

The Role of UNESCO World Heritage Site Charaideo Moidam in Promoting Tourism Through Tai-Ahom's Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Charaideo Moidam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Assam, India, is an identity of the Tai-Ahom dynasty's rich culture and heritage. The Moidam is a royal burial site of Ahom rulers known for its architectural magnificence. It also plays a significant role in preserving and promoting the Tai-Ahom community's intangible cultural heritage. The present work analyzes the site from the perspective of preserving oral traditions, ancestral rituals, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the Tai-Ahom language. Based on archival research, it analyses the role of how the Charaideo Moidam connects the tangible elements of heritage like the burial mounds with the intangible aspects, including spiritual practices, and the burial custom of Tai-Ahom. Further, the study explores the potentiality of Charaideo Moidam as a center for Cultural Tourism, intending to increase awareness of Tai-Ahom culture worldwide while benefiting the local community. The challenges like inadequate documentation, risk of commercialization, and limited community involvement are addressed, alongside the recommendations for sustainable heritage management. This study focused on the Tai-Ahom identity's connection with Charaideo Moidam, emphasizing its importance in cultural revival, education, and passing down knowledge to future generations, ensuring that the heritage of Tai-Ahom flourishes in the modern era.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Tai-Ahom, Charaideo Moidam, Tourism

1. Introduction

Located in Charaideo district in Assam, India, Charaideo Moidam is a significant archaeological site and is noted for its historical and cultural importance, especially as the burial grounds of the Ahom royals. It was built during the Ahom period, and the constructions reflect the architectural and cultural practices of the Ahoms, contributing to the understanding of Assam's past (**Bhushan, 2005**). The Tai-Ahoms most probably be traced either from Mong Mao (south China, current Dehong, Yunnan province of China) or Hukawng Valley (Myanmar) entering into Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century CE after crossing through Patkai hills. Charaideo or Che-Rai-Doi was the first capital of the Ahom Dynasty established by King (Swargodeo) Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha (reign 1228-1268). The Tai-Ahom built moidams or "home-for-spirit," for 600 years (from the 13th to the 19th century CE), highlighting the natural topography's features

of hills, forests, and water to create a sacred geography. Around 90 large and small size of moidams are found within the Charaideo burial site but only 37 moidams are currently protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Assam Government's Directorate of Archaeology (DOA) which are marked with serial numbers from 1 to 37 (Charaideo Moidam Report 2020-21). The moidams are made by constructing an earth mound (Ga-Moidam) on the top of a hollow vault made of stone, brick, or earth (Tak) and topped by a shrine (Chou Cha Li) at the middle of an octagonal wall (Garh). This shape resembles the Tai Universe. The shrine at the top is called the Mungklang, and the mid-area symbolizes a golden staircase that creates a continuity between heaven and earth.

Promoting Tai-Ahom's intangible cultural heritage in the region through tourism is facing several primary challenges such as issues of cultural appropriation, little benefit to communities, and poor stakeholder involvement, all of which adversely affect sustainability. Heritage sites are used externally for commercial purposes and often leave the Tai-Ahoms empty-handed economically and culturally (George, 2010). This situation worsens the financial inequity associated with the troubled identity of the community (George, 2010). Insufficient participation from cultural inheritors and poor incentives from the government hinder developing tourism, and thus, ineffective resource integration is due to poorly coordinated stakeholder initiatives (Qi et al., 2023; Yang, 2023). The difference in values between those cultures and the tourism strategy usually leads to poorly integrated and unauthentic initiatives (Yang, 2023). There are other challenges presented to the Charaideo Moidam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, concerning the formal promotion of Tai-Ahom intangible cultural heritage very little documentation has been done on cultural practices and rituals, which are bound to extinction due to modernization and change in generational attitudes. The site promotion seems more exclusive to its tangible products overshadowing the intangible aspect of the Tai-Ahom culture. Limited funding for cultural preservation programming further hampers the development of initiatives capable of integrating heritage promotion with tourism.

