to be sold in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Interestingly this indicates the association between being Shan with being Thai. Although this is not quite a “pan Tai movement”, it reflects the identity of Shanness with Thainess through Thai dramas being exported to the Shanland. Thus, whether the Shan are in Myanmar or India, it can be observed that their ethnic consciousness is related to “Tai” or “Thai” rather than with the countries they are inhabiting.

Concluding Remarks

It can now be seen that the Khamti, living far away in a land that not many people will ever be able to go, among many other ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh, impressively maintain and preserve their Shan ethnic identity, e.g., being Theravada Buddhist, continuing their *chaofa* political system, growing rice as any other Tai groups as their main subsistence, speaking Tai languages. It is also fascinating to learn that wherever the Shan live, in Shan State, in Dehong, or in Arunachal Pradesh, they share, to a large extent, Shan culture with their *phi-nong* Shan.

Shan in Thailand today may have already been assimilated into Thai culture. But from what I myself have witnessed, I must say that Khamti Shan in Arunachal Pradesh, since they live in quite a remote area, seem to retain their Shanness as if they were still in the northern Shan State from where they departed a long time ago.

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