

The Kammu People in China And Their Social Customs

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THERE are now fifty-six nationalities in China, including the Han 漢, Hui 回, Uighur 維吾爾, Tibetan 藏, Dai 傣, Wa 佤, Bulang 布朗, Benglong 崩龍 and a host of others. There are also a few ethnic groups which will be given proper names after having been identified. The Kammu 克木 people are one of these.

The Kammu people live in the flatlands, in the jungles at the foot of the mountains and in the uplands of the southern part of Mengla 勐臘 County and Jinghong 景洪 County of Xi Shuang Ban Na Dai 西雙版納傣 Nationality Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan 雲南 Province in China. They live in twelve stockaded villages (ten villages in Mengla County and two in Jinghong County) and their population exceeds 1,600. The Khbit people of the local area, who call themselves Phsiij 克比, are somewhat related to the Kammu people and there are about 500 of these. The economies, cultures and social customs of these two groups are very close, and their languages have a certain number of cognate words.

The legend goes that they were brothers: the Kammu was the elder brother and the Khbit the younger brother. One day Brother Kammu caught an elephant and gave a portion of the meat to Younger Brother Khbit. Younger Brother Khbit later caught a porcupine and gave a portion of the meat to Brother Kammu. Brother Kammu found that the hair of the porcupine was thicker than that of the elephant, and thought that the porcupine must be bigger than the elephant. But since he got such a small amount of meat from Younger Brother Khbit he alleged that the Younger Brother had been unfaithful. Finally he said to the Younger Brother, "Let's break up the family and live apart!"

Younger Brother Khbit thus left Brother Kammu and moved to the lower reaches of the river, whereas Brother Kammu remained at the upper reaches. Gradually their languages grew apart, but there are still many common words. Their stockaded villages are close to each other and they call each other *tmōi*, meaning brothers of the same clan or people who used to live together but now live apart. The area in which the Kammu and Khbit live, has a hot climate with plentiful rainfall, and there are thick forests and groves of bamboo. It is a typical semi-tropical and tropical rain forest area.

Some initial textual research indicates that the Kammu tribe was one of the branches of the ancient *Bai Pu* 百濮 group. They lived for a long time in the southwestern part of Yunnan Province of China.

The Kammu people of Mengla County are the original inhabitants of the area. The Kammu people of Jinghong County say that their ancestors settled there long ago. The local inhabitants of the Dai nationality, the Hani 哈尼 nationality and the Kucong 苦聰 people (another ethnic group yet to be completely identified) say that the Kammu people of Mengla County came to settle there long before they did. For a period of time the Kammu people were very strong. They had an army with 10,000 spears and 100,000 bows. They built a capital of their own. They opened up a salt well and set up markets. The wells in the Tian Feng 天峯 Mountain, the niches for statues of Buddha in the jungles at the foot of the mountain and the stone elephants buried in the ground are said to be relics left behind by the ancient Kammu people.

The discovery of a certain kind of fish with a salty substance on its skin led the Kammu to the site of the salt well which they began to operate. That was the salt well at Muohei 磨協 in Shanggang 尚崗 area of Mengla County, the best of the eight major wells in Xi Shuang Ban Na area. It was known far and wide. The Kiaus from the south, who claimed to have a population of 45,000,000, once invaded the area to seize control of the well, but they were driven out by the powerful Kammu people. After the incident there was a big flow of immigrants from the north. The big and powerful nationalities among the immigrants adopted a policy of relation by marriage. They married their princesses to the princes of the Kammu people and later they plotted to kill the chieftains of the Kammu people. As a result the Kammu people were forced to move south in large numbers and they deserted part of their flatland, settling in the uplands and the jungles. Sometime later some of them moved back. This is the reason the Kammu people were later called Theng/Theung or Phu Theng/Phu Theung, terms which mean "people from the uplands."

Before liberation, the Kammu people were under the rule of the Dai headman. They were engaged in forced labor such as rearing elephants, cutting weed for horses, husking rice, making thatching and weaving and knitting. They did, however, maintain their own marked characteristics and customs.

NAMES OF ETHNIC GROUPS

The Kammu people call themselves Kmhmu' / Kmhmu' / Kahmu', which means "human being." It is both a singular and plural form. Use of this term for themselves is associated with the concept of social evolutionism and is the customary word they use when asked what nationality they belong to. At the same time it is an opposition to the derogatory term of address, *La' mang* (which means "red deer" in the Lao language). There is a legend among the local Dais that a red deer being chased by a hunter suddenly disappeared, a Kammu appearing in its place. Since then the Kammu people have been called *La' mang*, a term of degradation meaning one appeared from a red deer.

They are also called Khmu', a variant pronunciation of Kmhmu' / Kmhmu' / Kahmu'.

The terms Kha Khomu' and Kha Khmu' come from words used for the Kammu by the Dai people. The word "Kha" means a slave or servant.