Its UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the cultural category can enhance tourism, attracting many tourists and economic growth for the region (Rofo, 2015). The moidams are not only tombs but serve as symbols of ancestral veneration, embodying Ahom's spiritual beliefs and their deep connection with nature. The site encapsulates the dynasty's advanced engineering, architectural skills, and cultural sophistication. The significance of Charaideo moidam extends beyond its tangible attributes; it represents the intangible heritage of the Tai-Ahom community, including rituals, oral traditions, and traditional craftsmanship. The site not only serves as a testament to the region's rich history but also plays a crucial role in promoting heritage tourism, which can lead to economic benefits for the local community. It also highlights the need to preserve both its tangible structure and intangible cultural heritage associated with it, making it a critical site for understanding and promoting the legacy of the Ahom dynasty and its contributions to Indian history.

This study is expected to help in promoting Tai-Ahom's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through the UNESCO World Heritage Site charaideo moidam, which will ultimately result in global awareness and recognition of Tai-Ahom traditions, active community engagement in cultural preservation, and help develop sustainable tourism for benefiting the local community. This site will encourage a more profound engagement by the visitors by emphasizing its intangible and tangible heritage. Additionally, better stakeholder coordination, complete documentation of cultural practice, as well as increased research will complement and strengthen the preservation and transmission of Tai-Ahom heritage. These will thus provide long-term cultural sustainability and economic benefits for the community.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To Explore the potentiality of Charaideo moidam for cultural tourism.
- To examine the role of Charaideo Moidam in safeguarding Tai-Ahom rituals, Traditions, and Indigenous knowledge

1.2 Research Methodology

This study incorporates secondary data and primary data to understand the role played by Charaideo Moidam in tourism promotion based on Tai-Ahom's intangible cultural heritage. Secondary data were gathered from research articles, government reports, and ASI records regarding the site. Primary data were collected by visiting the field, especially the Moidam and ASI offices, and direct observation of the infrastructure. Informal discussions with various stakeholders in the area and perusal of conservation documents were also conducted. Satellite imagery in Google Earth Pro and ESRI base maps created a detailed map of the site, and ArcGIS 10.4.1 software processed it so that an accurate visualization and spatial analysis of the Moidam's layout and surroundings could be done. The self-clicked images by the author of the site's architecture and infrastructure were used to document the significance of the site. This approach covers historical context, geospatial tools, and visual and field data to assess Moidam's potential as a tourism hub while emphasizing heritage preservation.

1.3 Area of the Study

The study area has taken up at Charaideo Moidam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Charaideo, Assam, India known for the cultural and historical legacy of the Ahom dynasty. Charaideo is the first capital of the Ahom Dynasty founded by King Siu-ka-Pha, at the foothills of Naga Hills, an extension of Patkai Hills while its successive rulers shifted their capital to other places such as Charagua, Bakata, Garhgaon, Rangpur and Jorhat. Over time, this area transformed into a sacred burial ground for Ahom royal family members, calling it the "Pyramids of Assam" owing to their burial mounds-endowed architectural grandeur locally known as moidams. Charaideo Moidam is not simply an archaeological wonder; it is also an archive of the intangible cultural heritage of the Tai-Ahom community. These burial mounds have their rituals, oral traditions, and craftsmanship, which have significance in cultural preservation and historical research. Most of the major parts of the Charaideo Archaeological Site are covered with wild vegetation, and thus there has not been a counting of all the Moidams since it ranges from a very small to a very large burial mound.

