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*Phi Muang*s

Khamti Forces of Place in Arunachal Pradesh

This article focuses on the *phi muang*, a collective of primordial spirits who live among the Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. I first look into contextualizing the ritual expressions associated with the *phi muang*, based on the description of two associated territorial cults: the ceremony carried out in the context of wild elephant capture operations, and those carried out at the village level for all inhabitants during the agricultural New Year celebrations. My ethnographic descriptions highlight the essential characteristics of *phi muang*s among the Khamti. Subsequently, by drawing from writings regarding the history of the region, I return to the question of origins, as well as the relations that the Khamti maintained with each of the *phi muang*s, as the latter's respective territory was delimited. Following Mus (1933) and more recently Schlemmer (2012), the conclusion considers *phi* or "force of the place." Moreover, uncovering the spatial configuration of these local forces allowed for the formulation of several hypotheses about the integration of the Khamti into a region that was and still is located at the margins of India.

Keywords: ritual—territorial cult—divine appropriation—Khamti—Arunachal Pradesh—Northeast India

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This article focuses on the cult dedicated to the *phi muang*, a type of primordial divinity for the Khamti people,[1] a Shan population that inhabits Arunachal Pradesh in India.[2] Like other Tai societies across Southeast Asia, the Khamti live in the lowlands and practice irrigated paddy field cultivation. In India, an important aspect of their livelihood is their attachment to elephants, which are still mainly used for the timber industry. This activity was the force behind the Khamti's economic development from Indian independence in 1947 until the end of the last century.[3]

The Khamti migrated to Northeast India from present-day Myanmar in successive waves, beginning from the middle of the eighteenth century (Gogoi 1968; Terwiel 1981). At that time, their settlement was facilitated by the presence of another Shan population, the Ahom, who had settled there since the thirteenth century and dominated the region. The vernacular sources available on the region, notably the *Buranji* (Historical chronicles), mention that in 1751 the Ahom king in power at that time authorized the Khamti to settle along the Tengapani River, which is located in the present Lohit district, a place that they used for the growth of irrigated crops. Unlike the Ahom, who had adopted the Hindu religion by the time of the Khamti's arrival (Devi 1968), the Khamti are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Since colonial times, the Buddhist doctrine has been presented as the sole religion of the Khamti.[4] This is reinforced today by a reaffirmation of Shan identity based on Buddhism (Nathalang 2009). However, like other Tai Buddhist populations in Southeast Asia, the religious system of the Khamti is much more complex.[5] It includes elements related to the cult of spirits (*phi*), as well as other beliefs that are a result of interactions with other populations from the northeast. Other Tai populations across the peninsula have also influenced their worldview. Similar to research done by the anthropologist Nicola Tannenbaum (1992) on the Shan in the northwest of Thailand, or by other researchers in South Asia, all of the mentioned practices and beliefs are viewed as constituting a coherent system, rather than being opposed or dichotomous.[6]

Among the various components that comprise the religious system of the Khamti, the cult dedicated to the *phi muang* is viewed as the most important. The deity associated with it, the *phi muang*, must be appeased before any individual or collective enterprise is embarked upon. According to the Khamti, there are three *phi muang*s that represent three distinct territories in the northeast zone of India.

The three deities are individualized and personified by different names: Chao Noi Cheynam, Chao Noi Tipam, and Nang Hoo Toung. The first two appear to be male spirits, as the title *chao* (chief) indicates, while the third one refers to a female deity, since any woman in this society is addressed through the use of the prefix *nang*. To obtain protection from the *phi muang*s and to ensure success and prosperity, they must be fed with a sacrifice that is offered to each of them over the course of the same ritual. The nature of the offering differs according to the spirit invoked. For example, for Chao Noi Cheynam, a pair of red chickens, a *kai may niang* (red rooster) and a *kai fu niang* (red hen), must be offered; for Chao Noi Tipam, the pair must be white; and finally, to feed Nang Hoo Toung, one must offer either a goat (*pia*) or a pair of ducks, with one being male and the other female. A specialist should sacrifice such offerings, since he acts as an intermediary between the community and the divinity. It is through animal sacrifice that the specialist enters into communication with the divinity concerned, to ask for protection and prosperity from him or her.

I will begin by contextualizing the ritual expressions associated with the *phi muang*, which will be based on the description of two associated territorial cults.[7] One is a ceremony carried out in the context of wild elephant capture operations. The second is carried out on a village level for the wellbeing of all the inhabitants on the agricultural New Year. My ethnographic descriptions will thus serve to highlight the essential characteristics of *phi muang*s among the Khamti. Drawing from records pertaining to the history of the region, I will then return to the historical and mythological origin of each *phi muang*, as well as look at the relations that the Khamti maintain with them and how their respective territories are locally conceptualized. By uncovering the spatial configuration of these local forces, I will formulate several hypotheses regarding the integration of the Khamti in a region located on the margins of India.

Ritual expressions associated with *phi muang*s

The role of phi muang*s in elephant capturing*

Since settling in Northeast India, the Khamti have captured, trained, and worked with elephants.[8] While the work performed with and by elephants has constantly evolved over different time periods, the animal still serves as one of the main sources of income for many Khamti households. In addition, elephants have always been used for domestic purposes, such as a means of transportation for many activities, including hunting, fishing, agricultural work, and firewood collection. Today, elephants are mainly used for logging work. Furthermore, some Khamti are still seasonally engaged in elephant capturing, despite the fact that this activity is now illegal.[9]

Each of these capture operations requires a set of ritual practices based on different beliefs to be carried out before, during, and after the expeditions.[10] These combine rituals associated with Tai populations of Southeast Asia, such as the use of divination charts and belief in Utingna, a forest divinity in charge of wild elephants.[11] In addition, other rituals or beliefs have been borrowed from other Indian populations inhabiting the northeast, such as the Moran and Singpho.

