



A
Visual Ethnography on
**Tai Phake Tribe in
Namphake village,
Assam**

Interaction Design Special Project

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Declaration

We declare that this written document represents our ideas in our own words and where other's ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea /data /fact /source in my submission.

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Approval Sheet

This Interaction Design project entitled “Visual Ethnography project on the ‘Tai Phake’ Tribe in Namphake village, Assam” by Indrajeet Roy (146330012) and Prasad Ghone (146330010), approves in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Master of Design Degree in Interaction Design.

Nina Sabnani
Project Guide

Date : 18/02/2016

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Indrajeet Roy
&
Prasad Ghone
February 2016



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Abstract

Tai Phake is a very less known tribe from Assam with a handful population of around 2000 globally. They have a glorious culture and tradition. Being such a small in number, the tribe is trying hard to keep their legacy and rich culture alive. They reside in small villages in Dibrugarh district with a major population staying in Namphake village in Dibrugarh. The village has 100 percent literacy and till date there is not a single police complaint fired in the village, is what we got to know from our secondary research of the place. Tai Phakes is keeping alive their glorious tradition by still living in their traditional houses, dressing in their traditional attire and also by the food they eat every day.

These insights from all the secondary research developed the curiosity among us to know more about the tribe. The project aimed to explore the history, culture, tradition and current status of Tai Phakes. The project gave us an opportunity to observe closely and live the life of Tai Phakes. All the information gathered by interviews, looking at artefacts, observations and insights are described in the report.

Why Tai Phake

Tai phake is lesser known community staying in Namphake village in Assam. They are a population less than 2000 all over the world. The total families in the village are over 72. In spite of being such a small number they have preserved their cultures and tradition. Lot of kids from the tribe are getting educated and settling down in various cities. It is speculated that this rich culture of the tribe will go extinct within 50 years. It is important to know the tradition and culture of such a culturally rich tribe. It is very strange to see how this small community of people are struggling to preserve their culture.



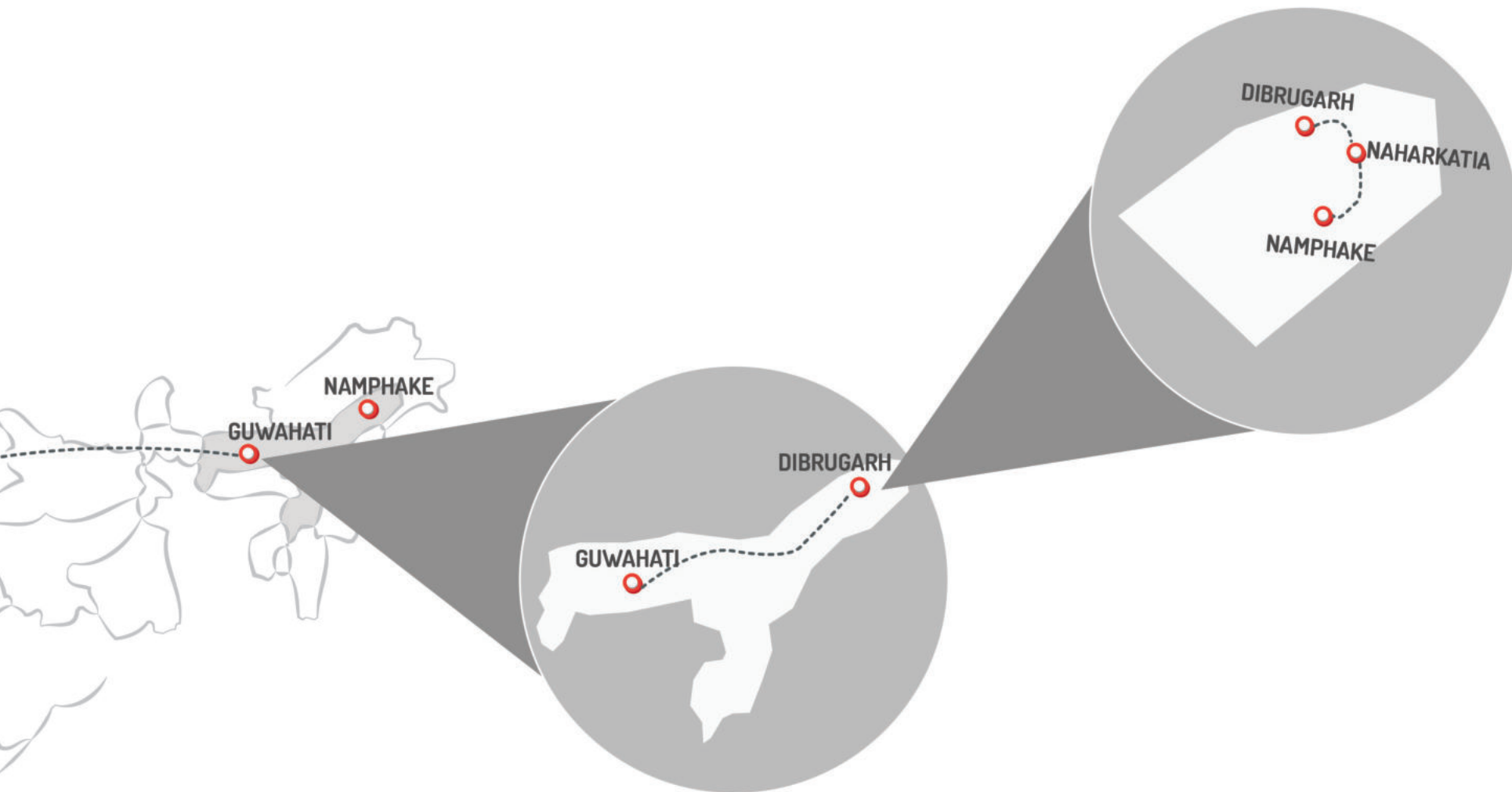


How to reach Namphake

Namphake is a small village in Dibrugarh district near Naharkatia in Assam. We went to Guwahati, Assam from Mumbai. There we contacted Mrs. Shikha Roy, who got us connected to a person named Mr. Arunjoyoti Baruah in Namphake. We took a train to Dibrugarh from Namphake. Dibrugarh is around 450 kilometers from Guwahati. We took a train Dibrugarh station to Duliajan oil town Railway station, which is around 50 kilometers. It takes one hour to reach Duliajan oil town from Dibrugarh. From Duliajan oil town we took a shared cab to Naharkatia town. Naharkatia town is around 15 kilometers from Duliajan oil town. Naharkatia is the

nearest small town from Namphake. Namphake is around 15 kilometers from Naharkatia. We took a bike rickshaw to Namphake. After reaching Namphake, we met Mr. Jyoti Prasad Konwar, who introduced us to Monks in the Buddhist Monastery in Namphake. Monks helped us connect to the tribe. Monks introduced us to few important people in the tribe. These people then helped us to talk to more people from Tai Phake.





History

Tai Phakes migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and then Pat Kai Hills and then entered Assam in 1775 and then settled in Brahmaputra valley.