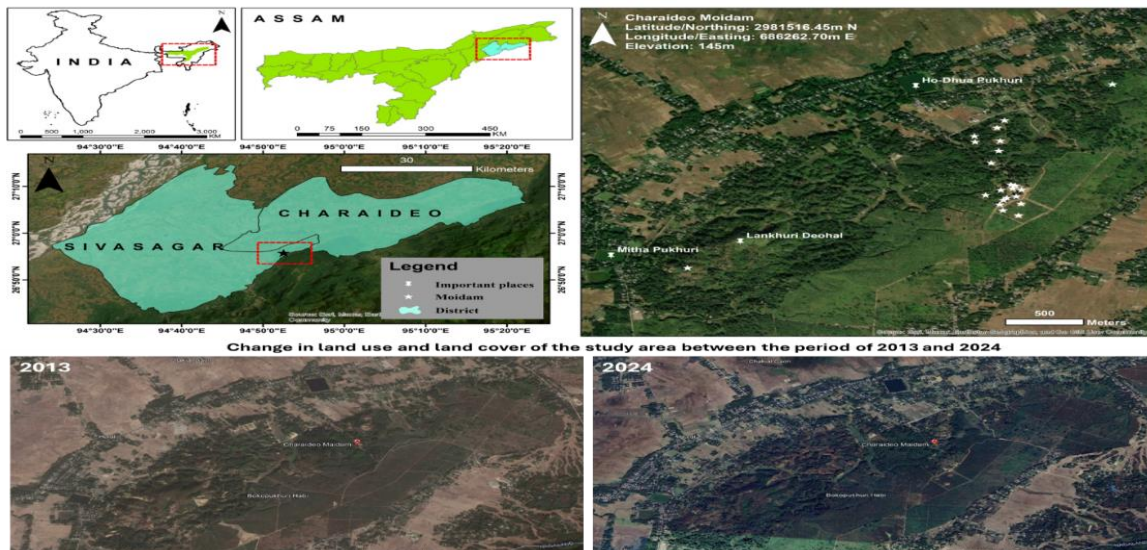


Figure 1: The location of the Charaideo Moidam, a royal burial ground (A UNESCO heritage site) in Eastern Assam, India (upper left); Scattered moidams and nearby important related heritage sites (upper right); the significant increase of built-up in the vicinity of the historical site between the period of 2013 (lower left) and 2024 (lower right) necessitates the formulation of conservation strategies.

From the above images (Figure 1), the upper left shows the study area location of Charaideo Moidam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Eastern Assam district Charaideo, India with scattered moidams and nearby important archaeological sites on the image upper right. The other two images below show the comparisons of changes in land use and land cover of the study area between 2013 and 2024. The comparison shows a significant build-up near the historical site during this period. Land cover has been changing over the years, and human activities like deforestation and urbanization are increasing. By comparing these two images we can also see the changes in land use for agriculture which is decreasing and the rise in encroachment on heritage site land by the local people. So, it is important to develop plans and monitor the implementation of strategy for conservation, and maintenance of the historically significant site. This initiative will help to raise awareness about the importance of the site and stop any encroachment on the site.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

UNESCO, (2003) defines Intangible Cultural Heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated with communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, interaction with nature, and historical conditions. It gives communities a sense of identity and continuity while promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Five Domains of Intangible Cultural Heritage:

1. Oral Traditions and Expressions, including Language
2. Performing Arts
3. Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events
4. Knowledge and Practices Concerning Nature and the Universe
5. Traditional Craftsmanship

Some authors have defined Intangible Cultural Heritage as below:

Wei, (2024) defined Intangible Cultural Heritage products as consumer goods or services that directly utilize such ICH resources and are, therefore commercialized or subject to industrialization. Such products act as representatives of ICH's emotional, symbolic, and practical values, thus constituting a significant part of the tourism industry while contributing to the overall effect of this sector on the tourism economy. Pan (2024) stated in his work that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is the practice, representation, expression, knowledge, or skill in a certain community recognized by that community as part of its cultural heritage. It is the transmission of generations and is often done by oral tradition, while it also reflects the community's identity and values.

2.2 Historical and Cultural Significance of Charaideo Moidam

The Charaideo Moidam is the sacred burial site of the Ahoms. It has significant cultural importance because of its heritage (Kalita, 2020). The burial structures, rooted in the Tai-Ahom community's

traditional knowledge and belief systems about the afterlife, preserve a living heritage of about six hundred years (Kalita, 2020). The Moidams involve elaborate preservation processes rituals and construction techniques (Kalita, 2020; Changmai, 2023). But, under the influence of Hinduism and other reasons, some Indigenous mortuary customs have been changed (Changmai, 2023). The Ahom dynasty ruled for six centuries, specifically from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries, and contributed immensely to its cultural fabric (Boruah & Srivastava, 2024).