Spirit cults devoted to *phi muang*s are also added to these other ritualistic components. In addition, they are combined with domestic spirits (*phi hai*) and references to Theravada Buddhism. Buddhism remains quite present unofficially, even though the practice of capturing or killing animals contradicts the Buddhist doctrine of *ahiṁsā* (Korom 2000). The presence of Buddhist influence is evident, for example, in the consideration of sacred days, the *satang*, in which it is forbidden for anyone to go into the forest. Among these numerous rituals, practices, and beliefs, the sacrifice offered to one of the three *phi muang*s is the most important.[12] No catching expedition can be carried out without first nourishing the *phi muang*s. This ritual is mandatory and was mentioned by all the capturers who were interviewed. Among the team members of each expedition, the main *phāṅdi* (elephant trapper) had the responsibility of offering the sacrificed animal and feeding the *phi muang*s on behalf of all the team members, including the domestic elephants that took part in the expedition.[13]

Interestingly, during capture operations the sacrifice is not conducted at the *phāṅdi*'s residence but rather in the territory where the operation takes place. For example, if it has been decided to capture an animal in Chao Noi Tipam's territory, while the *phāṅdi* resides in Chao Noi Cheynam's territory, he must still feed the former prior to entering into its territory. Only upon returning from the expedition will he perform another ritual dedicated to Chao Noi Cheynam, asking him to host and protect the animal. This second ceremony must be performed before setting up the camp required for the operation to help socialize the elephant.

In the case where the territory chosen for the capture is the same as the residence of the capturer, however, a single ceremony suffices. The ritual is then performed prior to entering the forest and could be made at the village altar dedicated to the *phi muang*, named *pang suea muang*.[14] In this case, the feeding ceremony is made both to seek protection from the *phi muang* as well as to inform him of their intention to capture an elephant.

The ritual sacrifice is generally made on the day of departure. Indeed, an elephant catcher that I met in the village of Chongkham informed me that he performed the sacrifice a few days prior to departure. He also added that the ceremony took place at night, directed at the altar of his own village. He said this was possible only because he was going to capture an elephant within his own village's territory.

In all other cases, the practice of feeding the *phi muang* is always held when first entering into the forest. It should be noted that at the entrance of each forest, there is a specific altar for receiving the offering that is required for each forest activity. However, possibly due to the illegal nature of capture operations today, the catcher that I interviewed told me that they made their own small discreet altar in the forest prior to setting up a temporary camp. This way, they can avoid being exposed or indicating to others the reason for their presence in the forest. At the same time, they can ward off the evil eye for the period of time that they spend in the forest.[15] Finally, capturers feed their own *phi muang* in a personal capacity, particularly if the territorial spirit is different from the one where the capture takes place. This way, they are able to seek additional protection in the same way as they do with the domestic deity who protects their home, the *phi hun*.

The annual collective ceremony at the village level

In each Khamti village, a small altar that is devoted to a *phi muang* can be found (see figure 1). The altar is located outside the general village habitation area and can be found either next to a large tree or at the edge of a river. This place is called the *pang suea muang*, which literally translates as the "place for the territorial divinity." Apart from domestic altar spirits that are present in each household compound, the *pang suea muang* remains the only material expression of the existence of the *phi* spirit cult within the Khamti villages.

Each *phi muang* is not specific to any particular village but is considered to be the protector of an entire territory that could include several villages, as well as forest areas (*pa*). It should be mentioned that in contrast to various other Tai populations across Southeast Asia, there are not any specific spirit deities associated with a particular village, which are usually called *phi ban*, literally, "the spirit of the village."[16] Indeed, throughout the numerous villages and locations visited during the course of the fieldwork, no Khamti could confirm the existence of a village spirit. In addition, it can be noted that *phi muang* does not necessarily refer solely to a divinity in connection with the human ancestors of the inhabitants of a village, as is sometimes the case for the *phi ban*, since this deity does not exist among the Khamti. However, the territorial *phi muang* is collectively appeased annually with a sacrificial rite performed within the village. These ceremonies occur in every village, and it is compulsory for every one of the residents to contribute, attend, and participate in the ceremony. Such ceremonies are the only collective ceremony devoted to the *phi muang*. Even though each *phi muang* is associated with several villages, there are no other collective ceremonies that are above the village level. The collective sacrifice offered to the *phi muang* must be performed at the beginning of each agricultural year, after the Shangken Festival, which would therefore mark the New Year and the beginning of the agricultural calendar, which occurs usually in the second half of April. Without this ceremony, which involves the participation of the entire village with the exception of monks and pregnant women, no agricultural work can begin. At the village level, this collective ceremony requires the presence of a specialist, the *phou muang*, who officiates over the ceremony. This specialist oversees the addressing of the sacrifice on behalf of the entire community. Interestingly, I also learned that many *phāṅdi* are or were the representative *phou* for their village. Through this act, the specialist will enter into communication with the deity concerned to ask for protection and prosperity, voicing hope for a good harvest, protection against wild animals, and defense against diseases.[17]

The ritual official is the one who will oversee any interaction with the divinity, before asking the village chief (*gāoṅ buṛha*) to deposit the offering as a sign of the entire community's allegiance. A helper assists the *phou muang*. The helper oversees the preparation of food that is first served to the divinity and then shared by the villagers. The assistant must be a young, single, and healthy man. In 2010, in the village of Jenglai, the assistant was the son of the *phou muang*. A few days before the ceremony, the village head or *gāoṅ buṛha* brought together the men to decide on a suitable Sunday to hold the ceremony. Following this meeting,

Figure 1: Altar devoted to Noi Cheynam during the annual ceremony. Photo by Nicolas Lainé.

two youth were assigned to collect the donations that would be used to purchase the ritual necessities (incense, candles), including the sacrificial animal. Indeed, it is compulsory for each household to contribute money for the purchases. In addition, each household has to offer a bag of rice, which was mixed together as a whole and then cooked and served to village members. A ladle of grain was taken from each bag; this was cooked separately and presented to the *phi muang*.

