

Tribal Transitions

Cultural Innovation in Arunachal Pradesh

Research >
South Asia

A new research project has been launched to document and analyse cultural change in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Starting from the premise that tribal people are not only guardians of culture but also initiators of change, the 'Tribal Transitions' project will study tribal culture in this state, which is home to about twenty-five separate groups who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Isolated both by terrain and official policy, Arunachal provides a unique location to study such change; its cultures were recorded in extensive archives made during the colonial period and augmented by fieldwork since independence. By combining contemporary documentation with a study of archives, the project, the first of its kind in Arunachal Pradesh, will analyse innovation in a historical perspective.



Monpa mask dancer.

R. Blurton

By Stuart Blackburn

Although Arunachal Pradesh has been isolated by mountainous terrain and by government policy, which have prevented absorption into mainstream culture, trade links with Tibet and the plains have always brought new objects and ideas – today brought by television, education, and better roads. Cultural change is apparent everywhere: textile designs of one tribe are borrowed by others; local festivals are centralized and refashioned as community events; oral traditions are printed and discussed as 'cultural heritage'. Some traditional practices (such as tattooing) have been banned by tribal organizations, while others (e.g. woodcarving) are undergoing expansion. Perhaps the most funda-

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'Tribal Transitions' is a collaborative project between the School of Oriental and African Studies, the British Museum, Arunachal University, the government of Arunachal Pradesh, the Centre for Cultural Research and Documentation (Arunachal Pradesh), and the British Council in New Delhi. The project director is Dr Stuart Blackburn (SOAS), supported by Mr Richard Blurton (British Museum), Dr Sarit Chaudhuri (Arunachal University), Mr Moji Riba (CCRD), Mr Michael Tarr (USA), Prof. T. Subba (Shillong) and Prof. Mibang (Arunachal University). The project, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom, runs from October 2002 to October 2007.

mental change is that animistic beliefs and rituals are undergoing formalization into a 'religion' with new visual images, places of worship, and a formal theology. This systematization of the worship of Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon) places it alongside the other religions known in the area: Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Ritual practitioners have also formed a statewide association of shamans. These changes are fast paced and largely undocumented.

In analysing innovation, the research will challenge deep-rooted perceptions of tribal cultures as antidotes to modernity. The impulse to romanticize 'indigenous peoples' is still a powerful force in scholarship and public debate, not only in the West but also in urban India. In order to shift the focus from preservation to innovation, the research will draw upon a range of writings that historicize tribal culture and theorize tradition as reinvention. Primary among these are anthropological critiques of the 'primitive', a notion which places tribal culture either in a timeless present or a vanished past. Also valuable are studies of historical change in tribal cultures, either through regional networks of trade or from adaptation to economic and environmental conditions. While these processes operate in Arunachal Pradesh, the research will approach change as more than passive adaptation and more as innovation, especially in expressive culture. We will utilize the concept of the 'invention of tradition', first described by historians. Although typically applied to public traditions in large states, we believe the concept is applicable to small-scale societies as well. Folklorists have likewise contributed to this reinterpretation of tradition and to the emphasis on the inventiveness of culture by developing the concept of 'second-hand folklore' to describe conscious manipulations of tradition.

We will also draw on new research that views objects not as static artefacts or bearers of meaning but as sites of cultural practice and history. In a study similar to the proposed research, for example, Gosden and Knowles (2001) have demonstrated that the juxtaposition of museum collections and fieldwork yields original insights into cultural change over time. Finally, we will draw selectively from the growing literature on 'indigenous peoples'. Although this literature often sacrifices accuracy for advocacy, it does contain valuable case studies of change among tribal groups.

The project involves both fieldwork and archival study. Field-



Apa Tani priest, narrating a legend, April 2002.

Stuart Blackburn

work will concentrate on three domains (ritual practices, oral narratives and histories, and material culture) among four tribes (Apatani, Adi, Monpa, and Idu Mishmi) using a variety of methods. By observation, photography, filmmaking, and audio taping we will document current practices; by interviewing and by showing (copies of) archival photos, we will elicit commentary on change. We will also produce a series of four films, one on each tribe, documenting the ways in which each group defines and displays its identity. Whenever possible, we will study events and objects already documented in the historical record: a festival filmed in 1953, for example, may be filmed again in 2003. Archival study will concentrate on major collections in the United Kingdom and India; photographs and films will help to establish a baseline from which change can be measured; objects will be examined for evidence of changing uses and interpretations. Finally, we will repatriate approximately 500 photographs to Arunachal Pradesh.

The planned outcomes of the research are:

- an exhibition in India, originating in Arunachal Pradesh and travelling to other cities;
- an exhibition at the British Museum;
- four documentary films;
- an extensive collection of photographs;
- monographs on oral traditions, religious life, and material culture in Arunachal Pradesh
- a photographic essay on cultural change in the state;
- a volume of essays from an international conference at Arunachal University.

Through the public dissemination of results, both in India and the United Kingdom, the project hopes to contribute both to our knowledge of tribal cultures and to the debate concerning their place in the modern world. The project will soon have a website (probably 'tribaltransitions') on the main SOAS website. <

Reference

- Gosden, Chris, and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change*, Oxford: Berg (2001).

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