The terms Chaman 岔滿, Shamang 沙芒 and Chama 查馬 are used for the Kammu by the Han nationality. "Man," "Mang" and "Ma" are probably variant forms of pronunciation and spelling of the character *Man* 蠻 in *Nan Man* 南蠻 in the history of the Han nationality. There are different pronunciation forms for the word *Man* in different languages in different nationalities in that locality and different forms of characters were used for the same word. "Cha," "Sha" and "Ch" all mean "the man who is belittled."

VILLAGES AND HOUSING

Before liberation the Kammu people mainly grew upland rice. They built their stockaded villages (Fig. 1) or living quarters around the mountain streams in the jungles, practicing divination before they decided on the plot, according to their customs. They used several methods of divination. For example, they would take a bunch of thin bamboo strips, making knots at the two ends, and then spread these open and count the number of knots. Even numbers meant happiness and odd numbers meant problems, the number of knots was used to decide whether they would settle at any given location.

They practiced slash-and-burn cultivation, habitually opening up

a new piece of land every year for crop rotation. The number of the pieces of land they had opened up thus indicated the age of the stockaded village and could also be used as a base to work out their ages. When they told others how old they were they always associated their ages with the number of pieces of land they had opened up. They also numbered the years of their social life by counting these pieces of land.

They follow the land they have opened, and this land is always around a mountain. As a result, they have a semi-permanent way of life. The style of their villages and houses is not standard. There are both bamboo houses (Fig. 2) surrounded by fences and low shacks. In the past few decades, the Kammu have settled at the foot of the mountains and in the flatlands, and more bamboo houses have appeared. The outer shapes and structures have improved a great deal. But the habit of using a fire place—a rough cooking stove with a cooker on three pieces of stone—still remains. Some have kept special fireplaces for ritual purposes.

Items of daily necessity are mostly made from bamboo, such as bamboo tables, bamboo stools, bamboo cups and bamboo spoons. Even today they still use a bamboo cooker to boil water or herbal medicine (Fig. 3). Drinking and smoking are their hobbies (Fig. 7), but drinking tea is not popular. Yet they know how to chop off *mai tun* (*Cassia Fistula* L.) to make tea and serve their guests with it to show warmth and respect.

The Kammu raise chicken, pigs, cattle and dogs, and at one time they also raised elephants. It is said that the elephants they raised were very tame, and would not easily leave with wild herds of elephants which passed by.

The Kammu people are very good at singing and dancing. Their home-made *dao-dao*, a percussion instrument and *tɔt*, a holed instrument, are rarely found in the neighbouring nationalities.

THE LANGUAGE AND ITS FAMILY

The Kammu language has a number of cognate words in other languages, such as the Wa language (parauk, Lavua², va² . . .), the Balang language (plang, ava²/va², phu-man, u . . .), the Benglong language (Ta-ang, Ru-mai, Pale Liang, ying . . .), the Hu 戶/空格 language (Hu², Maanmit . . .) and the Mang 莽/芒 language (Mang) of China, the Mon language of Burma and the Khmer language of Cambodia. They all belong to the Mon-Khmer language family. The Kammu language has no tones, but has long and short vowels. There are plenty of prefixes and quite a few infixes, for example, *gaang* ("a house") / *gang* ("busy"), *paat* ("to cut") / *pat* ("to sip"), *pɛi* ("to fan") / *prnɛi* ("a fan"), 'tɛh ("to

rub ") / trnɛh ("a thing to strike with"). The phonetic structure is very much like that of the Khmer language. There is no written form of the language among the Kammu people in China. They use objects to convey their sentiments and to substitute for letters. For example, tobacco is presented to mean friendship and an areca nut is presented to mean love, etc.

According to their legend, the Kammu people, like the Han nationality and the Dai nationality, once had a written form of the language. The Hans and the Dais had their written languages on papers which were washed away when they crossed the river. They went to look for them along the river. The Dais found the footprints of the water birds on the sand, and these were meandering and looked very much like their lost language. They copied them down. That is the Dai written language. The Hans saw the traces left by the black carp which had gobbled the moss on the stones. The traces looked like their lost language. They too copied them down and that is the Han written language. The written language of the Kammu people was written on leather. When they crossed the river they cooked it and ate it and as a result they lost their language. But the sound of their cooking the leather became their spoken language. The legend goes that the Kammu people vibrate their tongues when they speak. That is an imitation of the cracking sound made when they cooked the leather.

The Kammu people use an enigmatic formed by changing the vowel and consonant in the first and the last syllables. For instance, yɔh t m ə' > Y ə' t m ə h (Where are you going?), v e c d a' g a a n g > v a a n g d a' g e c (to go home). This is an interesting point in phonetics. This enigmatic form is often used among young people. It is almost a language of their generation or their own jargon.