On the morning of the ceremony, most of the men from the village gathered at the altar and, under the orders of the village chief, cleaned the area around it. This involved clearing the brush and making the enclosure ready to welcome the divinity. A bamboo fence was also rebuilt for the occasion. We were in the pre-monsoon period, and it was agreed that the preparation of the offerings, which included a pair of chickens, black and red, in reference to Chao Noi Cheynam, would take place in a sheltered place. It was decided that the location would be within the village school, which was located a few hundred meters from the altar. The official's son was in charge of the food. Consequently, he killed the animals, skinned them, and then began to prepare the food. During this time, he also mixed all the bags of rice harvested from the villagers and started to cook it.

The men who remained near the altar of the divinity completed the cleaning and decorating of the altar. Small colored banners were added around the shelter, and the floor under the altar was covered with candles, due to the rain. On the altar, incense and banana leaves were added to receive the food.

Once the dish was prepared, all the villagers gathered around the altar, before the village chief asked to proceed. There, the villagers sat or squatted outside the enclosure, facing the altar. With the men and young boys in front and the women behind, the official began to recite a prayer, with his assistant standing aside with

the two dishes in his hands in preparation to serve them to the deity. The request was brief, after which the divinity was served. Through the voice of the official and the offerings, which are later deposited by the village chief, the whole community comes together to ask Chao Noi Cheynam for protection and prosperity (see figure 2). Once the dishes were served to the deity, the villagers began to pray together, before the chief closed the fence to let the divinity consume the offerings in private. As the rain started to get heavy, everyone congregated at the school to share in the collective meal.

*Phi muang*s: Protectors of villages, forests, and their inhabitants

With the help of the two short ethnographic descriptions in this article, let us now see how we can characterize the *phi muang*s and their various roles and functions among the Khamti.

First, the notion of *muang* is itself essential for the Khamti, and more generally for Tai people. If we look at J. N. Cushing's (1914) dictionary of the Shan language, the notion of *muang* refers to a country or a kingdom, which would suggest an area larger than the village itself. A semantic study by Ranee Lertleumsai (2007) revealed that, among Shan populations, *muang* generally refers to a geo-socio-political entity. Indeed, the presentation of two territorial cults that are associated with *phi muang* revealed that among the Khamti, each one had the particularity of exercising its power over several villages, along with integrating certain parts of the adjacent forest area.

Figure 2: The village chief places the food on the altar of Choi Noi Cheynam. Photo by Nicolas Lainé.

Across Southeast Asia, the Tai are organized and structured around the notion of *muang* (which can also be called *mong*, *ming*, *maeng*, and *moeng*, depending on the specific Tai language used [Bruneau 2006]). This notion has been the subject of several anthropological inquiries. According to Christian Taillard, *muang* is "Inseparable from the tai identity, and the political structure of the müang, both segmental and topocentric (organised from a centre), thus appears as a historically stable element which still constitutes the basis of the local territorial organisation" (1992, 339). Stanley Tambiah (1970) referred to galactic systems, while Georges Condominas (1968) drew from the image of the parasol. In the interpretation offered by Olivier Evrard (2006), while the term can refer to the level of political hierarchy immediately above that of the village, this can be difficult to translate because it designates both the political power and the territory over which it is exercised.

Second, it should be noted that the collective ceremony earlier described is found in other Tai populations in Southeast Asia, with different variations. This includes the role of the ritual official, the exclusive character of the offering (with the exception of the monks), and the role of the village chief. Such ritual ceremonies, regardless of whether animal sacrifices are included or not, have been described by Paul Durrenberger (1980) in Thailand, as well as Condominas (1968) and, more recently, Vanina Bouté (2012) in Laos. All of these researchers describe a ritual ceremony that is held at the village level for the local spirit. Nevertheless, as mentioned, no Khamti interviewed could recall the existence of a village deity specific to a single village. Contrary to other Tai populations, in the present case there was no protective spirit specifically associated with a single village.

So far, we have seen that the *phi muang* can be celebrated both individually and collectively, linked with agricultural and forestry activities. In addition, throughout the year, people freely go to address the *phi muang* for personal purposes. For example, if there is theft of cattle in the village, one can come to the *phi muang* to seek justice. These particular operations are usually carried out at night, without anyone's knowledge. Thus, it appears that among the Khamti, *phi muang* can refer to a function of regulating social relations within the village. It would thus serve the role of a village spirit, which, as already stated, does not exist among the Khamti. In my case study here, the hierarchy of the various spirit cults from household to village to a larger territory, as highlighted by Shigeharu Tanabe (1988) for the Tai Lue, seems to skip an important level: that of the village. Instead, it seems that village-level protection relies solely on Buddhism and the *phi muang*. Yet, it should be noted that the latter does not just protect the village and its inhabitants.