In one of the chronicle it was written that, “There was a water stream in the kingdom. The stream water owed by the foot hills and dashed against a big rock wall. This made a cave like thing in the wall. Cattle used to come to this place to graze and this place had enough rainfall. Because of ample rainfall, people living here started cultivating in this land. Because of this big rock wall, people living there were called Phake people. In Tai language, ‘Phaa’ means big rock wall and ‘Ke’ means old or ancient.





Story of the Burmese army

After entering Assam, Tai Phakes resided in Nen tao which is presently in Arunachal Pradesh. While staying there they came in contact with Khamtis which also belongs to Tai race. Phakes and the Khamtis then revolted against the Ahom king. After that the Phakes settled down at various place on the bank of river Desoi. In 1886, when Burmese came to invade Assam, the Tai army officials saw Tai phakes . Burmese army officials asked them to return back to their ancestral home. Tai Phakes left banks of Desoi and went with Burmese army officials. On reaching Namchik, rainy season started, therefore Phakes, with their family and children found difficult to travel through the terrain of Hills. The Burmese army officials asked them to continue their journey after the rainy season. Later, the British took over Assam and the mission of going back to ancestral home did not happen.



Map of Namphake

Namphake village is around 15kms from Naharkatia town. Village is situated far inside from the main road. Once you take a left from the main road, first you cross the rice fields on both sides of the road. This is a narrow unpaved road which leads to main village. These rice fields are owned by the villagers of Namphake. Everyone owns a small piece of land for rice cultivation. Few Tai Phake houses are located just after the rice fields on both sides of the road. After that you encounter a monastery and the school of Tai Phakes. The villagers stay on both sides of the buridihing river bank.





Buddhist Monastery

The Buddhist Monastery is an inseparable part of Tai Phakes living in Nam Phake village. It was established in 1850. The day of every Tai Phake family starts with the offering made to Monastery. All the festivals Tai Phakes celebrate, are all around Monastery and the rituals are performed in the Monastery. The Monastery is situated right in the middle of the settlement. Once you enter the village, after crossing the fields, Buddhist Monastery is the first thing that you encounter.

There are in all 11 monks living in the monastery. These include junior and senior monks. Head priest is called 'vante'. Tai phakes are deeply connected to the Monastery. People provide food and clothing to monks. There is a ritual, every male member of the Tai phake family becomes a monk one day. He can remain monk for only that day or any number of days, depending on individual's choice.

Events in Monastery

Typical day of a woman in a Namphake family starts at around 4 a.m. The woman prepares the food for the entire day in the morning. The steamed rice is cooked in the traditional form and stored in banana leaves which can be consumed the entire day. The rest share of food is given to the monastery by every family in the village. Junior monk accepts these food offerings. The offering consists of a share of rice and a bowl of curry. Once all the offering is collected, a part of it is offered to Lord Buddha. After the offering to Buddha, one of the Monk rings the bell in the monastery. This bell can be heard by every house in the village. All families have food only after the bell is rung.



A villager with a food offering to monastery



Offerings are collected one by one



The monk emptying the offered food



Monk returns the basket to the villager



Post offering, villagers sit in the monastery and pray



All the food offering collected from villagers



An offering created by one of the monk for the Lord Buddha



Monk offering the food to Lord Buddha. A vessel of water with red leaves in it is also offered to Lord Buddha along with the food offering



Monk praying after he offers the food



The picture depicting the offerings made to Lord Buddha



Monk ringing a bell to let the villagers know that the food has been offered to Buddha and now they can also start having food.









The Chaan ghars

Tai Phake live in beautiful houses. Their houses are airy and comfortable. They have a manuscript called phe het hen which they specially use while constructing a house. They also consult a known person who will help them find a naag (the first pole) position which is called sau phi nam and an auspicious day to start the work.



Tai Phakes live in a special kind of houses known as 'stilt houses'. Tai Phakes call it 'Chaan ghar'. These houses are traditionally built with Bamboo and wood. The flooring and the walls of the house is generally made with bamboo strips and the house is roofed with takau leaves. These bamboo strip makes noise when you walk on it. They are now used to these sounds. While interviewing, one of the family member teasingly said these sounds let us know if any a thief tries to enter house in the night with a purpose of stealing.

The houses of Tai Phakes are generally faced North or South and the Tai Phakes sleep with their heads towards the east. A complete Tai Phake chaan ghar consists of Hoklai (ladder), Tup kan no (Sitting or

drawing room), Haun naun (sleeping room), Tup hong (rear room), Tau tin (corridor), Hen on (dinning and kitchen), Tup caan (front room of the kitchen), caan (front open porch), caan haun (rear open porch).

In early days, Namphake was surrounded by Jungle. So there was always a fear of wild animal entering the residential premises. This is the reason, Tai Phakes used to build houses at a height. Also, the villagers are settled on the bank of river. So, during calamities like flood, these houses used to protect them from flood. These were the reasons why Tai Phakes had stilt houses traditionally. Whereas, now there is no more fear of wild animals, but still they prefer to stay in Stilt houses to keep their tradition alive.

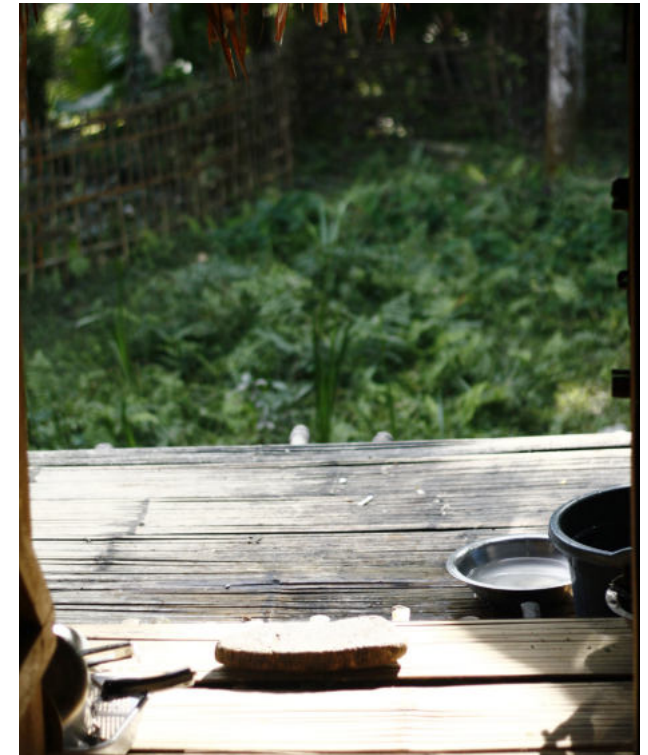




This is the place in a Tai Phake house which is used to store rice. All the rice is stored in this space after harvesting.



