The historical depth of these tribal, highly regionalized cultures—a single room with mud-plastered walls and wooden trusses to support a ceramic tile roof—is at the back of a large west-facing courtyard, demarcated by stone slabs. This rectangular space includes a wooden swing to the north, post in the center and a wooden swing to the north. When possessed by the goddess, individuals sit on this imposing seat, which is frequently studded with iron spikes. While the pujar: (village priest) is responsible for conducting rites in honor of one among a constellation of regional goddesses, it is the person possessed (stra) who, in the voice of the deity, answers queries from the assembled villagers concerning the welfare of individuals and the community. At these public events that combine aspects of religious devotion and community fair, animals are sacrificed at the wooden post, villagers offer small clay bulls or elephants. More costly metal animals, as well as brass umbrellas and iconic images of the goddess—all produced by local artisans—symbolize gratitude for wishes granted. Left in piles in the compound, old terra-cottas decompose as new ones are added. The shrines themselves, dedicated to local protective deities, are built of wood and clay which do not leave the historic imprint that stone architecture does.

Despite its colonial legacy “tribal” still has a political utility in India today. India’s constitution of 1950 granted “scheduled tribes” certain provisions and privileges, including a controversial policy of quotas or reserved seats in educational, occupational, and legislative arenas.

The vast majority of India’s tribal population is concentrated in hilly, forested, and resource-rich regions: the southern Deccan; the extreme northeast; and a wide belt stretching across the middle of the country from Rajasthan, Gujarat, and the Vindhyan range in the west to the Eastern Ghats of Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa. This central zone is home to India’s three largest groups: the Gonds, Santals, and Bhils. A selection of the art production of the Gonds and Bhils is discussed below.

Much of the visual culture of tribal communities reflects the once widely available resources of the forest, especially wax, bamboo, clay, and minerals. In addition to the ephemeral nature of many of these materials, production is often seasonal or cyclical, further emphasizing process rather than product. Highly abstract terra-cotta animals are presented by villagers at local shrines across central India as offerings to express gratitude for wishes granted. Left in piles in the compound, old terra-cottas decompose as new ones are added. The shrines themselves, dedicated to local protective deities, are built of wood and clay which do not leave the historic imprint that stone architecture does. The historical depth of these tribal, highly regionalized traditions, then, must be discerned from other evidence. The rich mythologies of tribal communities and oral histories of artisans suggest visual traditions of some antiquity.

In Bastar district, in southeastern Madhya Pradesh, Gond shrines are the foci of periodic public religious activities rather than spaces for daily personal worship, prompting Elwin to speak of their “abandoned appearance.” The temple precinct is clearly ordered and articulated as a communal space: the shrine itself, a modest structure—a single room with mud-plastered walls and wooden trusses to support a ceramic tile roof—is at the back of a large west-facing courtyard, demarcated by stone slabs. This rectangular space includes a wooden post in the center and a wooden swing to the north. When possessed by the goddess, individuals sit on this imposing seat, which is frequently studded with iron spikes. While the pujar: (village priest) is responsible for conducting rites in honor of one among a constellation of regional goddesses, it is the person possessed (strai) who, in the voice of the deity, answers queries from the assembled villagers concerning the welfare of individuals and the community. At these public events that combine aspects of religious devotion and community fair, animals are sacrificed at the wooden post, and villagers offer small clay bulls or elephants. More costly metal animals, as well as brass umbrellas and iconic images of the goddess—all produced by local artisans—symbolize gratitude for wishes granted.
brass casters and available at weekly markets (hāj)—are brought out from storage in the priest’s home to be used on these ritual occasions.

Another prominent aspect of Bastar visual culture is the painted stone and carved wooden pillars erected by the Gond in commemoration of the deceased. Placed along the roadside, these memorials may carry a pictorial biography, or denote tribal ethnicity by the inclusion of scenes of dancing or hunting.

In Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh’s most westerly district, stone slabs erected by the Bhils carry the image of a horse and rider—described by art historian Stella Kramrisch as an ancestral “Spirit Rider”—carved in low relief. Varying in height from two to as much as six feet, these gātī are also made for the deceased, and are commissioned by his or her family because of the belief that the soul of the departed is restless, especially when the death is premature or accidental. Public rituals for installation and remembrance at festivals, such as choti (small) and barā navai, bring together and help define a given community. Clay horses are offered at spaces designated for these east-facing gātī as well as at small open-air shrines, or more typically, simple stone platforms dedicated to the goddesses Sāvan Māti and Sītalā Māti.