Another aspect of the *phi muang*s among the Khamti relies on the nature of the power exercised by the associated divinity. The *phi muang*s appear to be the guardian spirits of an entire territory, including all its components such as forests, rivers, and mountains, as well as all the living beings, including both humans and non-humans. Khamti villagers also come to address the *phi muang* whenever they start forest activities. The deity then functions as the divine mediator between men and the territory's natural resources. Here, *phi muang*s serve the main functions of being both protectors and bringers of prosperity to the Khamti. The specific *phi muang*'s intermediary role is the reason why we have seen Khamti elephant hunt-

ers lend a double allegiance, first to the *phi muang* corresponding to the place of capture, then to the one corresponding to their residence where the captured animal is destined to live. Such aspects highlight the essential role of the *phi muang* in controlling all living beings present in its territory. Moreover, within elephant-capture operations, the various *phi muang*s form a spatial organization and stress the importance of integrating the village with parts of the forest.

Following Paul Mus (1933), a collective work edited by Grégoire Schlemmer (2012) recently stated the notion of the "force of the place" as the starting point for an analysis that studies the different territorial cults and ritual expressions on the Sino-Indian periphery. The case studies therein aimed to highlight the diversity of such supernatural forces: "tied to soil, water, forest and game, these entities are the masters of nature's resources" (2012, 9). Furthermore, one of the main characteristics of the "force of the place" is the explicit reference to it within a defined territory, in which this force exercises control over an entire set of beings, irrespective of their local and spatial properties (from villages to forest areas). A particularity of the force of the place is in its capacity to legitimize the occupation of a specific zone by a population, ensuring its prosperity as well as its attachment to the soil, vis-à-vis other local populations in the vicinity.

In order to see the extent to which we can associate the notion of the force of the place to *phi muang*s in Khamti society, I will now explore the territories associated with them in greater detail, along with their specific relationships, spatial arrangements, and origin, according to my field consultants. In addition, the discovery of such a spatial configuration in Northeast India could be used to provide ethnographic insights into the understanding of the upper part of this region, adding context to the historical sources.

Origin of the *phi muang*s and their interrelations

Chao Noi Cheynam

Among the three *phi muang*s recorded during my fieldwork, Chao Noi Cheynam was the one that was most often cited. According to the data collected, its exercised power extended from the Tengapani River to the Noa Dihing River, which currently marks the border between the Lohit and Changlang districts. This area corresponds with the Khamti's original settlement in the region back in the eighteenth century.

Chao Noi Cheynam literally means "the mountain where the water stagnates" or "the mountain surrounded by water" (in Khamti, *noi* means "mountain," *chey* is the verb "to remain," and *nam* means "water"). In seeking to specify which mountain this referred to, I found that it corresponded precisely to the Noi Cheynam, and the Khamti questioned affirmed that this mountain was located in the forest of Manabhum, which is the forest that borders their village.

Chow Na Mein (2005), for his part, tells us in his travel account from 2005 that a divinity with similar characteristics is venerated in Myanmar. In the Putao region of Myanmar, he reported that the Khamti referred to the *noi si nam*, which is Shan terminology for the mountain ranges that marked the natural border between

India and Myanmar. According to the information he collected, *noi si nam* corresponded with the path taken by the Khamti at the time of their migration to India. During the crossing of this pass, they would have sacrificed a rooster and a hen of red color.[18]

Historical elements from prior to the arrival of the Khamti in India can shed light on the sacred character of this mountainous area. The Chutiya kingdom dominated upper Assam before the arrival of the Ahom and Khamti. These were divided into four clans, one of which was the Tengapanyas, who lived along the Tengapani River (now in Lohit district). Sidney Endle (1975) reported that this clan had observed a cult on a mountain in Manabhum. He also reported that this forest coincided with the location of an older cult, which was practiced by the Deori population, one that was now assimilated with the Chutiya population. According to an informant I met in Tinsukia in 2010, there was also an Assamese work that described how when the Khamti settled along the Lohit River, they persecuted the Deori, asking them to close and then move this place of worship. This concordance of places made it possible to suppose that the Khamti, which were occupying the district of Lohit due to their migration in the northeast, would have taken their account of the cult of Deori and transformed it into that of Noi Cheynam, since the natural surrounding lends itself to it.[19] The physical characteristics of the middle of the Putao region (Upper Myanmar) and those of the Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh are also identical, and the district of Lohit is composed of hills and many rivers. This hypothesis is thus all the more likely as, during our stay in the region, violent incidents would break out between the Deori populations living in the village of Mahadevpur, which marks the current border with the state of Assam, and the Khamti. The Deori were also refused access to the forest of Manabhum, even though they wanted to celebrate an ancient ritual there.[20]

Chao Noi Tipam

The second *phi muang* is Chao Noi Tipam. During my fieldwork, the Khamti that were interviewed agreed in defining its territory on the Noa Dihing River, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Unlike the Chao Noi Cheynam, it was difficult for me to obtain precise data on the origin of Noi Tipam from my Khamti informants. Other sources, mainly by Indian scholars, were used to help in defining its origin.

To this point, we know that it is a male spirit, as the term *noi* refers to a mountain or mountain range with which the divinity would be associated. In his volume on the toponymy of Assam, the Indian historian Phukan Sarat Kumar (2001) reminded us that Tipam is a Tibeto-Burmese term that can be translated in different ways (*ti* means water, river; *pam*, place). Digging further into the history of the region, the term Tipam refers to several localities and several events that took place during the medieval period; that is, from the arrival of Ahom in the thirteenth century until the advent of the British, who eventually took root in the region in 1826. During this time, the name Tipam first corresponded with a small kingdom in Upper Assam that existed at the time of the migration of the first Shan, the Ahom in the thirteenth century. In his voluminous history of the different Tai kingdoms, Padmeswar Gogoi (1968) mentioned that when the first Ahom ruler, Sukapha,