2.3 Tai- Ahom's Cultural Heritage

The rich heritage of the Tai-Ahom Community has contributed to shaping Assamese society. The Tai-Ahom hails from Upper Burma and established a kingdom under King Siu-ka-pha, lasting 600 years before being annexed by the British in 1826 (Dutta, 2023). The Ahoms brought a distinct form of Tai culture that integrated with local traditions and enriched Assam's culture (Grierson, 1940). Their legacies are mirrored in the governance, culture, and contributions in Assam's socio-political sphere. One of the markers of culture is the Tai-Ahom language, which is rich in proverbs that talk about the community's worldview and its distinct identity in Assam. Proverbs carry history, pride, and societal values by enthroning their cultural heritage (Phukan & Nath, 2022). Modernity, however, poses challenges to the Tai-Ahom's heritage, affecting their traditional practices, religion, and language (Dutta, 2023). Changes threaten the preservation of culture, but for some view such modernity is an increased opportunity for cultural resilience adaptation and innovation that could enrich Tai-Ahom practice. However, very few studies exist exploring how younger generations adapt Tai-Ahom cultural practices, so there is a need for further inquiry into the same.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Potential of Charaideo Moidam for Cultural Tourism

Charaideo Moidam has abundant potential which can be exploited for cultural tourism development due to its rich cultural heritage and historical values. These spectacular burial grounds of Ahom kings reflect Assam's unique cultural character, represented by Moidam. This will provide an opportunity for the Charaideo Moidam to engage in a cultural exchange along with education on heritage conservation, that is specific to Assam. The Tai-Ahom community has a cultural inheritance of its own and that bears in some way to Assamese culture. Like any other ethnic group, Tai-Ahoms develop their own language and script, as a part of themselves (Gogoi, 1991). The background, language, and culture show the special blend of the features of the indigenous and external influences when they migrated into the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century. For instance, the UNESCO World Heritage title will encourage foreign tourists as well as tourists of domestic tourists. Cultural tourism attached to Charaideo Moidam could help the local community's economic development. Similarly, it is compatible with the fact that sustainable tourism is going global involving local communities, and empowering the economy.

For the last six years tourism at World Heritage site Charaideo Moidam has garnered increasing interest as a major cultural and heritage site. The government has been working tirelessly to preserve and promote the site with infrastructure to better visitor's experiences. It appears that the combined effect of these steps and the increased promotion of local and state authorities shows a steady increase in tourist visits in this period. From Table 1, it is evident from the data collected by the Archaeological Survey of India and Statistic data of visitors of the centrally protected monument Group of Moidam, Chairaideo under Sivasagar Sub circle for the period 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2021-22, 2022-23, we find that average domestic tourist is good except lockdown and that of foreign tourist is very low.

Name of Centrally Protected Monument	Period	Category	Total
GROUP OF MOIDAMS AT CHARAIDEO	01.04.2017-31.03.2018	Domestic	52,215
		Foreigner	54
	01.04.2018-31.03.2019	Domestic	37,220
		Foreigner	91
	01.04.2019-31.03.2020	Domestic	16,650
		Foreigner	65
(Lockdown)	01.04.2020-31.03.2021	Domestic	0
		Foreigner	0
(Lockdown ticket open on 25 th Nov 2023)	01.04.2021-31.03.2022	Domestic	33131
		Foreigner	4
	01.04.2022-31.04.2023	Domestic	94,172
		Foreigner	32

Table 1: Statistical data of visitors of the centrally protected monument under Sivasagar Sub-circle for the period of 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2021-2022, 2022-2023

Source: ASI (Archaeological Survey of India)

Guided tours, exhibitions, and even storytelling revolving around the display of heritage from the Ahom dynasty could be the growth area in cultural tourism at Charaideo moidam. Visitors learn about Ahoms' burial tradition, their contribution to assamese culture, and the role Ahoms have played in the regional history. The cultural fete for a traveler could be events and cultural festivals based on the Ahom tradition, where one could watch performances of traditional music and dance drama. Not only does it attract tourists but it also opens up opportunities for the locals to make income. Some other archaeological sites can be found in and around the Charaideo Moidam site (see Table 2).

Table 2: Archaeological Sites in the Charaideo Moidam Neighbourhood

SL. No.	Name of the Site	Descriptions
1	Bali Maidam	A group of some large Moidams nearly about 1 km east of Charaideo Archaeological site is probably made of double vaulted chambers covered with earth and finally covered with burnt brickworks. These moidam are now vandalized at the hands of humans and nature.
2	Gorukhiya Deohal	A significant rectangular slab of stone, measuring 2.72x1.86m, is placed here on the ground and under a decaying octagonal shed. It is most likely used as a royal seat for the ruler.
3	Bailung Moidam	This Moidam is in the middle of cultivated fields and belonged to some Bailung priests of the Ahom dynasty. Mostly destroyed, here and there, scattered bricks are observed in the exposed parts of the Moidam.
4	Khunduna Tila	It is a small mound above a small hillock, with two stone objects: one resembling a stone pillar and another, a pillar base.
5	Deohal	Deohal, and the Lankuri Doul to its immediate west, form the two most sacred sanctuaries for the Ahom royalty. Located atop two

