

ART. VII.—*On the Khámtis.* By P. R. GURDON, M.R.A.S.

THE habitat<sup>1</sup> of the Bor Khámtis, who are said to number 20,000, is in a valley high up the Irrawaddy, in latitude 27° and 28° east of Sadiya. The Khámtis that we know in Assam are those that have emigrated from "Bor Khámti" and have settled in Assam after the breaking up of the kingdom of Pong by Alomphra. These settlers established themselves early in this century on the "Tenga pani" (a river in the vicinity of Sadiya), with the permission of the Ahom kings. Before proceeding further, it will be interesting to note that this Khámti movement is the second instance of Tai emigration that we have on record. Some considerable time previously the Ahoms, who spoke a language much akin to the Khámti tongue, and who are also of the Tai race, made an irruption over the Pátkoi range and invaded and conquered Assam. The Khámtis, who had apparently been given hospitality by the Ahoms because they were almost kinsmen, before long rose against the Ahom king, and ejected the Ahom governor of Sadiya or "Sadiya Khówa Gohain." The Khámti chief took the governor's place and retained it. The Ahom king, not being strong enough to oust the Khámti usurper, had to recognize him. During the rule of this chief the local Assamese were reduced to slavery, and they were not released till our own Government interfered in 1839. Out of revenge the Khámtis rebelled against our Government, and the Sadiya garrison, including its commander, Col. White, was surprised and cut up. This led

<sup>1</sup> This seems to agree with Mr. Cust's language map. The larger patch of Khámti is, I conclude, "Bor Khámti," and the smaller patch the Khámti settlement at Sadiya.

to reprisals on our part, and the Khámtis were attacked, defeated, and scattered abroad. During the following year many of them returned to their home in Bor Khámti. Those that remained divided into four parties, and settled in different parts of the Lakhimpur district. In 1850 a fresh colony, numbering 300 to 400 persons, came and settled in Assam. The total number living in the province in 1891 was 3040,<sup>1</sup> against 2883 in 1881. Mr. Gait, the Provincial Census Superintendent, says "the real increase is slightly greater, as the 1881 figures include the Phakiáls." The Phakiáls are a kindred tribe, and I will note about them further on. The Khámtis live in fairly large villages, the houses of which are built on platforms several feet above the ground. The houses are reached by means of a ladder, which is often the notched trunk of a tree. The houses themselves are comfortable, substantially built, with good roofs. Men, women, and children, apparently, all live together in the same room, but there are partitions for the married people. The costume of both men and women is picturesque. Although perhaps not quite so showy as the Burmese, the costumes are very similar. The men's dress is a blue cotton jacket and a sort of kilt of checked cloth or silk, which looks like a plaid. The women's dress is the same, only that they wear a cloth tightly bound round the chest and tied under the arms, instead of a jacket. The Khámtis that I have seen looked strong and robust. They had faces of the usual Chinese type, with high cheek-bones, and small peculiarly shaped eyes, and with scanty beard. They did not appear as dark as the Ahoms, and they certainly looked cleaner and neater. The men wear their hair in a sort of top-knot, whereas the Ahoms wear it in a knob, shaped like a door-knocker, at the back of the head. The Khámtis suffer terribly from goitre, but this is not uncommon both in the plains as well as the hills. The Tairóngs, Aitanias, and Naras, who are the kinsmen of the Khámtis, are great

<sup>1</sup> Census of 1891.

opium-eaters, and are as well much addicted to liquor. They distil a fairly strong spirit from "gúr" (molasses), which they often try to sell without a license to the tea-garden coolies, and so get mulcted in fines under the Excise Law. The Khámtis of the Náraynpur colony in the North Lakhimpur subdivision are an interesting settlement. The late Mr. Stack described this colony at some length in the Assam Census Report of 1881. Mr. Stack says the Khámtis are nominally Buddhists, but the common people worship both Gautama, or "Kodoma" as they call him, and Debi or Durga. The Náraynpur colony is surrounded by Hindu villages, and I do not think that it can escape the subtle proselytising influence of Hinduism long. The Ahoms have almost entirely become Hindus now—only a few of the "Deodháis" (old Ahom priests) even remember the *name* of their ancient god "Chúng," which was said to have been a brass image which was worshipped with mystic rites. Whether this "Chúng" was "Gautama" or not it is now difficult to ascertain; but perhaps it was. The Ahoms have now entirely dropped their ancient faith as well as their language. The Khámtis keep Thursday holy as the birthday of Buddha, although they are not aware of the year of his birth. Their priests wear yellow robes, as do their Buddhist brethren in Burma. I noticed this also in the Tairóng and Nara villages I have seen. The holy books, as well as brass and stone images of Buddha, are kept in a prayer house (now called bápú<sup>1</sup> ghar), generally a little distance from the village. Women are not allowed to enter the "bápú ghar," but the priest at the Tairóng village I went to did not object to the male unbeliever, although my wife was told to stand outside the house. Sir W. Hunter says that the majority of the Khámti laity, as well as the priesthood, can read and write, and that the chiefs pride themselves upon their manual dexterity in working in metals and in ornamenting their shields of buffalo or rhinoceros hide with gold and lac.