settled in the region, he first conquered the kingdom of Tipam, which was located along the Burhi Dihing River, and whose inhabitants were called the Tipamia. This kingdom was then the vassal of the Chutiya (the most important kingdom in upper Assam), which was under the control of a Tai prince named Samlonhpha. Gogoi added that after a consultation with the latter and seeing Sukapha's intention to settle permanently in the region, Samlonhpha decided to offer him the territory of Tipam. Quoting Dheodai Buranji, Gogoi said that Sukapha initially stayed in Tipam for three years, during which he established his first capital city.[21] However, having become aware of the numerous floods in the area that occurred during the monsoon, he settled further north, in the village of Halaguri, near the river Lohit. Indeed, the lowlands in which the kingdom of Tipam was located were not suitable for irrigated rice cultivation. The *Ahom Buranji*, the main historical chronicle from the Ahom period, further stated that the fragility of the soil did not allow the construction of barricades in the new capital, which prevented it from protecting itself (Barua 1985, 46). Thus, during the history of the region, Tipam was a witness to many wars.[22]

Today, Tipam is the name of two localities in Upper Assam in the Dibrugarh district: Tipam Phake and Tipamia. These two localities are included in the area protected by the divinity associated with Noi Tipam. The first is located a few miles from the town of Jaypur. S. G. C. Thakur (1982) reported that, according to the inhabitants of this village, the Phake, who were close to the Khamti, settled on the north bank of the Burhi Dihing River. At that time they worshipped the deity Somdeo, who required an annual sacrifice of a buffalo. The Phake would then choose a place a few miles from the temple that was dedicated to Somdeo, where they would keep the buffalos before sacrificing them. Furthermore, Thakur informs us that in the Tai-Phake language, *ti* means place and *pling* stands for keep. Thus, before becoming Tipam, this locality was called Tipling, the "place where one keeps [buffaloes]" (Thakur 1982, 22). This interpretation, which gives Tipam's name a sacrificial value, is close to the contemporary meaning given to it by the Khamti.

The second locality, Tipamia, is further upstream, along the Bhuri Dihing River. Today this village, which is in Upper Assam, is best known as the home of an important Buddhist monastery. While it is not possible to locate the original place of worship dedicated to Tipam, the presence of this monastery allows us to hypothesize that this place of worship was built in place of the original *ṭhān* (sacred place), which was dedicated to the Chao Noi Tipam.

Nang Hoo Toung

Toward the north of the Lohit River is the Nang Hoo Toung territory.[23] The third *phi muang* is, as the prefix *nang* (lady) indicates, a female divinity. The territory it is said to protect is more easily identifiable than that of the two previous *phi muang*s. Nang Hoo Toung is known in Assamese as *kesāikhāti* ("raw meat eater"). A famous temple bears her name in Upper Assam, and it is dedicated to Tamreswari, nesting on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, which is just a few miles away from the town of Sadiya. However, the current location of this temple does not correspond with the original location of the temple, which was probably on a

hill. Due to numerous earthquakes it was destroyed and then rebuilt several times on the plains, leading to its current site along the Brahmaputra.

In the writings pertaining to the history of Assam, the temple of Kesaikhati is also noted to be associated with the Chutiya, whose kingdom was annexed by the Ahom in the early sixteenth century. Of note, this temple has a copper roof; this intrigued the English during the colonial period, and François Jacquesson (1999) recalled that human sacrifices were made there every year until the beginning of the nineteenth century. These sacrifices were used to appease the anger of the goddess, who is in the form of Kali. Bani Kanta Kakati (1967) informed us that the ritual officials of the goddess were of Deori descent (Kakati 1967, 62). B. K. Barua and H. V. Murthy (1965), referring to Kakati (1967), indicated that it was the most important temple in Upper Assam, and that many people worshipped Tamreswari and participated in human sacrifices. Barend Jan Terwiel also stated that during his investigation, the Khamyang of Chalapathar village had told him that in the past they also worshiped a female deity called Nang Hua Tong in the Khamyang dialect. Following Edward Gait (1994), Terwiel began to associate this divinity with Tamreswari. He noted that the Khamyang worshipped the goddess twice a year, after the Sangkhen festival (Buddhist New Year) and at the time of the rice harvest in October. However, he pointed out that in the 1980s, the sacrifice offered to Nang Hua Tong was replaced by a Buddhist practice that consisted of the construction of a sand pyramid called *cetii kong mu* (Kondinya 1986, 31). It is interesting to note that the construction of these pyramids also coincided with the sacred days (*wan kam*s[24] in Tai-Khamyang, equivalent to *satang*s for the Khamti) in which the sacrifices were offered to the goddess (Terwiel 1981, 31). In other words, the bi-annual sacrifice was thus replaced by the construction of pyramids during the designated holy days. As is the case found in other Tai populations, these holidays take place on the eighth and fifteenth days of the rising and falling moons. These elements thus let us suppose that the original temple associated with Tamreswari corresponds with the third *phi muang*, which is venerated by the Khamti, as Nang Hoo Toung.

Interrelations between the three phi muang*s*

The three *phi muang*s are related to each other. According to the Khamti, a sibling relationship might even exist between these three protective divinities, with Noi Cheynam being the oldest of the three. Indeed, the age of the different divinities makes it possible to show the precedence of one entity (starting from the territory and the inhabitants it protects) over the others.

In connection with the Buddhist doctrine, and unlike the other two *phi muang*s, Chao Noi Cheynam follows the precepts at an advanced level when compared to the others, at the level of eight moral principles (*aṣṭa śīla*). This is the reason why the Khamti offered him a cooked dish, as compared to a raw one, unlike the other two *phi muang*s, which only follow the precepts associated with the laity, totaling five in number.

