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Tai Aiton (Assam, India) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Tai Aiton
Language Family:	Tai-Kadai > Tai > South-Western Tai > Aiton
ISO 639-3 Code:	aio
Glottolog Code:	aito1238
Population:	1,500
Location:	Assam
Vitality rating:	Endangered

Summary

The Tai Aiton are one of six Tai communities of North-East India, along with Ahom, Turung, Khamti, Khamyang, and Phake. They are Buddhists by religion, and are commonly called ‘Shyams’, or the people from Siam, i.e. Thailand, by their Assamese neighbours. According to Morey (2005), this term comes from written Burmese *hyam*, which is the source of the word pronounced ‘Shan’ in English. The Tai Aiton live in small villages in the state of Assam and the names of their villages are directly translatable into modern Thai, as both sound and meaning correspond. The language belongs to the Southwestern branch of Tai, within the Tai-Kadai language family. The Aiton are multilingual, and can speak Tai, Assamese, English, and Hindi. They speak Aiton within the family and among community members, and generally use Assamese with others. Hakasam (2009) discusses the life style and the language system of Aiton.

The Aiton people are very conscious about their language, culture and traditions. They are very small in number compared to the larger, dominating communities of the state. They try to pass on their culture and tradition to their younger generations. Tai Aiton can be considered an endangered language, according to the endangerment scale of UNESCO, because most of the children can speak the language, but it is restricted to home use only.

1. Etymology and origins

According to Gogoi & Gogoi (1996), the Aiton district in the Upper Chindwin Valley of Myanmar was the original homeland of the Aiton. Bandhmedha (1977) gives two accounts of the origins of the word Aiton. Firstly, it has been suggested that Aiton was the name of a group of Naga people with whom the Aiton had been living, and secondly, it is an autonym based on the name of a mountain called ‘Aiton’ where they previously resided. Morey (2005, section 2.3.6.2) gives some explanations of the meanings of their name according to the Tai Aiton.

2. History

Tai people have been living in Northeast India for at least 700 years. Today, there are at least seven groups which identify themselves as Tai. Of these the Tai Aiton, Tai Khanti, a few Khamyang and Tai Phake still maintain their traditional languages. Altogether there are possibly as few as 10,000 Tai speakers in India. The Tai groups all use traditional writing systems, which they probably brought with them when they migrated to Assam, however today only a relatively small number of Tais can read and write using the traditional Tai writing system. The Tai Aiton language is similar to other Tai languages spoken in Thailand. They came to Assam as far back in the 16th-17th century from the east, crossing the Patkai hills. Presently they live in small pockets in Upper Assam along with the Turung people. Their exact population is unknown but is estimated to be less than 8,000. They are Hinayana Buddhists and their language is closer to Thai of Northeastern Thailand than to Bangkok Thai. They live in certain villages of Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts. They have been recognized by the Indian government as Scheduled Tribes (Hills) and are listed as Man-Tai speaking people by the Government of Assam. Despite how long they have been in Assam, many members of the older generations are not fluent in Assamese, the official language of the state.

3. Geographical distribution and population

The Tai Aiton people live in eight villages in Assam, according to Morey (2005), with the number of speakers being 1,500 (Morey 2006). Buragohain (1998) reports a total of 260 Tai Aiton households, comprising a population of 2,155.

Table 1: Aiton households (Buragohain 1998)

Village	District	Year founded	No. of houses	Population
Ahomoni	KarbiAnglong	1939	31	267
Baragaon(Bargaon)	KarbiAnglong	1835	39	359
Balipathar	KarbiAnglong	1898	59	528
Chakihola(Sukhihola)	KarbiAnglong	Unknown	18	180
Kaliyani(Kaliyoni)	KarbiAnglong	Man era	15	154
Borhola	Golaghat	1836	26	235
Dubarani(Duburoni)	Golaghat	Unknown	43	334
Tengani	Golaghat	Unknown	19	150

The location of these districts within Assam is shown in Figure 1.