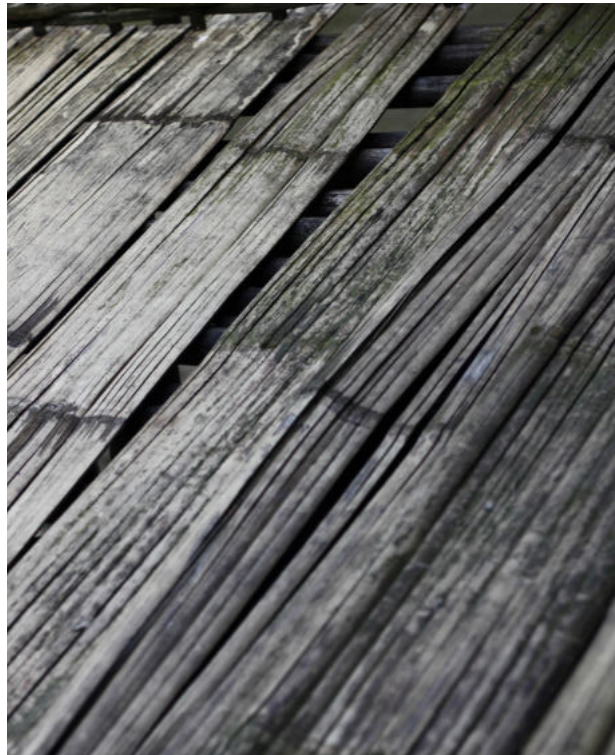
This room made of bamboo, wood and leaves is used by Tai Phakes for animals. They generally keep their pigs and hens here.



It is the back open area of the kitchen. It is called Caan houn. Women generally sit here to cut vegetables, fish, etc. Washing activities are also carried here, so that the water can be immediately thrown away.



This is the main pillar of the house. It is called Sau phii nam. It is considered as the main pole of the house and the name of the ancestors is written on it. It is oblation to the ancestors.



This is the flooring of a chaan ghar. It is made of bamboo. It keeps the room cool in summers.

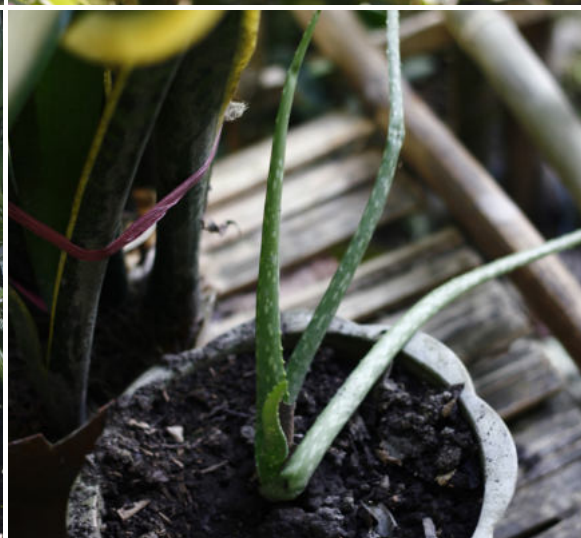


Every chaan ghar has a ladder to go the house. It is called Hok lai. It should be from east to west. It has odd number of steps and even number of steps are considered inauspicious.





Hen on is the kitchen of Tai Phakes. It should be towards the west of the house. It consists of a hearth which is placed in the rear side of the kitchen. The hearth is made of mud. In the kitchen, the cooker sits facing the east and there is a provision to sit around. This provision is important as in winters family members sit around the fire for comfort. Above the hearth, there is a bamboo platform which they use to keep their handcrafted bamboo utensils. All their bamboo utensils are turned black because of smoke. They say, the smoke from the hearth makes their bamboo utensils last longer. Their kitchen consists of very basic and minimal cooking items and utensils.





The vegetable garden

Tai Phakes grow the vegetables they use for cooking. All the vegetables are grown in the rear space of house. Typically, they get down from the chaan ghar and pluck leaves and herbs from their garden. Then they boil the leaves plucked and cook them with minimum or no use of oil and spices. The use of spice is very less in Tai Phakes. They have a weekly market in Naharkatia where they buy spices. The villager said, these vegetables and herbs also acts as medicine and immunes them from diseases.







Clothing

The Tai phakes have a special clothing style. The clothing of Tai Phakes are colorful and are very different from other tribes. All the dresses are woven by the tribe itself. Every family have their own loom looms. The colors play an important role in Tai Phakes. Colors depict the age of women in Tai Phakes. Younger girls wear clothes with lighter tone and the colors become darker as the age progresses. Marital status of a women is also depicted through her attire. The skirts and wrap arounds of girls are the elements of Tai Phake attire. Men wrap a chequered piece of cloth with vibrant colors around their waist.



Before making these colourful dresses, Tai Phakes prepares the colourful dyes by themselves. These dyes are made using various roots, barks, stems and leaves of trees. These are grown in their own gardens. After collecting these ingredients from the garden, they are first chopped. After chopping, they are boiled in water. After boiling, the colour is obtained and the thread can now be dyed. Once, the thread is dipped in this hot boiling water with colour ingredients, it is stirred. After removing the thread from the water, it is dried and it looks like the image shown. Tai Phakes have a traditional method of weaving. They do it in a dry weather and in the paths of their houses. All the women staying around cooperate in this operation. They weave lungis for men. Mikhila and pha phoo for women. All the Tai Phake women are specialist in weaving. Every day, after completing their daily





activities, they start weaving. The handloom is mostly on the platform of chaan ghar or below it. One of the important characteristic of Tai Phake culture is the colour of clothing and age relation. Ladies above the age of 50 are seen wearing deep green and deep purple. Men of the age group of above 50 wear Pure white phaa and saa. The design and colours vary according to the age. The younger the age, more the use of bright colours. The married women wear coloured naang wat and sidd till about the age of 45. Usually the Nang wats are yellow, purple, green and red in colour. Newly married women wear even more colourful dresses. Tai Phake people wear their traditional clothes at home as well as in social gatherings. Their traditional attire speaks about their pride and culture.



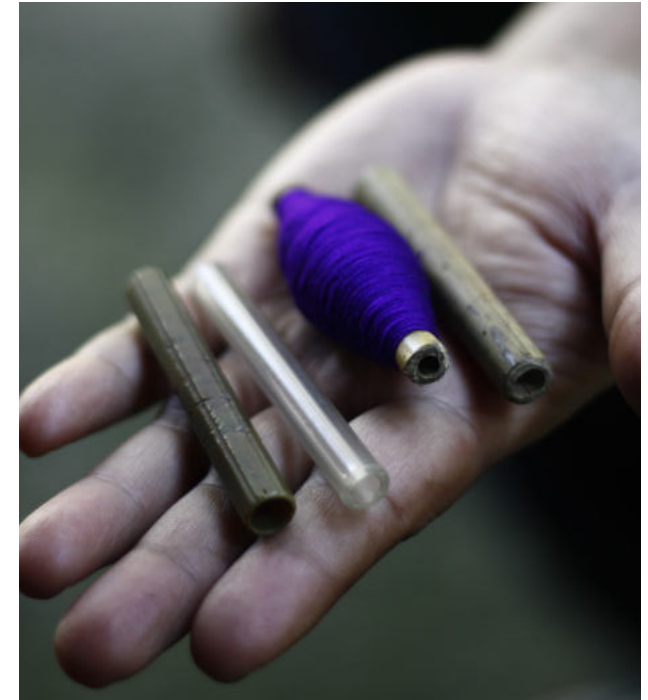




Porcupine spokes used by the Tai Phakes in the cloth making process.