CLAN AND TOTEM

The Kammu people have family names. They use the words for animals such as tiger, leopard, zibet, tokey, green-billed malkoha, "Wendlandia Wallichii Wight et Aru," beaver, water bird, tree fern and so on in the Kammu language as their family names. The family name in the Kammu language is called ta', meaning ancestor. In addition to a family name, they also have given names. Some common ones are "siang," "mɔt," "təm" or "nɔɔ." Some of their surnames are borrowed from the Dai nationality, and some come from their own language.

Before the surname of the Kammu people there is also a word which indicates the sex of the person. For instance, words indicating male are *t/d* or *ai*, and the feminine word is *ii*. For example, a person

called *ii* so-and-so will be a woman. The family names of the unmarried are formed by the gender word and given name. The family name is used only when there are two people bearing the same surnames, and it is put after the given name. The surname of a married person is so-and-so's (a child's name) father or mother, or so-and-so's grandfather or grandmother, or simply grandpa or grandma. This custom indicates whether a person is unmarried or married, what his or her age is, and even shows social status.

There is also a legend behind the origin of every family name, which is a reflection of the social and economic structures. Let us consider, for example, the family name "Tiger". The legend goes that their ancestors were hurt by a dead tiger's teeth, therefore they worship the tiger and have taken "Tiger" as their family name. Again there is a legend about the family name "Pheasant." Their female ancestor was a transformed pheasant. Therefore they worship the pheasant and have taken "Pheasant" as their family name.

Similar legends can be found in every clan, without exception. According to these legends, every clan has a taboo against catching or touching a certain animal or a plant, but of course the members of the other clans are not subjected to this rule. It is obvious that the family names of the Kammu people are something left by ancient clans. Those animals or plants were the clan totems of the ancient Kammu people.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

The Kammu people have an exogamous marriage system. In other words, people having the same family name—"Hornbill," for example—should not intermarry. People from the same ancestor do not intermarry. For example, boys and girls of the same grandfather or the same great grandfather should not intermarry, for they are regarded as close relations. They also practise semi-cross-cousin marriage. For example, the son of a maternal uncle cannot marry his aunt's own daughter, but the daughter of a maternal uncle can marry her aunt's own son. In the past twenty or thirty years, additionally there have appeared marriages between stockaded villages (for example, intermarriage between clans bearing the same family name but of different areas). And there are a few cases of adoptive marriage; in which orphan girls of other nationalities are adopted and when they have grown up they marry to Kammu people.

Kammu marriage customs are very strict, and the community will stop any cases which go against the practice. If persuasion does not work, a special ceremony to atone for one's crime will be held to

eliminate evils. In this ceremony the man and woman have to imitate the grunting of a pig, walk like a pig and eat pig's food in a trough. The venerable elders at the same time say their prayers to Heaven and then use an ax to chop the pig's trough. It is said that act can prevent the stockaded village from being hit by lightning and the villagers and cattle from being injured. Just before liberation, there was a case among the Kammu people of Mongla County in which an elder brother's son married the daughter of the younger brother. A ceremony of this kind was held, for the couple, but the newlyweds were still disliked by their fellow villagers.

Generally speaking, the Kammu people do not marry people of other nationalities, but the Khbit people are an exception. There has been a small number of Hans and Yaos 瑶 who have married into and lived with the brides' families. But they must observe the customs of the Kammu people and must continue to live there.

The practice of double family names is popular among the Kammu people. In other words every member of the family has his or her own family name according to sex. The females will follow the mother's family name and join the maternal clan, and the males will follow the father's family name and join the paternal clan. There are, however, people who have both their father's and their mother's family names and invariably they are the only children of the families. There are also cases in which triple family names are used: First is the genitor's family name, then the step-father's family name, and finally the adoptive father's family name. The extreme cases are all associated with the right of inheritance of property. This is a reflection of the transition from the ancient matrilineal society to patrilineal society and of the struggle between the expansion of paternal rights and maintenance of maternal rights.

In general, there are two marriage arrangements: one is a patrilocal residence type, in which a woman, called *Kammu Lao* 克木老, leaves her own home to go to her husband's home; the other is of the matrilocal residence type, in which a man called *Kammu Lue* 克木叻 leaves his own home to go to his wife's home. Currently the matrilocal system is more popular. If the man marries into and lives with the bride's family, there is a maximum of three years and a minimum of one to two years before the newlyweds will establish their own family.

During the wedding ceremony the Kammu people still keep the practice of having the bridegroom and the bride sing with a closed door between them. Very often other people are invited to sing for them. After that the door will open and the bridegroom and the bride meet each other, and the guests will then sit around the tables and

drink watery wine brewed in jars. They sing while drinking and improvise blessings for each other.