In Alirajpur, southern Jhabua district, the choti and barā navai offer opportunities to produce wall paintings known as pithorā. Prior to painting, the interior space is ritually cleansed by the artisan’s wife, who, like the Bhil craftsman, must fast in preparation. The painter works in concert with the priest, who dictates the subject matter and placement of equestrian figures, domestic and wild animals, and village scenes. The ritualized production of pithorā is experienced by only a few; afterward the entire village celebrates the new harvest with a feast.

Contrary to the prevalent view of tribal art as unchanging or static, tribal arts reveal a vitality and a vigorous capacity to incorporate or borrow elements from other cultural systems, as well as to promote current values, attitudes, and aspirations. While one can speak of the continuity of a specific artistic tradition—an old gātī with an inscription in Gujarati dated 1855 C.E., for example—the ability of people to change, revitalize, and reformulate indigenous arts must be emphasized. Brightly painted gātī commissioned as recently...
ASSAM

as 1995 depict men on motorcycles or in planes, and are signed by the artisan; funerary structures in Bastar may now take the shape of miniature temples or cars.

Although in general craft production in South Asia is a hereditary occupation and a male-dominated domain, there are gender-specific tasks and technologies. Among the low-caste Kumhar, or potters, who have a large adivasi clientele in Jhabua, men exclusively work on the potter’s wheel, whereas women craft hand-built forms such as the small horses. Rather than evincing the romantic position of the isolated and “authentic” tribal, patterns of craft production and consumption underscore a dynamic interaction between artisans and consumers. Indeed, this overview of tribal art would be incomplete without acknowledging the increasing commercialization and popularization of tribal arts for urban and international art markets.

Until quite recently tribal arts in South Asia received more attention from ethnographers and anthropologists than from art historians. In the formation of a canon of Indian art, the discipline has privileged sectarian and literate traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism with their monumental and datable art. At the risk of oversimplification, “tribal art” can be a useful category, because it makes an important intervention into a canon that has marginalized or excluded these other domains.

References


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ASSAM

Assam is the anglicized form of the local name of a state in the northeastern region of India, close to the country’s borders with China, Burma, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The basic term asam (pronounced asam) is popularly interpreted as a formation of Sanskrit derivation, meaning “peerless or unparalleled.” However, the opinion generally accepted in academic circles is that the term has come from Ahom, the name of the ruling power of the neighboring Tai-Shan dynasty that was most dominant in the territory in the late medieval period.

In the ancient period, Assam was known by the names Pragcyotisha and Kamarupa, which, along with the names of kings like Narakākura and Bhagadatta, figure prominently in epic and Puranic literature. Recorded history speaks of several ruling dynasties, of whom the Varman line was the most illustrious. At various times during the medieval period, different parts of the land were under the control of the Chutiyas, the Barahis, the Kacharis, and the Bhuyans. In time there emerged two major ruling powers, the Ahoms in the east and the Koches in the west. The Ahoms came as invaders in the thirteenth century C.E. and soon became fully independent. Through their strong and uninterrupted rule, which lasted six hundred years, they effectively forged political, social, and cultural consolidation of different ethnic groups and sociopolitical forces. A more or less similar role was played in the western part by the Koches, whose descent can be traced to Bodo extraction. Several Muslim invasions, although successfully resisted by the Ahoms, left their own imprint. Serious internal conflicts and devastating Burmese invasions paved the way for British annexation in 1826. The British province with the present name included a large part of northeast India. After India’s independence, the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram were carved out of Assam.

Since early times, there had been migration of Aryans through and to Assam, settling in the region at different intervals. Segments of the original population had also been influenced in various degrees by Aryan religiocultural modes and mores. However, this part of India has always been a homeland of Indo-Mongoloid people. Scholars have also discerned some Austric and Dravidian elements. A large number of communities who stand at different levels of acculturation, integration, and assimilation vis-à-vis the Assamese-Hindu majority live in the hills and plains. Among the major tribal groups are the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Misings, the Deuris, and the Sonowals in the plains, and the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Zemi Nagas, and the Kukis in the hills.

There is also a sizeable percentage of Assamese Muslims whose progenitors were early Muslim settlers taking local wives, early local converts, and Muslim artisans brought from the west. Their contribution to the overall sociocultural makeup is considerable. While there is a small Assamese Sikh community, Christianity has been embraced by certain segments of the tribal communities. Among the more recent large-scale settlers are Santals, Oraons, Gonds, and Mundas, whose ancestors were brought from the region around Oissa.

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