Tribal Architecture in Northeast India

by René Kolkman and Stuart Blackburn. Leiden/Boston : Brill. 2014, 249 pages, 201 B&W Photos, 103 Drawings, ISBN 97890 04255968, price €130, $169.

Reviewed by Emilie Arrago-Boruah

Since the pioneering work of Morgan Lewis Henry who, in 1842, started collecting documents on the architecture of the Native North Americans, the notion of 'houses' has enhanced the study of kinship. The primary focus of this notion is the conceptual dimension of the house, not its materials. In the 1970s, the concept of space and place appeared in several works where, following the example of language, they became founding categories of a given culture. But for Stuart Blackburn, a researcher in South Asian studies who wrote the introduction as well as the concluding chapter of this book, the gap between the documents of anthropological and architectural nature still exists. Hence the key question: Is the house an environmental adaptation or a cultural construct? This book proposes to answer this question as the retired architect from Amsterdam, René Kolkman, has placed before us the fruits of his long investigation in northeast India, a complex region known for its tribal houses since S.E. Peal's 1882 publication, *Note on Platform Dwellings in Assam*.

After three sojourns, between 1996 and 1999, among 37 tribes scattered throughout northeast India, René Kolkamn presents an attentive and well-documented study of traditional tribal houses by examining their materials and social functions. The author's drawings, photographs and map undoubtedly enhance the book's value. It is divided into three sections, focusing respectively on Meghalaya, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The sections are further subdivided into several chapters, each of which concentrates on a particular tribe. As the book's numerous examples indicate, there seems to be a much greater range of traditional housing styles in Arunachal Pradesh than most other regions in South Asia.

The state's luxuriant flora is handy for constructing houses suitable for the wet climate, as well as for its geographical conditions. As William Robinson noted in 1841 in his chapter on Botany (p. 52) the varieties of

bamboo that constitute the primary construction material for dwellings are almost uncountable. To these should be added the various kinds of cane, grasses and palm leaves used to make joints and thatched roofs. Depending on its location – on a sloping hill, on the bank of a river or at the foot of Himalayas – each tribe possesses characteristic "models for" houses. Although the architecture may still allow each group to differentiate itself from the others, a simple affirmation like 'Yes, we are Karbis' no longer identifies the culture of a group, reflecting the extent to which regional identities have become changeable nowadays (Ramirez, 2014: 61-98). Moreover, each construction is connected to social organization and to diverse systems of faith. Since the works of Verrier Elwin, tribal dormitories have constituted a subject of fascination for scholars. These central constructions, mostly for males, are associated with sexual education and the separation of genders. Kolman's journey into the heart of local houses also gives us an 'inside' view of the old practice of headhunting, once prevalent among certain tribes. Kolman's main accomplishment is to move us closer to these categories through the eye of an architect. The hundred sketches he drew in the field intrigue inhabitants while his writing, filled with anecdotes, resembles the work of an ethnologist. The book opens with a description of a Garo village hosting a dance festival where girls dance around boys whom they wish to marry. All the houses are ordered around a courtyard where the dance is performed, adjoining which is a communal house (where the villagers come to talk) and the young boys' dormitory that is 'protected' by a flowery enclosure.

The main achievement of this book is to show the essential link between architecture and culture, the deficits of one weakening the other, and vice versa. The most striking example concerns the Khasi and Jaintia tribes. The only remaining monuments to their ancient culture are two traditional house replicas. The first one reproduces the Jaintia household in central Jowai, a small modern city, and the second one, in Smit, serves as the setting for the last Khasi festival associated with a local king. The Khasis and, to a lesser extent the Jaintias, are now Christian. In addition to the issue of the conversion of values, the author helps us see a different notion of architecture. In fact, it is not a shift in housing materials that destroys a culture, but rather the way houses are conceived. In most of the tribes, they are not simply an assemblage of materials, but rather

living bodies that age and catch diseases, forcing for example the Dimasa cacharis to change their foundations regularly (p. 53). Houses also have souls: for the Hill Tiwa people, spirits can shift from an ancient style to a modern one (p. 48). It comes as no surprise that the Mising did not readily understand the author's question when he asked them the number of people living in their 60-metre longhouses. In fact, the inhabitants do not believe that they live in the house, but the house allows them to live by providing a gathering place to eat and to sleep. Sometimes, longhouses are so big that they constitute a village, accommodating 60 people as among the Nyishis (p. 129).

The last part, on Architecture in Arunachal Pradesh, is the most voluminous, and for good reason. Located on the Tibetan border in the north and bordering Myanmar in the south, the population is extremely diverse. In the north are Monpa and Sherdukpen, two Buddhist communities considered "tribal", whose houses contain rooms dedicated to worship. They are designed for a nuclear family and made with materials meant to last for more than a hundred years. In the centre of the state, between the hills and the plains, the architecture points to the once-prevalent practice of slavery among the hill tribes, described in Assamese novels such as Miri-Jīyarī (Bordoloi, 1894). In conclusion, the author pays homage to the Noctes and the Wanchos located near Nagaland. They perpetuate the artistic tradition of tribal houses decorated with buffalo and human skulls and anthropomorphic straw sculptures on a vegetal roof. This is followed by another example of how architecture is linked to culture: separate dormitories exist for both sexes, and the polygamy of the Wanchos appears in the layout of their houses.

Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the empirical reality of tribal houses as relational structures. This is particularly true of the question of sexuality, which the study takes beyond the notion of gendered space. The absence of a dormitory, for example, does not mean that sexual discipline does not exist. A separation of the house into male and female sides leaves a central space open to sexuality, such as in Karbi houses, where that room is called kam (p. 39). The author could have pointed that kāma means 'love' in Sanskrit and Assamese. Throughout the book in fact, the author provides insufficient translations of local terminologies. For instance, the notion of khel used by the Wanchos to denote a particular 'quarter' of a village (p. 237) also means the village council in Assamese

villages. An index of botanic names of the materials would have also been useful. Nevertheless, this is a very important and daring work, gathering first-hand data on places very difficult to reach. René Kolkman has done the scholarly community an enormous service in producing excellent drawings and photographs of what will soon become the sole vestiges of a housing environment that is already beginning to disappear.

References

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