		different hillocks, Deohal is the ancient and much higher of the two places. It was founded as the first temple site for the Ahom kings. Currently, remnants of the Ahom temple lie in Deohal, which are represented through a raised rectangular platform. Fluted stone pillars can be seen at the edge of this platform, three on the north-eastern, and four on the north-western side.
6	Lankhuri Doul	Situated on the top of the second high hillock, Lankhuri doul is a state-protected site. It also contains remnants of burnt brick structures, more or less cylindrical, which are believed to represent the form of another important Ahom religious site.
7	Juriya Moidam	Juriya Moidams are two small moidams located within 3 to 4 km of the Charaideo Archaeological Site and fairly close to each other, like twins. These Moidams are either vandalized or intact. No signs of burnt bricks were found during the exploration.
8	Rajbari	Within the locality of ancient capital city Charaideo, north of Deohal and very far from Charaideo Archaeological site, can be seen a linear feature forming a raised earth embankment that is said to represent remnant ramparts raised to protect the Ahom king's palace area.

(Source: Charaideo Report 2020-21, Directorate of Archaeology, Assam)

3.2 Charaideo Moidam as Repository of Tai-Ahom Heritage

Charaideo Moidam is a storehouse of Tai-Ahom heritage, the only source of historical and cultural identity. On one hand, this site chronicles the Ahom Kingdom's historical narratives, on the other, it represents the ongoing struggle of the Tai-Ahom people to construct their identities and heritage through the issue of present-day Assam. The first capital of the Ahom kingdom was Charaideo or Che- Rai-Doi (Tai-Ahom, meaning the shining city on the hills). The burial mounds of the Ahom Swargadeos (Kings) and royal family members are known as Moidams. The word Moidams is derived from the Tai-Ahom word Phrangmai-dam. Dam refers to "the spirit of the deceased person" and Phrangmai means "to put into the grave"

Shape and Size of Moidams

The maidams on the exterior are hemispherical and range from a small mound to a hillock of about 20m in height. According to the power and status of the one buried, a moidam was said to be determined in size. A moidam is composed of a vault or chamber with a hemispherical mound over an arched gateway on its west. Initially, the vaults were made of solid wooden poles and beams. The wooden vaults were replaced with stone and brick vaults at the time of the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1696 CE- 1712 CE.) Karal or a cementing agent used in a unique mortar mix was used to put bricks and stones of moidams together. Varying locally available materials, such as lime, snail shells, pulses, resin, hemp, molasses, matimah (black gram), and fish were used to fabricate this cementing agent.



Figure 2: Image of Excavation of Moidam No.2 (Image left) conducted by ASI, Guwahati circle from 2002-2003 and Exhibition Hall in front of Moidam No. 2 showing details from the excavation. (Images by Author)

The Religion of Tai-Ahom

To make their identity distinctive, the Tai-Ahom community tries to reconstruct their identity through historical narrations as well as cultural practices thus fostering uniqueness of identification (Saikia, 2001). A site of cultural and religious rituals and activities, the Moidam solidifies Tai-Ahom identity and positions the past and the present through rituals and commemorations (Saikia, 2004). Although most of the Ahoms have converted to Hinduism, Tai-Ahoms have their own religion. From historical records, it appears that the Assam Tai-Ahom people were not image worshipers. They had no iconography of the gods and goddesses named in their religious books. However, it was discovered that only the Tai-Ahom royal family had possession of two idol guardian deities, Chum and Sheng. In Assamese, they are, comparatively, known as Chumdeo and Shengdeo. These deities (Phra) were bright in color and were believed to rule over the kingdom for which the ruling king kept the secret of these deities under his responsibilities. Ahoms acknowledge Lengdon as their ancestor and primary deity.