<sup>1</sup> Assamese বাপু (bápú)=priest.

The women also are said to be skilled in embroidery. Where did the Khámtis get all this civilization from? Was it from China?

I should now like to make a few remarks about the Tairóns, Naras, and Aitanias, who, as I have already mentioned, we in Assam regard as the kinsmen of the Khámtis.

The Turúngs or Tairóns have been generally regarded as Sháns. The Khámtis call the Sháns "Tailóng" (great Tais). Tailóng has probably become corrupted into Tairóng, and finally into Turúng. Some three or four villages of Tairóns are to be found in the Sibsagar district. The Tairóns themselves claim to be Sháns, and to be far above even the Khámtis, who, in their turn, look down on the Tairóns (at least the Jorhát colony). Quite recently I came across a book in a Tairóng village, a page of which I sent to Mr. Gait, the Census Superintendent, thinking that it was Shán. Mr. Gait sent the page to Mr. Needham, at Sadiya, who declared it to be pure Khámti, both as regards idiom and character. These Tairóns had another book, which appeared to be Burmese. Strange to say these Tairóns themselves spoke Singpho, the explanation of this being as follows: The Tairóns, who originally lived somewhere in the direction of the Upper Irrawaddy, started for Assam to join some Naras who had preceded them thither. Unfortunately for them they had to pass through the Singpho country (*vide* Mr. Cust's language map). As they passed through the country they were taken captives by the Singphos. They remained as captives for five years according to their own account, but probably for longer, as they quite forgot their own language and adopted the language of their captors. It is strange that even to this day the Tairóns speak nothing but Singpho. After a time the Tairóns were rescued by Captain de Neufville, and were brought by him in safety to Assam. The Tairóns intermarry with the Naras, who are rather more numerous than the former. The Naras apparently speak Khámti or Shán, I am not certain which, but they understand Singpho. The Naras have some six or eight villages

altogether in the Sibsagar district. They are indistinguishable from the Tairóns in appearance. Mr. Cust, writing about the Khámtis, says<sup>1</sup>: "The original name of the tribe appears to have been Nara, and to have had two subdivisions, '*Aikham*' or Khámti to the north, and '*Aiton*' to the south." If this be the case probably the Naras are Khámtis, and the Aitonias, of whom there are, I think, three villages in the Golaghat subdivision, are Khámtis also. There are also some Aiton villages, I believe, in Lakhimpur. With reference to Mr. Cust's remarks on "*Aiton*," p. 122, I agree, at present, in thinking that Aiton is not a separate language but a dialect of Khámti. I will, however, make enquiries about this when I return to Assam. There are some people in the Sibsagar district, inhabiting two villages, I think, called Dóanias. These people also, I think, are allied to the Khámtis, notwithstanding the idea that prevails that they are a relict of the Burmese invasion of Assam. The Assamese call them Dóanias from the word দোআনিয়া (*dóaniya*) meaning "interpreter." Possibly these people may have acted as interpreters for the Ahoms with the Burmese. It would be interesting to make enquiries about these people also. Possibly the Phakiáls of Jeypur, in Lakhimpur, who were in 1881 returned as Khámtis at the census, may prove to be Khámtis also; but this is more doubtful. Before leaving the subject it should be stated that Ahom and Khámti are connected. I have selected thirty-two words at haphazard from Hodgson's vocabularies for the purpose of comparison. Out of thirty-two, eighteen words are identical in Ahom and Khámti. In most of the remainder it will be observed that the only difference is the phonetic change or some prefix—for instance, the Ahom word *bán* (village) becomes *mán* in Khámti. The Lao and Siamese word for village is also *bán*, and the Khyeng is *nám*. Take the Ahom word, *laling*, for monkey. In Khámti the prefix *la* is dropped.

<sup>1</sup> "Modern Languages of the East Indies," p. 122.

In Shán the word is *lein*, and in Siamese *leun* or *ling*. The Ahom and Khámti numerals are almost identical, *e.g.* :

KHÁMTI.	AHOM.
1. lüng	ling
2. sǎng	sang
3. sám	sam
4. sí	si
5. há	há
6. hók	ruk
7. chet or t'set	chet or t'sit
8. pet	pet
9. kau	kau
10. sip lüng	sip.

