

Architecture at the Margins: Regional Identity and ethnic expression in the Traditional Tangkhul House

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Abstract: *This paper explores how the traditional Tangkhul house embodies regional identity and ethnic expression within the broader context of marginality in Northeast India. It examines how architectural forms, spatial arrangements, and symbolic motifs articulate the Tangkhul community's cultural values, social hierarchies, and connection to the natural environment. As a manifestation of identity at the margins, the Tangkhul house represents both continuity and adaptation – preserving indigenous worldviews while negotiating modern influences. Through this analysis, the study highlights how vernacular architecture becomes a vital site for asserting cultural distinctiveness and regional belonging in a marginal and dynamic socio-cultural landscape*

Keywords: *Tangkhul, Motif, Cultural, Traditional, Tribes.*

Introduction

The Tangkhul Naga Tribe which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid both ethnically and linguistically is one of the major Naga tribes of Manipur and is an indigenous people of the state. The adjacent regions of Senapati and Thoubal districts are also home to the Tangkhuls. In Myanmar, the Tangkhuls live mainly in the Somra (Somrah) tract.¹ Ukhrul district is the main concentrated homeland of the Tangkhul and the Tangkhul are the first to settle at the present land since time immemorial. The Tangkhuls are self-sufficient people, lived independently under the governance of their customary laws and administration in the past.

Architectural symbolism means a design technique that uses architectural elements to convey deeper meanings beyond their practical purpose. Traditional

Architectural symbolism reflects cultural beliefs, values and narratives. The Tangkhul Traditional house, its Sculptural motifs influences reflect their values, social structure and cultural identities. A typical naga architecture speaks its own story, the tribes that it belongs and status the owner holds in the village. Traditional house of the Tangkhuls not only display but also play a vital role in preserving their rich cultural heritage and serve as a means of passing down cultural knowledge and values from one generation to another. Deeper learning on the Tangkhul traditional house and sculptural motif, one gains a deeper appreciation for its roots and identity.

The Tangkhul society live a community life which is vibrant and full of life. R.R. Shimray has mentioned that "Naga individuals know no other life except that of community life. They work in groups, eat in groups and sleep in groups. There is no individual cultivation or harvest, no individual house-building, no feast of merit by individuals alone and no wooing of girls individually. All things are done in groups and in the full presence of the entire community."²

The paper made an attempt to look into the different types of Tangkhul traditional house, the cultural significance and its preservation.

Tangkhul traditional house and classification of traditional house

Construction of an individual house was collectively done by the community; clansmen, neighbour, relatives came together to build the house until completion. Tangkhuls built their houses using local materials namely wood, thatch and in some places, bamboo is also used. Generally, the houses were built on the ground directly so it had a mud flooring and the walls of the house was made with broad wooden planks with rough surface as it was carved with traditional tools like dao, chisel and axe. Roofing of the house was of two kinds namely shingled wooden plank roofing which was done in the house of the chief, clan's head and wealthy man. Another one is the thatched roofing that was generally made by the commoners however, in some place houses of the chief or rich man house were even made with thatched roof.

Tangkhul tribe has the powerful influence of culture in their lifestyle and this can be seen in their houses too. Being a communal society, Tangkhuls construct their houses with the help of the villagers. Tangkhul house can be broadly categorised into two: Lengcheng Shim (wooden house) and Ngashi shim (Thatched house). Further, Lengcheng shim is sub-divided into two: Lengcheng shim with Lengcheng kui (crossed wooden horns) which are constructed by the village chief and the clan heads and Lengcheng shim without Lengcheng kui which are constructed by wealthy person. According to DS. Zimik, there are four types of Traditional houses with different wood carving motifs namely,

1. **Ameikharar Shimsak (Village chief's house):** The upper portion of the chief's house, Lengchengkui, is shaped like a horn adopting the structure of a buffalo. This form of home has shingled wooden plank roofing

(Lengcheng); however, depending on the materials available, thatched roofing is also used in some areas. Five pillars support the front of the house: Phungva is the largest and the main post, the two next to it are termed Meilarung or shimrui, and the two corners are called Pakra. Motifs of human head, pig, cattle head, hornbill head etc. are carved on these pillars.

2. ***Achuileng Shimsak (clan head's house)***: The clan head's house, Lengchengkui have curved that face downside and the Motif of Hornbill was not carved on such houses.
3. ***Acheimei shimsak (Rich man's house or Warrior's house)***: Lengchengkui of Acheimei shimsak is simple with no curve or horn shape and Motif like pawprint of Tiger, Stag, Pig, shield, spear, buffalo head, Mithun head, human head etc are carved.
4. ***Icham chamlak kahai shim (Ordinary house)***: commoner house is made simple with no motif carved on the façade and pillar with thatched roofing and studying the structure and motif of the house one can know the status of the family in the society.³