The Hindu priests and pundits in Assam compared the Tai-Ahom God and Goddesses with Hindu Gods and Goddesses by the following names:

Table 3: Names of Gods and Goddesses names in Tai-Ahom and Hindu

Tai Ahom	Hindu	Tai Ahom	Hindu
Lengdon	Indra	Langkuri	Siva
Pha-Pin-Bet	Visnu	Chang-Dam	Brahma
Ban	Suryya	Den	Chandra
Fai	Agni	Ai-jang-Nao	Kuvera
Ai-A-Nang	Lakshmi	Ja(Ya)-Shing-Pha	Saraswati
Lao-Khri	Visvakarma		

(Source: Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs)

In the ancient Ahom chronicles, among the gods and goddesses of the Tai- Ahoms namely Lengdon, Thenkam, Yashingpha, and Laokhri are specially mentioned. Besides, many other deities followed by the Ahoms are 1. Pha-tung-ching 2. Khun-theu-Khan 3. Khrai-Pha-rung-Kham 4. Lengdon 5. Pha-but-rum-Sham-dam 6. Pha-ship-ip-shang-deng 7. Phura-tara

Animal sacrifices were used in grand ceremonies. The animals used for the sacrifice were elephants, cows, and buffaloes. Other small domestic and wild animals were also sacrificed. The Tai-Ahom religious ceremonies called Om-pha, Sai-pha, and Rik Khan also offered to the spirits of Kamle, Rangle, and Rangbang. The worship of Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven; Om-pha; performed by the King; with unaccountable animal sacrifices. The people in general performed the worship of Sai-pha. The rik-khan is a ceremony of victory celebration in which priests pray that the King and country may live long and well.

The Burial custom of the Tai-Ahom

In the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the first half of the 13th century A.D., the Siu-ka-Pha, the first king and founder of the Ahom Dynasty, established Charaideo as the first capital of the Ahom kings. The royal cemetery was at Charaideo, far from the palace, where most of royal bodies were buried. The Tai-Ahom used to bury their dead; but after the missionary influence of Hinduism, adopted cremation. However, this form of burial is still performed by selective priestly classes of the community such as Ma-chai, Ma-hung, and Ma-phung, in assamese they known as Deodhai, Mohan, and Baillung respectively. The change from burying to cremation was pronounced by the Bar-Raja (King over King) Phuleswari, wife of King Siva Singha (1714-1744 A.D.)

The only one who can order a coffin (Rung Dang) for the dead body of the kings to be buried is the new King. A religious ceremony called Dam-Lao-Dam-Phi was performed to cut short the period of suffering in the king if he was suffering from his life and had no chance left of further life. After the King died, the platform where he lived was then raised outside the palace. Then the dead body was taken out and placed on the platform in a sitting posture and the body was washed called Tai-ce (Tai: dead ce: wash). Then a fowl's egg was broken and struck upon the forehead of a dead body to drive out evil spirits. Pulses (a black variety called mati-mah) were rubbed into the body, the body was washed, the body was rubbed with all of this, and the body was then washed with water poured on the head. An old man of the Lukhurakhan clan offers himself to be buried in the grave with the king, the acknowledgment of such a privilege. In the period of the Ahom rule later the man was replaced with a fowl and delivered into a grave with the body and buried the body alive.

Some persons were sent before the start of the funeral procession to clear the royal cemetery and select the site for the royal grave. Secondly, they placed it gold and silver pieces they were taking with them. Once they've done that, they recite the prayer "pha ting tin lai-pha lai bet" and begin digging. Along the road, the procession goes off with grace and shenanigans. For them, the attendants consisted of the King male or female, and the bodyguard, carrying the hengdang (a sword), walked beside the coffin in the right order.

The number of attendants may be varying in number from king to king but the following ten are indispensable and must accompany the funeral procession:

Table 4: Attendants accompany in the funeral procession

SL. No.	Name	Description
1	Hengdan-dhara	The holder of the sword, in Tai called Hengdan. He is the king's bodyguard.
2	Chang-mai randhani	The royal cook
3	Tamuli	The attendant who prepares and serves betel nut to the king.