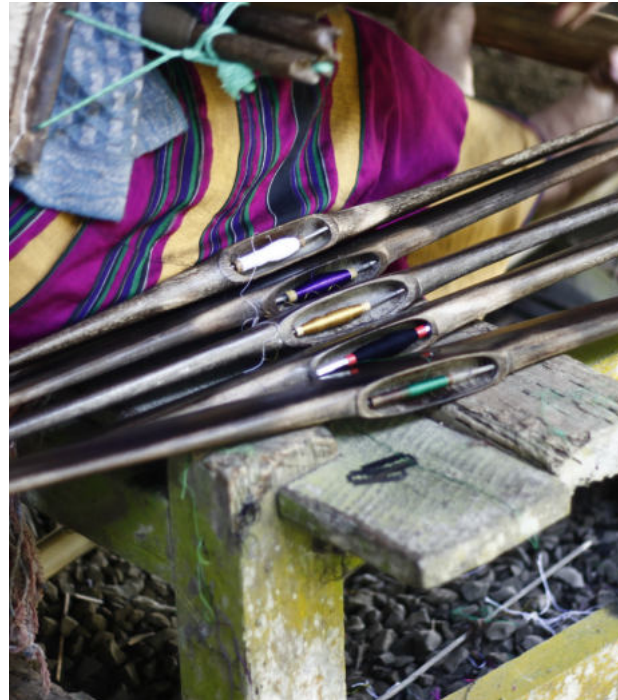
The strap used by the Ladies everyday while weaving. They sit to weave for several hours every day. This strap helps them keep their back straight and avoid pain. This strap was 92 years old.



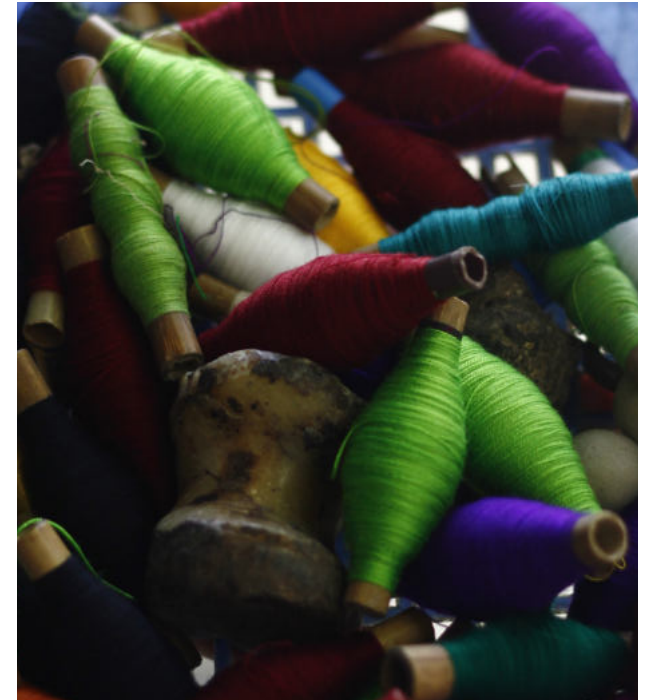
The bobbins used for the cloth making process are made by Tai Phakes themselves. They are generally made of special kind of bamboo. Nowadays, it is difficult to find these special bamboo, so Tai Phakes have replaced these bamboo with other substitutes



A device created by Tai Phakes made of bamboo and wood which they use to keep threads separated in weaving process.



This is the shuttle which Tai Phakes use in their cloth making process. They make these shuttles themselves from wood.



The colorful threads made by Tai Phakes. The color dyes used for these threads are also made by themselves.





A newly made shin by one of the Tai Phake family.



Phaa ho

The head turban

Naang wat

A cloth wrapped during festivals or important occasions

Phaak phaa

Cover to hold the dau(knife) which is used for safety and agricultural purpose

Shin

The skirt like stripe cloth wrap from the waist up to ankle

Phaa phek

Scarve used while going for congregational prayer or any other festive occasion





Phaa ho

The head turban

Sai shin

It gridles around the waist for tightening the pha shin

Shin

The skirt like stripe cloth wrap from the waist up to ankle. The color of these *shins* signifies the age of Tai Phake women



Tai Phake women during a family occasion. All the Tai Phakes come together for everyone's family function.



A young Tai phake group with their traditional attire on a festival. We can see the youngsters also dress the same way the elders of the family dress.



One of the villager took us to his place and showed us all the Tai Phake clothes. The extreme left is the lungi which Tai Phake men wear generally. The middle image is of Shin which Tai Phake women wear daily and the right image is of the Sai shin which women wear around their waist. The villager also showed few more images for the clothes Tai Phakes wear mentioned in the earlier pages.

Ornaments

The ornaments wore by the Tai Phakes are the example of Traditional Tai Phake culture. These ornaments are made of gold, silver and bronze.



Mai khat ho is the ornament they wore in the past



The chain which they wear around their neck is known as Poi kong pung.



The earrings they wear are called Kaan hung and ting hun paas



All these ornaments are part of their culture. Every family regard these ornaments as their national property and preserve these very carefully.

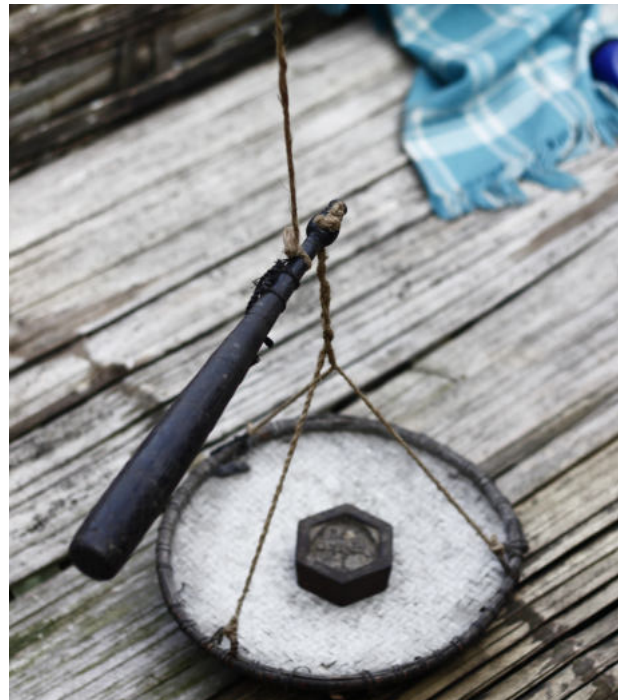


Handicrafts

Tai Phakes are known for their richness in handicrafts. Every article that they used is locally made at their home by either bamboo or wood. Utensils used to collect herbs and vegetables. Utensils used for prayers are all made by themselves.



This pot is called Pup shel kau. It is generally used to serve food to the aged one.



This is one of the unique weighing machine Tai Phakes used. The specialty of the weighing machine is that you don't need a counter weight to weigh. The weighing machine itself acts as a counter weight. 1kg, 1/2 kg and 1/4 th of a kg can be weighed by this weighing machine



This is a multipurpose bamboo utensil. These Tai Phakes use in their everyday kitchen activities as well as for collecting vegetables from their garden.



The special kind of pot which is used to serve to the monks is called as Psa shung shung.