Married members of the family typically establish their own households elsewhere since the majority of Naga houses had been constructed to house a single family.⁴ Tangkhul villages have close affinities in building their houses. Although each village have their own style of construction, their structures are fairly uniform. The typical Tangkhul house as mentioned by Wungnaosui Ronra Shimray is commonly consisted of three rooms:

1. ***Yangkhup*** (The front room): The front room was used for doing domestic works like pounding paddy in a huge wooden mortar, winnowing, the room is also used for sheltering the domesticated animals like fowls, pigs and cattle. Skulls of buffaloes and Mithun are also kept here as trophies.
2. ***Shimlung*** (Middle room): The middle room contained the kitchen and the bedroom. Traditionally the hearth was installed at the centre of the room made with three cylindrical shape stone and it is in this hearth that the family sit together sharing folktales and folklores, discussing family matters, cooking etc
3. ***Pongrun*** (Storage room): The last room was the storeroom and it was in the storeroom that daily supplies of rice and fermented rice wine were stored. Everything that were essential and valuable for the family were kept in this room.⁵

Ethnic sculptural motif of the traditional house and types

The traditional house of the Tangkhul naga people serve as a tribute to their identity, traditions and beliefs. The house of the commoners was usually built in a simple manner with no wood carving or sculptural motif since they didn't make any feasting in constructing their houses. So, the sculptural motifs were usually found on the walls and pillars of the village chief, Clan head or the

wealthy man's house. The Lengchengshim house are adorned with the carving of animals head such as Mithun and buffaloes, human heads, paw prints of tiger, heavenly bodies etc. showing his higher social status in the village.⁶ Their woodcarving on the façade and pillars also showcase their artistic skills. Additionally, the sculptural motif or themes on the houses function to preserve cultural identity and legacy.

The Tangkhul typical wood-carved art motifs were abstraction of mostly animals' forms, with a defined relationship to important aspects of the ancient Tangkhul animistic tradition. Human figures or sculpted head were inscribed on wall panels. Mithun heads, buffalo heads were the most common motifs and had great relevance and symbolism in the Tangkhul naga tradition. With respect to the resources available in each area, the sorts of motifs may differ slightly from one another. Given below are different types of sculptural motifs;

Motifs on *lengchengkui* (crossed wooden horns)

In the Lengchengshim (House of the chief or wealthy people), the Lengchengkui are adorned with motifs of buffalo head, rooster, sun, cobweb.⁷ The traditional houses in Longpi also have carving of pottery, butterfly, mango on the Lengchengkui. The Lengchengkui of the dwellings were typically kept simple in communities such as Chingjaroi.



Figure 1: Tangkhul traditional house with Lengchengkui adorn with motifs, Longpi village.

Motifs on facades and pillars of the house

House of status or the Lengchengshim is constructed with five main pillars. In some cases, when the house of a wealthy man who have given the feast of the

merit is built, more pillars are added to enlarge the house to accommodate the bachelors' dormitory or the ladies dormitory.⁸ The pillars and façades of this house are sculpted with the carving of Mithun heads, buffaloes heads, human heads, Human figure, hornbill, heavenly bodies like star, moon, sun etc., paw prints of tiger known as Shangkha chuk in Tangkhul dialect and other geometrical forms. Houses with motif that is not only carved but painted as well is found in Longpi village of Ukhrul.



Figure 2. Motifs on Facades and pillars of the wealthy man: Lungghar Village

Motifs on the Y post or Tarung

The Tarung or the Y post is erected by the wealthy person during the feast of merit. A home with a Totem post (Tarung) is a symbol of the owner's accomplishments and an indication of their higher social standing. The Totem post is revered and regarded as a sacred pole.⁹ The host prepares by making a large amount of rice beer and butchering buffalo, cows, pigs, and dogs for meat because erecting Totem posts (Tarung) takes a long time. This celebration was exclusively observed by the wealthy because it lasted for days and weeks and cost a lot of money. The killing of buffaloes was based on the number of Tarung posts; five buffaloes were killed for every five posts, and six buffaloes were murdered for every six posts.¹⁰ In Chingjaroi Village, The Y post is carved with buffalo heads representing the quantity of animals killed when the Y post was erected and also elevating their status in the society.¹¹ In some villages like Phungcham, Longpi carving of the Y post with tiger's pawprints (shangkha chuk) is also found.