4	Pacani	The royal messenger of the household
5	Gacua Ligiri	Personal female attendant, especially in matters of dress and toilets.
6	Ligira	The waiter or male personal attendant.
7	Dhuakhuadhara	The holder of the tobacco pipe or hooka.
8	Cunwar-dhara	The holder of the whisk is made of the hairs on the tail of a yak
9	Jara-dhara	The holder of the water pot with a spout.
10	Pikdan-dhara	The holder of the spitton

(Source: Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs)

In the past, a particular road called Sa-nia-ali (Sa:dead body, nia: to carry, Ali: path or road) and a particular tank called Sa-dhua-Pukhuri were utilized for the ritualistic bathing of the deceased. Before taking the dead bodies of the kings to the burial ground washed with the waters of the Sa-dhua-Pukhuri, (sa: a dead body, dhua: wash, pukhuri: tank), located along the road Dhudor-ali (Sivasagar-Sonari road) near Charaideo Moidam.

Four-Person then lifts the dead body with the cangi and goes around the grave led by the torch bearer three, five, or seven times according to the seniority of the age of the deceased. The torch bearer is to point the torch towards the grave at every corner never looking at the grave. Then the bamboo torch was thrown away after completing the rounds. It is said that only people from the Gharphaliya and Lakhurakhan clans were assigned to bury the bodies of the Ahom Kings and Queen. And only Lakhurakhans were allowed to enter the giant vault under the hemispherical earthen mound, known as Kareng-Rung-Dang. The coffin was placed here in an east-west direction along a huge quantity of resources including utensils made of gold and silver, carpets, clothes, edible items, etc. Boulders in clay mortar were used to seal the vault door after the coffin was placed inside. The Ahom Swargadeos (Kings) appointed a special officer Changrung Phukan to construct and maintain all civil works, including the royal moidams. Special officers Moidam Phukans and groups of guards called Maidamiya were also appointed.

Tai-Ahoms practice of burial or cremation is followed by rituals and ceremonies like Tilani, which is performed on the third day in the open yard of the house, counted from the day of death of a person. The next ceremony is called Mara Lag Laguva, the ritual that is done by hosting a feast in the courtyard to be conducted on the tenth day from the date of death. After that, Puta Bhuj, the burial feast, is held in an open field under a pandal. It is held after the ritual but not before one year from the date of death. The last one is Mul-bhoj after Puta Bhuj, which offers an extravagant feast of rice, meat, fish, vegetables, and rice beer for the spirit of the dead, the ritual performed after the first year of passing.

Me-Dam-Me-Phi is one of the oldest festivals significant to the Ahoms. The term "Me" implies offerings, "Dam", ancestors, and "Phi", to deities, so this could mean the oblations offered to forefathers and sacrifices done to deities. This tradition was observed privately by individual families and publicly observed by a king and the common people. Today, this festival celebrated by the Tai-Ahom people of Assam can be said to be more about a festival than just worship. This worship of honor is celebrated by the Ahoms every year on 31st January in memory of their ancestors and it is believed that the soul stays as a dam(ancestor) for a short period then turns phi later afterlife."

3.3 Challenges in Promoting Tai-Ahom's Intangible Cultural Heritage

Therefore, there are so many issues related to historical, social, and economic factors that challenge the development of cultural tourism for promoting Tai-Ahom's Intangible Cultural Heritage. These challenges

have taken their toll on how well communities can foster an identity for preserving the Tai-Ahom traditions through the integration of ICH into cultural tourism. These challenges can be traced further generally as follows:

a) Lack of Documentation and Underutilization

As a community, the Tai-Ahoms have a rich collection of ancient manuscripts or Buranjis (historical chronicles) in the Ahom script. They are reflections of the knowledge systems, history, rituals, and traditions of the dynasty. These could cover the aspects of governance, religious rituals, astrology, or genealogies. However, a lot has not yet been tapped from this area owing to serious challenges that affect it. Only a handful of manuscripts have been transferred from their original language into modern Assamese or any of the widely spoken languages now, making them less useful for research and public awareness because the contents remain confined to their original text.

b) Lack of Community Involvement

Lack of community involvement would pose a serious threat to all Tai-Ahom heritage arts and practices and associated places: the richest heritage knowledge of the Tai-Ahom community, dismal involvement, and highlighting the activities of heritage conservation, resulting in fragmented disjointed efforts at cultural authenticity. Urbanization and modernization pose gaps for younger generations between themselves and the heritage of their ancestors. Soon, the rituals, languages, and traditional customs of the Tai-Ahoms may find themselves gradually disappearing.