It has already been mentioned that during the Khamti migration, the Chutiya kingdom occupied the Lohit region. In his work, the Reverend Endle (1975)

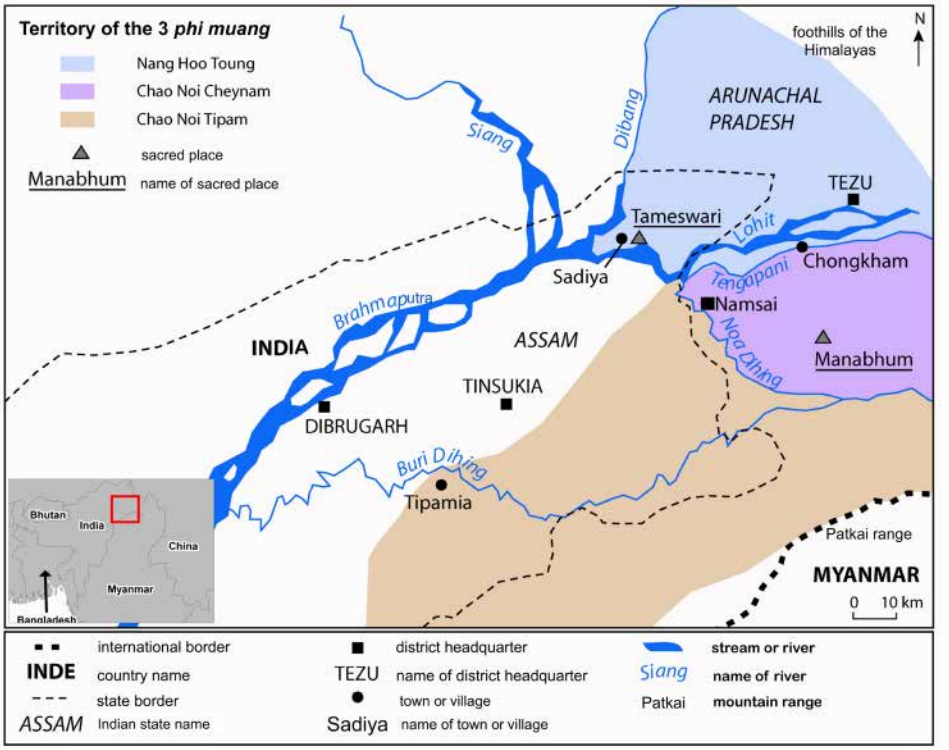
had pointed out that each of the four clans worshipped divinities specific to their respective location. Each of these divinities reigned over the territory on which one clan or another lived. Girasi-gira was associated with the Dibongiya clan, Pisha-dema with the Tengapanya clan, and Pishashi-deman (the suffix *shi* is the mark of the feminine, making this divinity the daughter) was the divinity of highest importance for the Borgoniya. Endle did not provide information on the divinity of the Patargoniya, for he simply stated that this clan quickly disappeared. Above these four primordial divinities, Endle signaled the existence of a supreme divinity, Kundil Mama. For all these divinities, a *ṭhān* (sacred place) had been consecrated. This was the place where one came to celebrate the divinity annually, and to ask for protection.[25] In accordance with the information collected here with regards to the kinship ties between the three *phi muang*s worshipped by the Khamti, Endle (1975) wrote that the divinities of each of the Chutiya clans also shared kinship ties.

Moreover, in his thesis on the Dibongyia clan, the Indian historian Paban Chandra Saikia (1976) informed us that Pisa Dema (also known as Boliababa in Assamese) and Pisasi Dema (the equivalent of Tamreswari in Assamese) were the children of Kundil Mama. If we were to now transpose the delimitation of the territory of the deities Boliababa and Tameswari with two of the current *phi muang*s, namely, Nang Hoo Toung and Chao Noi Tipam, we would be able to note a correspondence pertaining to the places of worship. Based on this, one could therefore hypothesize that Nang Hoo Toung and Chao Noi Tipam correspond to divinities formerly venerated by the Deori. The Khamti would then have appropriated them during their implantation into the region. Moreover, with regards to these two divinities, the names given by the Khamti and their characteristics—one male and one female divinity sharing sibling relations—correspond to the divine entities that pre-existed their arrival (Pisasi Dema or Tamreswari for Nang Hoo Toung, Boliababa for Chao Noi Tipam). Concerning the origin of the name Chao Noi Cheynam, while its territory corresponds to that of an ancient divinity present in the region, it seems to be a divinity that can be properly traced to the Khamti. The latter appears to have taken this name due to the similarity of the natural environment between Upper Myanmar and Upper Assam. Map 1 shows the information derived from our analyses on the territory of each of the three *phi muang*s, according to the Khamti. Rivers or streams mark the boundaries of a territory.

Conclusion

Acting as guardian protectors on several levels, on which the *phi muang* control the entirety of living beings, the investigation conducted here on the origin and interrelation of each of the *phi muang*, along with the characteristics of individual and collective ceremonies, allows us to consider these divinities as forces of place.

In addition, this article formulates certain hypotheses related to their integration into and appropriation of the northeast corridor of India. The concordances with several local cults and deities that existed prior to their arrival allows us to suppose a transposition of local cults with existing deities in their former place of residence (in present-day Myanmar), such as Chao Noi Cheynam, or by trans-



Map 1. Map showing the spatial representation of the three *phi muang*s. Courtesy of Nicolas Lainé.

forming them by what one could term "Tai-izing," as is the case for Nang Hoo Toung and Chao Noi Tipam.