The words of one wedding song are as follows:

Everyone comes to congratulate you,
 Wishing you to love each other for ever.
 Love is like the stone in the river,
 Which must bear the pounding of the mountain torrents.
 Love is like the pipal tree in the stockaded village,
 Which must bear the lashing of wind and rain.
 Wishing you to be as firm as rock,
 Wishing you two together forever as the pipal tree.

NATURE WORSHIP

The Kammu people are the pagans of an area in which Hinayana is practiced in Xi Shuang Ban Na. (The Kammu people of Jinghong County are an exception, however; they believe in Hinayana and at the same time have their own customs.) The Kammu people worship nature and consider that spirits exist between heaven and earth. They regard the natural calamities, illnesses and deaths as the result of offending and displeasing these spirits, so there are rituals to send off domestic spirits, village spirits and Meng 勐 spirits (local spirits).

In general they kill chickens to offer blood and pray for peace. If nothing effective happens, then they usually adopt a method of evading trouble. For instance, once a certain village was hit by a herd of elephants and the crops were damaged continuously by red deer, but the ritual of sending off the spirit did not work, so finally they had to desert the village. A few stockaded villages were merged and became what is known today as *Maanmai* 曼邁 Stockaded Village, that is, "New Village."

Another form of nature worship is divination. The Kammu people think that spirits attach their will on objects which in turn will pass the message on to man. This means that daily events very often depend on divination. For example, once a man lost an ox and the Kammu people used rice to divine the solution to the problem. Under the guidance of venerable elders, each of the suspects wrapped a package of rice and toasted it by the fire. They had to check from time to time to see whether the rice was done, in order to find who the thief was. Naturally, in the end someone is wronged in such cases. However, in most of the cases the packages of rice were all done. Finally, this dispute ended up with nothing definite.

If a small object is lost, there is another method of getting the thing back to the owner. For instance, if someone has lost a bracelet

an elder Kammu will call on each of the villagers to wrap up an object in a parcel and put it at a designated place where no one is watching. After everyone has put a parcel there, the lost bracelet will be found in one of the parcels, for the one who has stolen the bracelet will voluntarily wrap it up in the parcel and put it there. The lost object is returned to the owner and that is the end of the matter.

Divination is also used to collect the honey of wild bees. For example, when the Kammu people find a bee colony (cong), they will kill a chicken or a rat to divine the position of the honeycomb. What they do is to put the dead chicken or the rat on the way the bees might pass and keep an eye on the part of the body that the bees swallow. If the head is swallowed, they will search for the honeycomb at the top of the mountain. If they fail to find the honeycomb they search for it at another mountain top. The result is generally satisfactory. If the waist or the feet are swallowed they will search for the honeycomb at the mountain slope or at the foot of the mountain. And again the results are usually satisfactory.

The tattooing of the skin is another form of nature worship among the Kammu people (Fig. 6). They believe that tattoos give them the magic power to conquer nature. Most designs are tattooed on the chest, back, hands, feet and buttocks, and are geometric figures or animal designs.

HUNTING AND GATHERING

Other Kammu customs include hunting, gathering and digging. The traps they use in hunting are varied. To catch birds they use rope traps, loop traps, sticky traps and so on, and to catch small animals they use traps with loops, clips, etc. In order to be more lucky, they collect the bones of the animals and birds they catch, or stick the skin or feather onto the hunting gun or the cross-bow with blood to pray for more hunting bags. The Kammu people like to gather and dig edible wild plants, and they maintain their custom of giving the owner of a new house some wild plants on its completion. Wild plants and game are always served to guests.

RAIN MAKING RITUALS

In the past before the spring sowing (April of the lunar calendar), if there happened to be a drought and seeds could not be sewn the Kammu people who lived at the foot of the mountain near the flatlands of Meng-peng, 勐捧 Mengla County, would hold a ritual to pray for rain. (Those stockaded villages that participated in the ritual included Hui Saang 回散, Hui Kεε 回格 and Maan Cong 曼種.) They worshiped a phallus,

made an imitation of it and imitated some primitive movements. They would travel among the stockaded villages, beating with bamboo sticks (Kl tɔng) and praying to Heaven. It was said that the god would fly into a fury when he saw the ritual and then ordered a rainfall. The last ritual of this kind was held just before liberation.

The many customs reflected in both the spiritual and the material cultures of the Kammu, and their linguistic and anthropological characteristics further demonstrate that the Kammu people have the peculiarities of the ancient mountainous Mon-Khmer nationality.



Fig. 1. A stockaded Kammu village at the foot of the mountains.



Fig. 2. A Kammu girl weaving cogongrass into building material.



Fig. 4. A Kammu woman with her young son.



Fig. 3. Kammu women come from river after drawing water with a bamboo slip



Fig. 6. Tattooing of the skin.



Fig. 5. A Kammu man.



Fig. 7. Sharing a pot of wine.



Fig. 8. A bronze drum.