c) Insufficient Infrastructure Development and Government Support

Poor infrastructural development and poor government backing saw the Tai-Ahom heritage has constrained the preservation and promotion at sites like Charaideo Moidam. Though recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, there would hardly be any development in the areas of roads, accommodation facilities, amenities, a well-equipped tourist information center, and interpretative facilities as regards marking it for cultural tourism development. Infrastructure development and steady government support are critical for the protection of Tai-Ahom heritage and its incorporation into wider education and tourism.

d) Environmental and Urban Threats

Increase in urbanization and build-up near the World Heritage Site Charaideo Moidam leading to deforestation. The land cover has been changing over the years in this region with rising human activities creating threats to the site and environment. There we can see a decrease in the land use for agriculture while a rise in encroachment on the heritage site land by locals.

4. Recommendations

There must be a multi-pronged approach to fighting the struggle for the preservation and promotion of Tai-Ahom heritage. Documentation and translation of the Tai-Ahom manuscripts (Buranji) should be strengthened for advancement. Involving collaboration and efforts for such projects in tying translation into more known languages like requesting Assamese or English induction would enhance comprehension for researchers and common people. The other initiative is to digitalize to be able to guarantee that it will be preserved long-term and also that it will be accessible to a worldwide audience via an online repository. The earnest program of the government should also focus on protecting and promoting the tangible and intangible heritage of Tai-Ahom. It could be part of the cultural conservation schemes of the government or derived from existing frameworks like UNESCO's Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Such policies should fund the restoration and rehabilitation of places of interest such as Charaideo Moidam and provide tourism infrastructure upgrading for sustainable cultural tourism

development. From this standpoint comes the need to learn and put into sustainable practices for tourism, avoiding the commodification of ICH, which involves the balancing act between the two - that is, tourism growth and cultural preservation initiatives (Wasela, 2023). Educational policies include Tai-Ahom history and language within the scope of their curriculum, while scholarships and research grants are some of the incentives for pursuing more academic interests. Public-private partnerships (PPP) can promote more resource mobilization and share expertise, while technology-based interventions such as digitization and virtual tours can bring drastic improvement in access across the globe. Policy backing for cultural festivals and other activities should elucidate the traditional Tai-Ahom way and improve the well-being of communities. Elements of ICH such as traditional crafts and performing arts enhance the tourist experience, for example, tourists may participate in pottery workshops that allow them to directly engage with local traditions (Melko et al., 2024). Government, local community, NGO, and other stakeholder involvement will further help to preserve and promote the Tai-Ahom culture and heritage.

Assam Tourism's Heritage Walk initiative amidst a storyline could give an amazing experience to visitors. The Government of India's various schemes such as PRASAD, Swadesh Darshan, SAATHI, Dekho Apna Desh, and NIDHI should cover this region to promote tourism domestically and internationally.

5. Limitations

1. The Study is geographically limited to Charaideo Moidam Site which may not fully represent the broader dynamics of Tai-Ahom cultural practices across Assam.
2. This research mainly relied on secondary data which do not cover all the intangible cultural elements of the Tai-Ahom community. Hence, the lack of field-based validation might limit the depth of the study.
3. The inadequate documentation of intangible heritage from Tai-Ahom creates a gap in analysis.

6. Conclusion

The Tai-Ahom dynasty's cultural and historical glory is reflected in Charaideo Moidam in Charaideo District, Assam, India. It is beyond tangible heritage; also includes the intangible cultural heritage of Tai-Ahom. It is an important ancestral reference site for Tai-Ahom identity, housing in it the spirituality, oral traditions, and indigenous ways of knowing. The above, thus, places Charaideo Moidam as an important site in safeguarding and promoting such intangible cultural heritage aspects. Not that this site, much more, has the potential for further development as a destination for cultural tourism to create awareness and appreciation of Tai-Ahom culture and heritage; still, it has challenges such as inadequate documentation, threats of commercialization, and a low level of community participation. Digital tools and educational programs would enrich the documentation and transmission efforts of Tai-Ahom heritage to the next generations.

Gaining recognition from UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site would bridge the gap between the past and present of the Tai-Ahom culture. Further, this would showcase the cultural heritage to the world and make them a player on the cultural tourism map. In this, the state has to provide enough supportive infrastructure equivalent to global standards to ensure such balanced approaches are needed for cultural revival in the modern era of Tai-Ahom.

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