The territory of each *phi muang* reveals indeed a particular representation of the northeastern Indian space, and it should also be noted that the territory of each of these divinities does not extend south of the alluvial plain of the Brahmaputra River but rather is concentrated in Upper Assam. During the investigation, no informants were able to cite other *phi muang*s or even name the divinities residing beyond the areas reported on the map. Moreover, the territorial boundaries of the three *phi muang*s corresponded to the limit of the historical settlement of the Khamti in the region; these were either inhabited by the different waves of Khamti population or assimilated since the middle of the eighteenth century. However, it would be prudent to remember that the Khamti have historically always lived in Upper Assam and have entrenched themselves in the present-day Namsai district following an agreement with the British officer James Hannay in 1843, which occurred after an insurrection that was overthrown by the British power of that time. Since this treaty, which marks a commitment to good conduct, the Khamti have been allowed to relocate along the Tengapani River, where they originally settled when they migrated toward India.

It should also be noted that this appropriation of land and social space was *not* expounded upon according to a concentric model, by circles of power—from the village to a given territory, then to the nation-state scale, where a divinity

controls different levels of space—as is the case for many Tai populations who have a nation-state across Southeast Asia.

As for the appropriation of the venerated cults that were present prior to their arrival, we were able to note that up till today, the Khamti were still in conflict with the descendants of the Deori, who they refused to give access to the forest of Manabhum to perform the practices of their old cult. It can thus be assumed that it is by transposing and appropriating pre-existing divinities that the Khamti sought to legitimize their presence in the region. The adoption of local deities, which implies their pacification, also includes a desire to pacify the forces of the place to be able to occupy it, thereby legitimizing their presence in Northeast India. Across South and Southeast Asia, the controlling of a territory by controlling the strength of a place remains a strategy that is often used to legitimize the presence of a group in any given territory.

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Notes

1. The Khamti are a Tai-speaking people. Their language is a part of a family spread wide across Southeast Asia. Among the numerous Tai groups and language speakers, the Khamti are classified into the Shan language subgroup (from the Tai-Kadai family), also called Tai Long or Tai Yong ("Greater Tai").

2. This area remains the most important Khamti population center in the country. In Upper Assam, small pockets of Khamti populations and other Tai (Tai Phakey, Tai Ahom, or Tai Khamyang) still live in Sivsagar, Tinsukia, and Lakhimpur districts (Gogoi 1996). In mainland Southeast Asia, Shan people are found in the Northwest of Thailand (Tannenbaum 2001) and in the Yunnan Province of China, but they are mainly in present-day Kachin and Kyin States of Myanmar (Robinne 2000; Conway 2006).

3. For more information about the development, growth, and collapse of the timber industry in the area, see Lainé 2012.

4. The British saw the practice of Theravada Buddhism and what it implies, notably the existence of an alphabet and a morality, as the index of a certain degree of "civilization" of the Khamti, unlike the other populations of the region, notably the Mishmi and the Singphos. Since colonial times, most studies of the Khamti or their religion have focused solely on this aspect of their religious system (see among others Kondinya 1986; Pandey 1997). While only a few contemporary authors have reported the presence of a spirit cult (Barua 1976; Behera 2000), Siraporn Nathalang (2009) recently (re)affirmed that Theravada Buddhism was the only religion of the Khamti. However, she notes that it is by adhering to Theravada Buddhism first and foremost as a part of their identity that the Khamti today can claim a renewal of Shan identity.

5. In this article, I use the term "Tai" to distinguish Tai-speaking populations living outside Thailand (while those from Thailand are referred to as "Thai"). The term "Shan" corresponds to a linguistic sub-branch of these Tai populations, to which the Khamti and Ahom in particular belong.

6. Early research on Theravada Buddhism stressed dichotomy, while Melford Spiro (1967) marked a clear distinction between Buddhism and what he called "supernaturalism" (spirit worship) in Myanmar. Most recent research (like Tannenbaum's work in Thailand in 2001) considers Buddhist and animist (spirit cult practices) as both belonging to the same religious system.

7. The data presented in this article were collected between the years of 2008 and 2010. During this period, I benefited from an appointment offered by the French Embassy at IIT Guwahati to conduct several field trips to Arunachal Pradesh, which amounted to fourteen months among the Khamti. During my visits, I mainly used participant observation and semi-directed interviews, with the help of a field assistant.

8. Writings from the colonial period attest to the presence of many elephants in Khamti villages. During those times, the sale of elephants allowed privileged relations to be maintained with the dominant British power. The latter also granted specific statuses to the Khamti by exempting them from taxes concerning the capture of elephants (Gogoi 1971, XLI). Furthermore, the writings of Arthur John Wallace Milroy (1922) and George Peress Sanderson (2000), both important figures in British elephant management, highlighted their knowledge regarding a pachyderm's capture. From the time of the country's independence, elephants became essential for logging, an activity that drove the region's economic development until the end of the twentieth century. However, this momentum was stopped by a sudden ban on this activity enacted by the Indian Supreme Court in 1996, which consequently led to the economic and social disintegration of the Khamti society; the ban also led many Khamti to sell their elephants.

9. As a seasonal activity, catches generally begin after the monsoon period at the time of Durga *pūjā* (in September/October, a date that was introduced during the British period) and extend until the Buddhist New Year, *poi shangken*. This period precedes the arrival of the rains and the beginning of the sowing of rice, which requires labor and therefore needs the men in the villages to be available.

10. Among these ritual practices and beliefs are the consultations of horoscopes that are used to set the date and direction of departure, the *chao pling chang* ritual exchange ceremony (literally the one that deals with wild elephants) in the forest, and the alliance with Utingna, which is considered the lord of wild elephants (Lainé 2018). At the end of my fieldwork, each capturer I met had his own practices, beliefs, and personal experiences. Thus, unlike the customary ritual of the Khmer, as studied by the French historian Jean Ellul (1983), there are no sets of strictly defined rules on the practices to be performed among the Khamti prior to the capturing of elephants, which is called *tranam*.