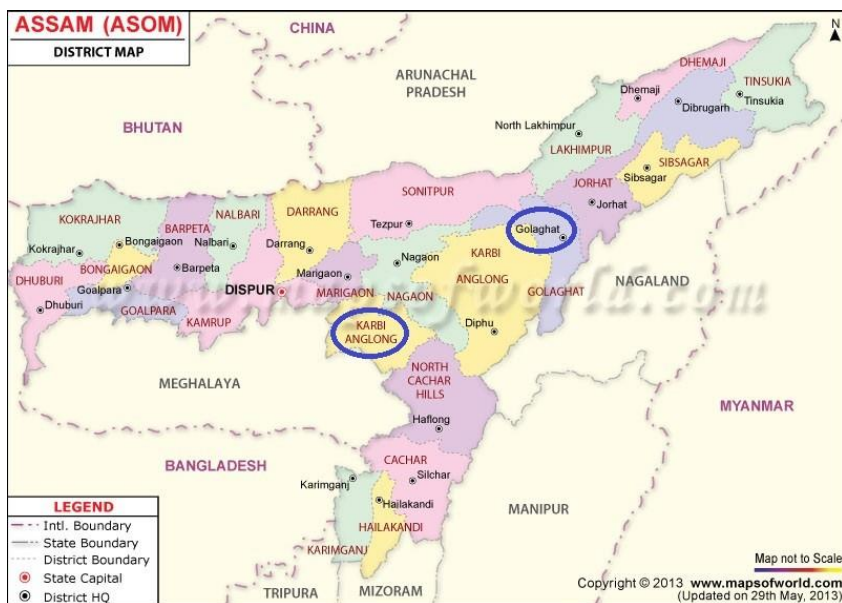


Figure 1. Map of Assam state showing regions

4. Socio-cultural life

The Aitons live in nuclear families, usually with five to six members. Land inheritance is patriarchal and sons inherit their father's property. Married women are not given a share of the father's property, however unmarried daughters are.

Aitons are Buddhists and there is at least one monastery in each village. The head priest of the monastery is called *Chow Mungyang* and his helper is called *Tepe*. The affairs of the monastery are looked after by the monks living in the monastery and the people of the village. There are several festivals (*poi*) celebrated throughout the year (the first three are also Tai Phake festivals (Sharma 2017):

1. *Poi Sang Ken* is celebrated to welcome the Tai New Year, and falls in April and coincides with *Bohag Bihu* the Assamese New Year. The festival involves washing the Buddha statue of the monastery with water
2. *Buddha Purnima* is celebrated after *Poi San Ken* on day of the next full moon
3. *Poi Mai Ko Sum Phai* is celebrated in February, around the time of the Assamese festival *Meji Bihu*. Note that *mai* is 'firewood', *ko* 'pile', *chum* 'to light' and *phai* 'fire'. In this festival, piles of wood are burnt on river banks
4. *Poi Don Si* is celebrated in the month of March.

The Tai people are subsistence cultivators, mainly growing rice in paddy fields situated near their homes, with each family having some additional land for growing fruit and vegetables. Every Tai house is equipped with a loom, and the women are skilled in weaving and embroidery. According to Aiton consultants, many years ago only Tai people knew how to weave cloth and created different styles, probably based on settlement with the neighboring tribes at that time (Kakoty 2018).

The staple food of the Tai Aiton is rice with plain boiled side dishes, mainly vegetables, leaves, and herbs which are found near their homes. Due to contact with Assamese they now sometimes eat fried food also. According to the villagers, vegetables and herbs have medicinal value and they help to improve the immune system of the body (Kakoty 2018).

5. Language status

The Aiton people are very conscious to their language, and always use it with family members and people within the same community at home, religious places, and social gatherings. They communicate with others in Assamese (the

state language, also used in schools, market places and offices) and Hindi (the national language), with some able to speak and understand English (used in education and government interactions). Each village has two to three schools where the medium of instruction is Assamese. Almost all Aiton have at least basic education up to school matriculation, and only a very small number of women aged over 50 are not literate. Most youths are high school graduates and many know English, as well as Assamese and Tai Aiton. Traditionally, young men would learn the language when serving in temples, but Tai monks are now few and many monks no longer know the language. Due to the restricted domains of use and the reduction in opportunities to learn it in religious domains, it can be considered an endangered language.

The literacy rate in Assamese among the Aiton is approximately 85-90%, however literacy is very low in Aiton written in traditional Tai script, which is derived from Shan script, itself probably derived from Burmese. Note that the traditional script has nineteen consonants and six vowels, but does not mark tone and reading it presents considerable challenges (Morey 2015). The Tai languages are using an increasing number of words borrowed from Assamese and other languages, including English, so some new traditions are arising for the writing of borrowed words. Since both Assamese and English allow for final consonants which are not permitted in Tai, some interesting adaptations have arisen.

Tai Aiton belongs genetically to the Tai-Kadai language family, in the South-Western branch of the Tai subgroup. Typologically it has SVO word order, and is monosyllabic and tonal. According to Morey (2005), there are six tones, three of which are more prominently used, namely, rising, falling and mid. The grammatical categories of number and person are expressed with free morphemes.

6. Research on Tai Aiton

There are a number of published and unpublished works that deal with Tai Aiton. Diller (1992) gives a historical background of the Tai varieties in Assam and also presents useful notes on syntactic configurations and an Aiton ghost story transcribed in the Aiton orthography. Diller (1995) presents a definitive taxonomic treatment of 197 Tai terms.

Khanittanan (1983) is a general overview of Tai languages and their origins. Morey (2005) contains a comprehensive analysis of Tai Aiton and Tai Phake, together with information on Tai Khamyang, a highly endangered variety, and covers phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicography and the writing system. Morey (2014) is a comparative study of six languages in the Tai, Singpho and Tangsa groups. His Tai includes Aiton, Ahom, Phake, Turung, Khanti and Khamyang. Hakasam (2009) describes the Aiton community, their cultural aspects and traditions, and the language. Finally,

Kakoty (2018) is a brief description of the community, covering history, origins, culture, traditions, geography, population, and economy, and the language, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and socio-linguistic aspects.

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