This is the bamboo container Tai Phakes use to serve Paan. Serving a paan to guests is a general greeting practice they follow.



The knife cases are called phaak mit aun and the dau cases are called Phaak phaa.





Food of Tai Phake

Rice is the staple food of Tai phakes. The rice that they eat is grown by themselves in their fields. The rice is steam cooked and is sticky. The rice is made in morning and is stored in banana leaves. Along with rice they eat boiled vegetables. These vegetables are made without oil. These vegetables are grown in the front yard of houses of Tai Phakes. Tai Phakes also eat sh and meat. Fish and meat is generally grilled.





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The sticky rice which they eat is made with a special technique. This traditional method of cooking rice is called Tang hou he. The rice is made in double decked pots. The lower pot contains water which is set on fire. The upper pot contains rice. Hot water is added at regular intervals to this rice in the upper pot. This method of preparing rice makes it sticky. When the rice is cooked, it is spread on a bamboo plate called della and then cooled. This rice is made in morning by the ladies of Tai Phake family. Then small portions of rice are made and are stored in banana leaves, known as Kopat. These small portions of rice is called as Hou hu.



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Paasa is a traditional Tai Phake delicacy and is made on special occasions. This is a curry of fish and other ingredients. This delicacy can be made with variety of fishes but generally Large Varaje is preferred for the dish. To make this dish, leaves of orean are collected from the gardens of Tai Phakes. The main ingredients of this dish are Fish, orean leaves and spices. To make this delicacy, first various herbs and spices are collected. Fish is then cut in slits with knife, this ensures proper cooking of fish. The fish is then grilled on direct fire. Orian leaves are then chopped in a mortel. Once the fish is cooked, fish meat and bones are separated. The fish is then chopped finely. The chopped orean leaves are then dipped in hot water, the juice of orean leaves is then induced in this water. Spices are added to the chopped fish and then blended properly. The water and the orean leaves are then separated and this water is added to the chopped fish. This is then thoroughly blended. This paasa soup formed without cooking on fire is now ready to serve.



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Paisoo is another traditional and beloved delicacy of Tai Phakes. This is made on very auspicious moments and occasions like wedding or naming ceremony of a child. It takes about a week to make this delicacy. Fish needs to be preserved in a very special way for a week to make this dish. To make this dish special kind of baskets are woven, by the men of Tai Phake family. Various ingredients are weighed for the correct proportions of ingredients. The mixed ingredients are then stuffed in the banana leaves and which are stuffed in the special baskets made for the dish. This is then covered with leaves and then tied tightly in the basket. These baskets are left undisturbed for a week. After the week, Paisoo is ready to cook. It is then either fried or boiled in water.



4



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Khaau putt peetha is the traditionally made sweet item of the Tai Phakes. This sweet is made from sticky rice and sesame. The rice is first cooked in the traditional way of Tai Phakes and then sesame is added to rice. After that, small round shaped patties called peethas of the mixture is made.



Ping hou khar is another traditionally prepared sweet food item of the Tai Phakes. This is also a type of peetha. To make this sweet, powdered rice and muasis are mixed with small proportion of water. Then it is wrapped in Kopat leaves in a special manner and steam cooked like sticky rice. Once cooked, these small packets is unwrapped and are ready to serve.









Agriculture

The main occupation of Tai Phakes is cultivation. They cultivate rice twice a year. The rice they grow is the special sticky rice. Villager said, earlier they use to cultivate other crops too. But the growing number of monkeys and the destruction they cause has made them cease other farming and now they only grow rice. Even in rice, they need to take special care in farms and in the rooms created to store rice from monkeys. Villager explained, how monkeys has been a serious source of worry for them these days. He also explained how his family members take turns to stay at home and save crop from monkey attacks.



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THE CONSONANTS

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THE CONSONANTS

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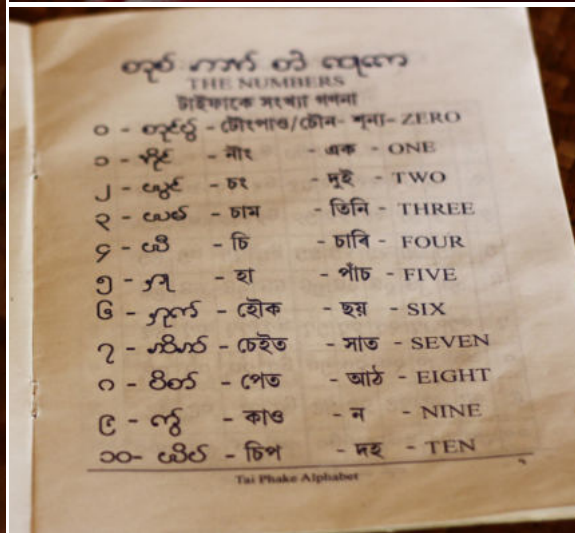
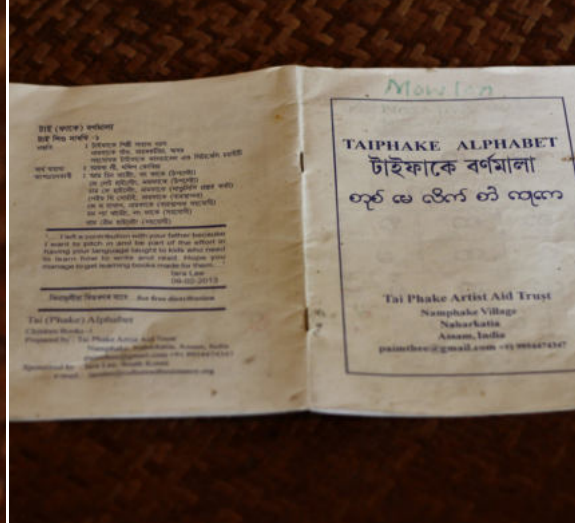
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Language

Tai phake language is the language in which Tai Phakes speak among themselves. They speak in their own distinctive dialect among them and in Assamese with outsiders. They have their own script. There are 17 consonants and 10 vowels in Tai phake language. The script is shown in the picture [reference]. There are hundreds of volumes of manuscripts preserved in the monastery and at home. Mostly the manuscripts are stored in the stupa shown in the picture [reference] of monastery. Tai Phake is a tonal language and is to read melodiously. The manuscripts of the Tai Phakes talk about Principles of Buddha, Jataka tales, codes of monks, Mahabharata, novels, history, folk tales, Herbal medicines, etc. Few words in Tai Phake language have multiple meanings. For example, there is one word which has 32 different meanings.



Manuscripts

Tai Phakes have old historical manuscripts which are written in Tai language. The two important manuscripts are called 'lik chum khe men' and 'lik chum khe khun'. These manuscripts talk about their king and their country. It also talks about creation of living beings, Earth, calamities, etc. The rich culture and legacy of Tai Phakes are reflected in these manuscripts.

The manuscripts also talk about Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata written in Tai Phake language. Few scriptures are as old as 200 years. Few of the scriptures have inscriptions of Burmese language along with Tai phake language. Because of this, these scriptures are unread, as no one now knows how to read these languages. As these scriptures are this old, they are getting degraded. Currently, archaeological department of government of India is trying to preserve these manuscripts by chemical processes. But this process is still in the proposal phase.



Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely Burmese, on aged paper. The text is arranged in several lines, with some characters appearing to be part of a list or a series of related terms. The paper shows signs of wear and discoloration.

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely Burmese, on aged paper. The text is arranged in several lines, with some characters appearing to be part of a list or a series of related terms. The paper shows signs of wear and discoloration.




Handwritten text on a small label inside the garment, possibly indicating a brand or size.

Handwritten text on a central label, likely identifying the item or its origin.

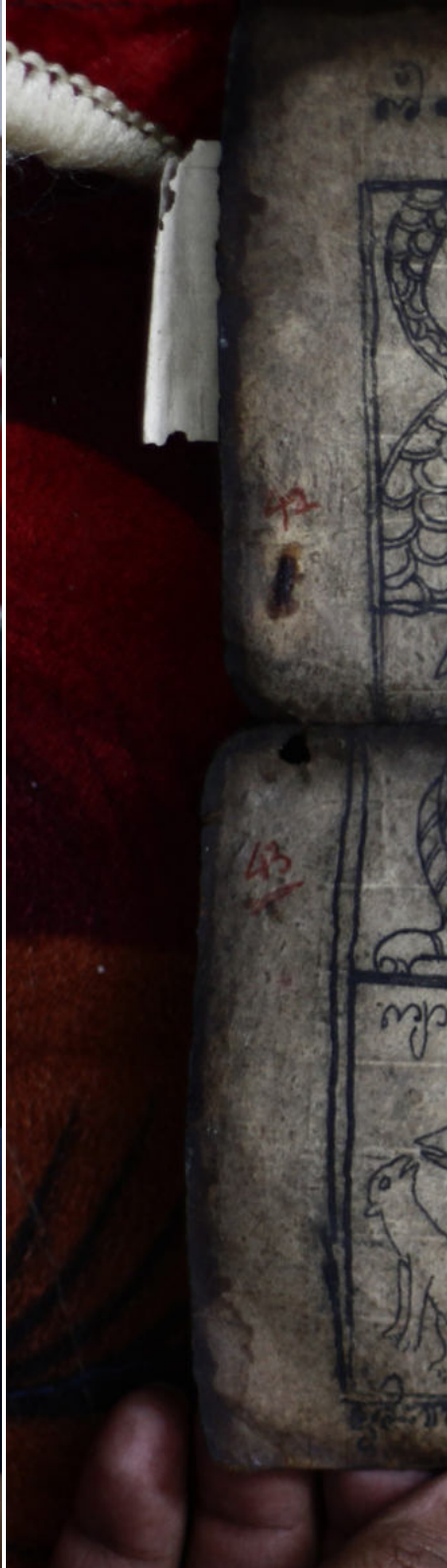
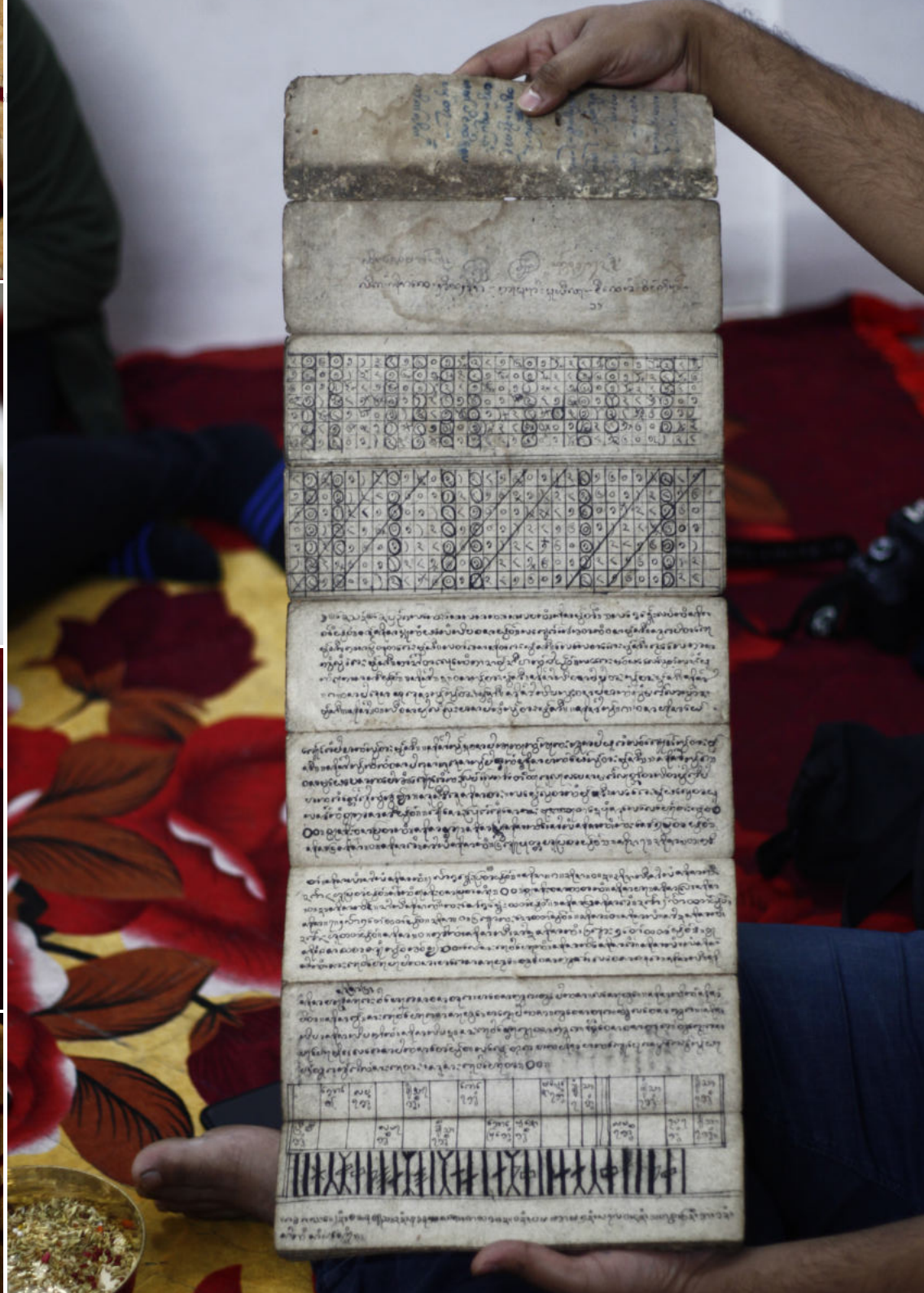


Tai phakes have a old historical manuscripts which are written in Tai language. We went to meet the school teacher of the school of Tai Phakes, she had various old manuscripts. These manuscripts are more than 150 years old. The manuscripts are written on handmade papers created by phakials themselves. Manuscripts are very carefully preserved by the Tai Phake families. The packages are beautifully created by the Phakials. They are wrapped around with a beautiful piece of cloth and then buttoned to keep the package tight. This shows their affection towards their language and legacy.