The remarkable similarity between the five languages—Khámti, Shán, Ahom, Lao, and Siamese—will be seen from the accompanying table.

ENGLISH.	KHÁMTI.	SHÁN.	ANOM.	LAOS.	SIAMSE.	REMARKS.
Ant	mót	mót	nyuchu	mót piak	mót	(Annamitic) meo.
Bird	nók	h'not	noktú	nók	h'not nok	
Bone	núk	sot	tau	duk	katot kaduk	
Cat	miau	myoung	men	meau	may mean	Chinese—(Canton) tseong (Shanghai) siang. (Khyeng) pau. Chinese—(Canton) fo.
Crow	ká	ma	ká	ká	ka	
Dog	má	ma	má	má	ma	
Earth	languin	sen	din	din	tein-phendin	Chinese—(Canton) tseong (Shanghai) siang. (Khyeng) pau. Chinese—(Canton) fo.
Elephant	chang tsang	tsan	tyang	tsang	htsaun chang	
Father	pó	pau	po	po	lipau po	
Fire	fai	fai	fai	fai	thwa fai	Chinese—(Canton) chü.
Hand	pha mü	mí	kha	mü	mo mü	
Hog	mú	má	mú	mú	mú	
House	hün	hien	ren	heun	rau reuan	(Khyeng) nám. (Mrú) loung. Chinese—san (Nankin), san (Pekin), sám (Canton), san Shanghai, san (Amoy).
Man	pá chai <sup>1</sup>	kon putrin	kun	khon	hpuhtso khon	
Monkey	ling	lein	laling	wok ling	leun ling	
Tiger	sü	htso	sü	seu	tso sü	Chinese—sze or si. Burmese—(spoken) nga.
Village	mán	maun	bán	ban	paun ban	
One	lúng	nein (noung?)	ling	nung	nung nem	
Two	sáng	h'tsoug	sang	sung	sang, tsoung, song	Chinese—(Canton) ts'at, (Amoy) ch'it. Chinese—(Canton) pat. Chinese—(Canton) kau.
Three <sup>2</sup>	sám	h'tsan	sam	sám	sám, tsan	
Four	si	h'tse	si	si	si tse	Chinese—(Canton) ts'at, (Amoy) ch'it. Chinese—(Canton) pat. Chinese—(Canton) kau.
Five	há	há ha	há	há	há hgná	
Six	hók	hoht or hok	ruk	hok (hoht?)	hok	
Seven	chet or t'set	t'sit	t'sit or chet	t'set	t'sit or chet	Chinese—(Canton) pák. Chinese—(Canton) ngau. Burmese—(written) nwa, (spoken) nwau. Chinese—(Canton) tsú.
Eight	pet	tet	pet	pet	pet tet	
Nine <sup>2</sup>	kau	kaut	kau	kau	kau or kaut	
Ten	t'sip	t'seit	sip	sip	sip htseit	Chinese—(Canton) pák. Chinese—(Canton) ngau. Burmese—(written) nwa, (spoken) nwau. Chinese—(Canton) tsú.
Twenty	sau or sau lúng	htsoung	sau	san nung	ye sip ya-t'sit	
Fifty	há sip	ha-htsit	há sip	há sip	há sip or hatsit	
Hundred	pák lúng	hpat	pak	hoi	roi and ráe nung	Chinese—(Canton) pák. Chinese—(Canton) ngau. Burmese—(written) nwa, (spoken) nwau. Chinese—(Canton) tsú.
Cow	ngo	wo	hu	ngoa	ngwa, -woa, ngoa	
Plantain	kóy kue	kwa	kui	kue	khue kalwai	

<sup>1</sup> Hunter gives kun khun.<sup>2</sup> See Hunter, p. 21.

The question remains, what is the source from which these five languages and the language of South-western China is derived? Perhaps some of our Burmah officers or missionaries may be able to throw light on the subject.<sup>1</sup> The character is an adaptation of the Pali, which has been used in the formation of the characters of many other languages. Some of these are Burmese, Karen, Sinhalese, Pegu, and perhaps Telugu, Kanarese, and Tulu. It would be interesting to know how the Khámtis came to adopt the same character as the Sinhalese?

In conclusion I would call attention to the excellent grammar of the language published by Mr. Needham. It is well arranged for the object in view, *i.e.* to help frontier officers and others to learn Khámti.

<sup>1</sup> See Sir W. W. Hunter, "Non-Aryan Languages of India," etc., pp. 20, 21, on the influence of Chinese, in the formation of these languages.