11. Khamti *phāṅdi* (elephant trappers) consider Utingna to be the lord and king of wild forest elephants. He is represented as a man sitting on an elephant, playing a musical instrument that is described as a flute or lyre (see Lainé 2016).

12. For an exhaustive account of elephant catching operations as practiced by the Khamti, see Lainé 2014 and 2020.

13. The term *phāṅdi* is a neologism that refers to the Hindi term *phāṅd*, which means trap. Literally, the *phāṅdi* refers to the person who launches the rope used for lassoing the elephants, hence "trapping" them.

14. Regarding the presence of *pang suea muang* on the outskirts of villages, it should be noted that many Khamti also use the Assamese term *dāṅgariẏā bābā* to describe the altars that are located on the fringes of villages near prayer halls (*nāmghar*s). The name is an appellation of Shiva and may be associated with a temple dedicated to him in the district of East Siang located in Arunachal Pradesh. However, I was given the following folk etymology: *dāṅgar* means "big" and *dāṅgariẏā* is a term used when one addresses the elderly, while *bābā* (father) is a rather affectionate term employed to designate a relative or wise person,

such as a *sādhu* in India. By this definition, *dāṅgariẏā bābā* can be thought of as a Hindu equivalent to *phi muang*. In reality, *dāṅgariẏā* refers to the malevolent spirit of a person who died an untimely or inauspicious death. There is also a class of village spirits known as *buṛha dāṅgariẏā*, but *dāṅgariẏā bābā* generally refers to a malevolent spirit in Assamese.

15. A catching expedition lasts for at least two or three weeks.

16. For example, in Northwest Thailand, Tannenbaum wrote that in addition to the altar that is dedicated to the spirit *phi muang*, there is another altar in the village center, which is called the *tsau waan* (Tannenbaum 1992). Among the populations within this region, the villages are also repaired annually. This practice is associated directly and solely with Buddhism. Monks are called in to chant mantras to repel evil village spirits (*phi hai*). Among the Khamti, such purely Buddhist ceremonies exist, despite not being performed annually. They take place only when several calamities happen within the village, such as a series of deaths or crop failures. From memory, the inhabitants of Jenglai mentioned to me during my research visit that this ceremony was last held in the year 2000. At that time, the village was closed to outsiders, and as many as seven monks took part in the ceremony.

17. Two Khamti women, both of whom were among the eldest in the village, informed me that in the past, there was a second annual ritual to thank the *phi muang*s during harvest time. Today the ceremony in honor of the *phi* takes place only once a year, as mentioned.

18. The practice of sacrificing when crossing a pass is common with other Shan groups too. According to legend, the Ahom, when they migrated to the northeast, had also immolated a rooster during crossing the mountain pass, which opened the plain of Assam to them. They had baptized this mountain as Mount Patkai (from *pat*, meaning to cut, and *kai*, chicken). This name is still used today (Jacquesson 1999; Terwiel 1981).

19. Such appropriation of cults from other populations is not uncommon among the Tai in other parts of the peninsula. For examples, see Archaimbault (1971) on Tai in Laos.

20. During the research, there was difficulty obtaining recognition from the Khamti of the existence of cults carried out by the Deori in the forest of Manabhum, although many villagers hesitantly admitted that there were yearly pilgrimages toward this forest. During the course of the fieldwork, this issue raised important political questions, revealing intercommunity tensions in the district. Indeed, recognizing an ancient cult rendered by the Deori in the Manabhum forest would amount to attesting to their previous presence on the territory, which would legitimize the Deori's claim of autochthony in order to access land rights that they do not currently have. This is what happened in 2010, during my time in the field. Several members of the Deori community living in Mahadevpur on the border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh organized a march to demand their Permanent Residential Status (PRS) from the authorities. This march resulted in violent clashes in Namsai ("Several Injured as Clashes Rock Lohit" 2010).

21. Dheodai Buranji ascribes this area as being near the current villages of Jaypur and Nam-Phake, along the Brahmaputra River.

22. This was the case in 1401, between the Taï Nora and the Ahom, and later, in 1563, between the Chutiya and the Ahom. During the period of the Mughal wars in the seventeenth century, Tipam remained famous as the place where a peace treaty was signed in 1663. During the last period of the Ahom dynasty, in 1768, the inhabitants of Tipam joined the Ahom to suppress the first Moran insurrections, which led to the Moamaria revolution that heralded the decline of the Ahom Empire (see Phukan 2001, 286–88). From a geological point of view, there is a mountain range called the Tipam Hills (or Tipam series), which crosses the south of the northeast and has an altitude that varies between 2,500 and 4,000 meters. This range lies in the Arakan Valley in Myanmar, extending into Tripura and along the Cachar Hills and Naga Hills in Upper Assam to the border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (see Goswami 1960, 97–100). This range contains many deposits, especially sandstone and salt, which were exploited at that time by the nearby Naga and the Kachari.

23. Barend Jan Terwiel translates this name as "the lady with the golden head." However, he specifies that it is not about gold but rather an alloy of five metals that is the color of gold (Terwiel 1981).

24. *Wan kam* are days dedicated to Buddhist religious activities. The village must be closed to foreigners during this period, and the inhabitants must not leave the village. On these days, no agricultural or forestry activity can be undertaken.

25. It remains impossible today to find the initial location of each of these *ṭhān*s, due to the many earthquakes, floods, and landslides that have occurred in the region since that time. All of these sites have thus been demolished and rebuilt several times in different locales.

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