Manuscripts of Tai language talk about lot of things in human history, creation and destruction. These are few pictures from the manuscript depicting hell. These beautiful illustrations describing the punishments in hell to your bad deeds are drawn by the ancestors of the Phakials.







The age of these manuscript can be seen from the top left images. Few manuscripts destroyed because of the fire which was a very common earlier. The long chart is known as (Horoscope) of a person written in Tai language. This is made immediately after the birth of a new child. The last image contains set of illustration which stand for different signs of Tai Phakes.

The age of these manuscripts can be seen from the top left images. Few manuscripts got destroyed because of the floods which was a very common earlier. The long chart is kundli (Horoscope) of a person written in Tai language. This is made immediately after the birth of a new child. The last image contains set of illustrations which stand for different zodiac signs of Tai Phakes.

Calendar of Tai Phake

Tai Phakes follow a different calendar. They follow the Tai calendar. Independent on the western calendars, in their calendar they have eight working days and after that there are two holidays. All the Tai Phakes follow this calendar. They work in fields for these eight days and then the next two days they take rest and do household things. We observed few villagers marking Tai calendar holidays on a western calendar.

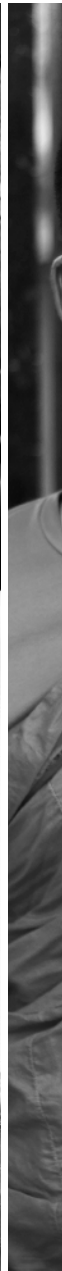
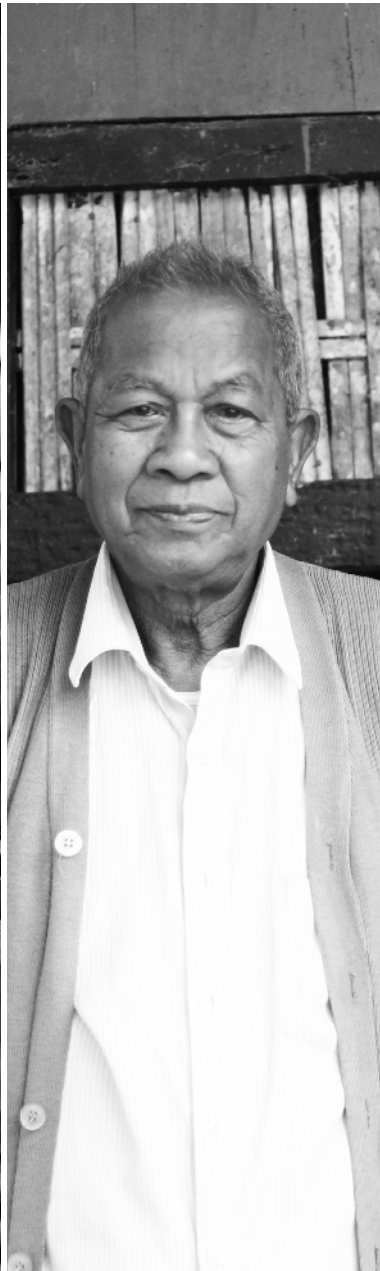


Music & Dance

The traditional songs of Tai Phakes are very melodious and these songs praise nature and its beauties. Most of the songs are folk songs. A song called 'ballad' is sung when a person dies by his/her relatives. In festivals, Tai phakes play their traditional musical instruments. The drum is called as 'Kong' which is used a lot for rhythm. Also, 'Mong' which is a cymbal, 'Yam lowng' which is a bigger cymbal, 'Mar phang' which is a at cymbal and 'Toro' which is harp, are used.

Tai Phakes' tradition has beautiful dance forms. They dance during their festivals and other get together. 'kaa chong', 'kaa won', 'kaa pan', 'kaa kong', etc. are the names of few dances of Tai Phakes.







The Name Game

The name to the new member of a family is given on a special day. The ceremony in which child is given name is called 'au lowng nu naai'. Close relatives, old women are invited in the ceremony. The name is decided by the parents of the child. The name of the Tai Phakes is a combination of three words. The first word is the pre fixed name. This word is according to the Birth order. This name is based on the order of the birth of the child. It also takes into account the gender of the child. The second word is the actual name of the child. This is the name by which the child is referred in society and the last name is the surname or the family name.

The prefix for male and female child are as follows

Male :	Female:
First: Ai	First: Ye
Second: Ngi	Second: Ee
Third: Saam	Third: Aam
Fourth: Sai	Fourth: Ay
Fifth: Ngow	Fifth: Ok
Sixth: Nuk	Sixth: Eit
Seventh: Nak	Seventh: Aat



Festivals of Tai Phakes

The Tai Phakes celebrate festivals like Sang ken, Kham Sang, Mai ko sum fai, Pet moun si hein, Poy pa te sa and Simithong. The festivals bring together the Tai Phake villagers. All the festivals are celebrated by people coming together and participating in the programs. Festivals are surrounded around Buddhism and involves monastery for performing rituals of the festival.





Sang Ken (Water splashing festival)

It is the main festival of the Tai Phakes. It is held on 13th, 14th and 15th of April, every year. On the day of the festival every member of the Tai Phake family gather at the monastery and chant prayers for the whole day. The women spread sadoos all along the path and the men transfer the statues one by one at the kamphra. While this is done, women standing all along the line sprinkle akhoi on the statues. The statues are kept at the kyamphra for 52 hours. During the time of Sang ken, the Tai Phake women get up early at dawn to make all the preparations for the prayers, before the lord Buddha's statues are kept at the kyamphra. A small packet of rice is prepared and kept in horoui (a small handcrafted basket). This is presented to the Lord Buddha by every member of family along with flowers. Water to bath the lord is brought from the nearby river by all the Tai Phakes. All the members of family come for this festival in their traditional dresses. The Tai Phakes collect water from the river and splash it on the statues of Buddha. Along with the bathing of Lord Buddha, Tai Phakes also bath their religious leaders. One

time of the day is decided and the villagers call the monks at a public space and pour water on monks one by one. One of the villager then wipes off the water of monks. Later, the monks give discourses on Buddhist philosophies. During evenings, the villagers pray at kyanphra by lighting candles, burning incense sticks and offering flowers. This tradition is called luu suu mi. Every member of the Tai Phake family takes part in this tradition. After 52 hours, Tai Phakes again gather near the kyanphra and do prayers and rituals. Then, they bring back all the statues one by one to the monastery. Young Tai Phake boys play drums while others are bringing the statues back. The next day the villagers clean, polish and paint the statues. The statues are painted by the locally made colors. The women join and help in cleaning the monastery. After the statues are cleaned they are kept back to their original places. The next day the villagers again gather at the monastery to chant the thomtra. On this day, scented water is sprinkled on everybody to purify them. The day after a pillar of clay is erected at a particular location. This is called je ti Kau Hung. By this way, the Sang ken festival is concluded.





Kham Sang Festival

In every Tai Phake family, there is a tradition in which every male member of the family decides to be a monk. Kham Sang is the festival for this tradition. Every year few boys of the village are decided by their family members which will undergo this ceremony. The boy becomes a monk at least for a day. He can continue to stay monk for any duration after that. It is left to the boy's and his family member's discretion. In this festival, all the monks along with the new monks carry a procession in which people give donations to them. In this festival, the new monk is treated as a king for a day as he is turning into monk. He is been served with several special dishes prepared by the villagers. The kid who is turning into monk goes through all the processes of becoming a monk. This festival shows why Tai Phakes are so deeply connected to the monastery and monks.

