HILL TIWA (HILL LALUNG)

Overview

Hill Tiwa villages are mostly situated in clearings in the forest, with houses and fenced yards facing each other in two rows along the village road. The houses are on an earthen platform, with a small veranda in front, which is used for weaving and storing bamboo water containers. Generally the house consists of three rooms: (1) nomaji, a guestroom with a fireplace, (2) nukhti, a living room with cooking fire and (3) a storage room.

The dormitory (dekachang or dekasang) is used for the young men’s association of the village (samadi) and as a meeting place for the village council. It is the sleeping place for unmarried boys (aged 5 and older) and sometimes also for guests. The woodcarvings of female breasts on the horizontal connection beam signify that the dormitory is forbidden for girls. A central big post and seat is for the head of the boys.

Houses have walls of mud plastered bamboo, a one-foot high earthen plinth and a thatched roof, plus bamboo fencing with a gate. The large dormitory is constructed with beautifully carved wooden posts. Inside are two fireplaces and wooden benches for sitting and mats for sleeping.

Commentary

In Krokendang village, we passed a woman weaving a colourful cloth. An old blind man sat on a low stool and said, ‘If you want to see a beautiful dormitory you have to go to Amdoba, a bit further down.’ We followed his advice.

A footpath took us to the village, which had some 500 inhabitants, and a nice young man was willing to show us around. Sushil didn’t understand the Hill Tiwa language and the people there scarcely spoke Assamese. What we understood was that they call themselves ‘Hill Lalung Douar Amla,’ which was the name of the young men’s club.

The man took us to the impressive dormitory (D. 025, P. 038 and P. 039), which was built on a raised platform accessible at the front and rear by heavy wooden logs with hewn-out steps. The thatched roof was supported by round wooden columns, of which the middle one was beautifully carved. The connection beams were ornamented with women breasts and painted with abstract motifs and images like an airplane and a train.

On the springy bamboo floor rolled-up sleeping mats and blankets lay neatly along the side. Boys from 5 to 6 years old and young unmarried men were sleeping around the two fireplaces which burned at night. For a photo one of the fires was kindled, and the boys and men sat on the benches on the sides.

On the central horizontal roof beam lay several drums, long and short ones. Branches with withered leaves were stuck on the inside of the roof, which our driver Sushil said he had also seen near the kitchen in one of the houses. When I looked through the small gaps in the floor to examine the round wooden beams supporting the floor, the men nearly broke open the floor for me. I told them quickly that I had already seen what I wanted to see.

In the meantime the whole village had run out to see what we were doing. The headman arrived and, concerned, asked what I was drawing. I attempted to explain and showed him my book with drawings in 1996, including some of the Karbi village of Rongmandu. They knew it and pointed in its direction.

The boys slept in the dormitory but ate at home with their parents. There wasn’t a mentor-like figure who taught the boys, as in dormitories of other tribes, but of course they had a school here.

The three thick middle columns represented deities, we were told. Sometimes they sacrificed to these deities. The ornaments on the columns and beams were all made by a man in the village. All main columns, the ridge and main purlins were made of heavy, round wood, while the wooden collar-beams were rectangular. The other floor and roof beams and the thin columns were bamboo; the connection laths for the thatch were split bamboo; and the floor cover was made of split and flattened bamboo. All connections were made with split bamboo.

It was too late to visit one of the houses. We planned to come back the next day. When we said goodbye, a large circle of villagers gathered around us.

P. 035: Hill Tiwa children on their way back to the village, Khawragaon, 1998.