Mai Ko Sum Phai Festival

This is another festival which Tai Phakes celebrate. This is the day when Lord Buddha told his disciples the date on which he is going to leave the world. It would be 3 months from current day is what he told. On this day the young population of Tai Phakes create a long structure of bamboo. This structure is then set on fire on the evening of this festival. Tai Phakes sing their traditional songs and Dance on them. All the villagers unite for this festival and is celebrated by Songs, Drums and Dance.







Pet Moun Si Heing Festival

It was observed that Dihing River in Namphake plays an important part in all the events of Tai Phakes. This festival is celebrated on the banks of the river. Tai Phakes do not celebrate all the festivals yearly. Villagers decide every year the festivals the village will be celebrating every year. Pet Moun Si Heing is celebrated once in 2-3 years. In this festival, small stupas of Buddha are created on the bank of river. Thousands of such small stupas are created for the festival. The preparation starts few days before the actual festival. All the members of family contribute in making these stupas. The rituals are then performed on the river bank and then in the monastery.





Poy Pa Te Saa Festival

Poy Pa Te Saa is the festival of giving for Tai Phakes. Independent on the economic state of the family, each family celebrates this festival by donating things. In this festival, a procession is carried out in which a huge tree is carried in the procession. This tree is like a kalpataru which we have heard in Indian mythology. A Kalpataru is a tree on which all your demands are fulfilled. The tree is created with the same thought that all the things which people wish for should be found on it. With the same spirit, villagers donate the things that they possess. This procession is carried in the village and villagers come out and put something on the tree. Finally, all the donations are offered to the monastery by the villagers.







Thomtra ritual

Thomtra is a ritual which Tai phakes perform on lot of festivals. Villagers spend all day siting in the monastery chanting. They generally start in the early morning by offering flowers to Lord Buddha.

Death

Generally, the Tai Phakes are cremated after death. The disposal of the dead body of a Tai Phake villager and of a monk is different. For villagers, after dead body is cremated and after a week a ceremony is carried out for purification. In this ceremony, a feast is arranged for all the villagers. Whereas, the disposal process is completely different for monks. In case of monks, the dead body is kept in a water tight coffin for a year and after a year a big ceremony is arranged. This is a special ceremony for the cremation of dead body. All the villagers are invited for this ceremony.







Conversations





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I have seen how the things have changed with time. But it gives me immense pleasure when I see my kids, in spite of being well educated, they are still rooted to their culture. Working hard towards keeping their tradition and culture alive.

There are several books in Tai Phake language. I've been translating them into other languages, so that this valuable resource becomes available to masses. I've translated 6 books till now and I am working on the next.

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I have seen how the things have changed with time. But it gives me immense pleasure when I see my kids, in spite of being well educated, they are still rooted to their culture. Working hard towards keeping their tradition and culture alive.

We are trying hard to get rid of the monkey attacks on the fields and in the store room. This was never a problem earlier. Earlier, we used to grow other crops along with rice. This problem has raised after cutting of the jungle around.

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There are no police complaints till date because all the disputes in the village are settled by us. We are appointed as leaders by the villagers. We have a rule book which we refer while settling the disputes.

My elder brother with his kids and wife are staying in Arunachal Pradesh. He is working in a company there. We know if he stays back here, the rice farming will not be sufficient to serve both of us. This is a general trend you will observe in all families.

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It will be hard to find a Tai Phake girl who doesn't know weaving. Even if a girl is educated or studying higher education, she will definitely know weaving. This cloth making process helps us socialise with other ladies in the village. It's our favourite pass time.

Tai Phake language is not officially registered and taught in schools. The kids of the nuclear families staying out for employment purposes will never know their language. This is my main motivation for creating these language learning books. If the child sees this book lying around in house, he might get curious and might then learn it from his/her parents.

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Insights

The project gave us an opportunity to look into the lives of so different people which we wouldn't have otherwise. It was a very different experience to stay with such a tribe, live their life for a while and then come back and retrospect yourself. Few important insights which we got from our studies are mentioned below:

Minimal and simple life

We saw the lives of Tai Phakes closely and observed how minimal and simple it is. Right from the food they eat to the things they shop. One of the villager said, we generally boil leaves from the garden and eat, but if it a special day we do cook potato to celebrate. The scenario mentioned above does not really talk about the economic state of Tai Phakes but it tells us how simple their lives are. We did saw the reach of modern technologies like televisions but we were happy to see that did not really brought much change in the way the Tai Phakes were living before.

Small dreams and small needs

One of the villager told us how earning lot of money is never a dream of a phakian person. While explaining his views he mentioned, "We never try to earn a lot of money or save money. In emergencies, villagers come forward and help".

Education versus job

Tai Phakes' notion of education is completely different. We are 100% literate and they looked education as a medium not to get a job or earn but a source of knowledge which will expose them to things happening around the world. We talked with a person who was a graduate of arts and who is working in the rice fields every day. In spite of being a part of such a small community isolated from society, their open minded and modern thoughts surprised us.

Love for the language

Tai Phake language is not officially registered language.

So, the school in Nam phake does not teach Tai Phake to the kids nowadays. But every kid once he comes back from the school gets a tuition from the elderlies in the house. They teach their kids how to read and write Tai Phake language. They have also made books, printed and distributed among villagers. Elder generation and youths are striving to keep up their legacy and does not want their young generation to ignore it.

Struggle to keep up their tradition alive

While talking to the monk, he said, Tai Phakes' all customs and rituals are attached with monastery and all the prayers they pray are in Tai Phake language. They have already thought of scenario where their younger generation might not learn Tai Phake language. But then at least while praying they will pray in Tai Phake language. If the generation is curious to know about the prayers, they will definitely ask an elderly.

Even the current song writers use some old Tai Phake words in songs to make young generation curious. The intent is to make young generation to keep their Tai Phake language alive.

Wearing traditional clothes every day, eating traditional food everyday are the attempts to keep their tradition alive.

Looking into their problems

The biggest threat Tai Phakes are currently having is the existence threat. The prediction statistics say that within the next 50 years this tribe will go extinct. They are striving hard to change this picture. Only occupation in Namphake village is cultivation. A bigger joint family cannot survive on just cultivation because of which only one or maximum 2 siblings are staying the village cultivating, others are moving to cities for jobs. The rate of this migration has increased a lot

recently.

The Tai Phake language is not officially registered.

Villagers and the heading body of the village are trying to make Tai Phake language an official language.

Only then, they will be able to teach the language in the school of Namphake. Currently, all the language learning tuitions are happening in home by the elderlies.

The Namphake village earlier use to be surrounded by Jungle. But with time all the jungle has been cut down. The monkeys which use to survive on jungles have no place to stay and eat. These monkeys have been a trouble to Tai Phakes since a last decade. They have stopped growing other vegetables in farms which they use to do earlier because of these monkeys. Also, the have to take serious care of the rice crops in the field and store.

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