Figure 3. Motifs on the Y post: Longpi village (left) and Chingjaroi Village (right)

Deciphering the motifs found in the Tangkhul sculpture

The Tangkhul possess a profound tradition of wood carving rooted in an animistic heritage. Wood carving as an artistic discipline is predominantly associated with architectural and ceremonial traditions and all naga tribes exhibit proficiency in this craft. Each pattern encapsulates distinct elements of Tangkhul life, including agricultural techniques, everyday activities and spiritual beliefs; these carvings served as a remembrance of those events and a person's accomplishments, conserving these motifs ensures that the cultural tapestry will continue to be vivid and intact. The oral tradition embedded in the motif carry stories, offering a special platform for learning. The tradition of wood carving can be seen reflected even today in a number of areas which have been responsible for maintaining this tradition. The woodcraft of Tangkhul is full of symbolic motifs and designs. Woodcraft is traditionally practiced by male members of the community. The ability to create exquisite carvings of people and animals- the most popular subjects in Naga carving-was more complex than what was needed to make everyday objects. These were abilities that were very indicative of the culture of specific groups rather than being general across the naga region.¹² Primarily dao, axes, adzes, knives and chisels made from used dao tangs and other metal objects were used for carving.¹³ Tangkhul sculptural motifs with their symbolic meaning are listed below;

Mithun head motif

The most potent representation of riches, success and fertility is the Mithun, which enhances home exteriors through Mithun head carving that historically indicate the owner's social standing. Houses with carvings of Mithun head motifs on the façade and pillars are done in villages of kamo areas and Jessami. According to the book written by Mutua Bahadur and Y. Santabai, the carving of Mithun heads is said to bring fertility to both the land and the family. They also held the belief that a man's soul is guided to heaven by the soul of a Mithun after death, and that a man's soul goes to heaven if he kills a Mithun during his lifetime.¹⁴



Figure 4. Mithun head motif: Jessami Village

Buffalo head motif

The Tangkhul traditional house features buffalo heads as a motif on its façade and pillars. They primarily carved these images to commemorate the large feasts that the Tangkhul Naga community conducted.¹⁵ Not only carving but even skulls of the buffaloes are still kept in some villages like kuirei, Longpi. Large, magnificent buffalo skulls that were consumed during the building of the house and the feast of merit are still exquisitely preserved within Longpi homes to serve as a reminder of the magnificent feasts and to demonstrate the social standing of the family. Veikho also stated that in addition to preserving their ancestral traditions, the house's buffalo heads are carved to symbolize strength, honour and the house's whole history.¹⁶ Additionally, a buffalo head was carved in the Lengchengkui, indicating that the house was the chief's house.¹⁷



Figure 5. Buffalo head motif, Phungcham Village(left) and large buffalo skulls preserved in Longpi Village(right).

Human head motif

The wealthy man's residence was well-known in the Tangkhul region. It featured highly formalized human heads that frequently stamped together in formations resembling ladders.¹⁸ The ancestors of the Tangkhuls were head-hunters, and the depiction of human skulls in wood carvings serves as a poignant reminder of their historical tradition.¹⁹ Hungpung village still has houses with numerous human head carvings or paintings signifying a warrior's house. Carving of human head sculpture in the facades of the houses is done in all the Tangkhul villages as it depicts the head-hunting traditions of Tangkhul ancestors.



Figure 6. Human head motifs: Phungcham Village (left), Hungpung Village (right).

Human figure motif

Figures of mothers and children, men and women standing, and women in compromising positions are carved to represent the harmonious and healthy social lives of the two sexes.²⁰ Carved statues of two women standing in the

Chingjaroi Headman's home depict the two concubines of his great grandfather.²¹ The sculpture of a man with a shield and spears portrays a warrior signifying the bravery and courage of a warrior.²² Such motif is still found in villages like Chingjaroi, Longpi and Sihai.



Figure 7. Human figure motif: Chingjaroi Village

Hornbill motifs

For the Nagas, hornbills are a representation of their magical abilities as well as of bravery and beauty. As mentioned by DS Zimik in his book, the Tangkhuls employ hornbill's head as a motif to represent the princess symbolising royalty; hence, they are only carved on the village chief's home. Motifs of birds and hornbill symbolise pride and valour.

Rooster motif

A rooster motif is carved only on the home of a wealthy family who had performed feasts of merit to represent the accomplishment of the owner, whose status in society has elevated. Hence, it symbolises honour, victory and prosperity.²³



Figure 8. Rooster motif: Sihai Village

Animal motifs

For the Tangkhuls, carvings of animals such as Tigers, Stags, Pig, Dog and Tiger pawprints represent a man's courage and hunting prowess, strength and power. Such motifs were often displayed on the houses of chiefs, warriors or families of high standing, indicating their achievements and authority within the community. Shangkha chuk (Tiger pawprints) also demonstrates how sturdy the built homes are. These carvings are done on the house of the man who completed the feast of merit or Lengchengshim and they additionally demonstrate the house of a warrior.²⁴ Houses with such carvings are still found in Kuirei, Longpi, Chingjaroi, Sihai, Phungcham.



Figure 9. Tiger pawprints, Kuirei village (left), traditional house with Animal motifs, Chingjaroi Village (middle) and Longpi Village (right).

Geometrical motifs

The various geometrical carvings seen in Tangkhul traditional house include Leishi leiya, Mishan Shimplakshan Achut, Manuirei, Karkaoran, Hali, Mirin Shongza, Riksi, Shangkha khangareo, and Khongrei Hangva.



Figure 10. Geometrical motifs: Longpi Village.

Mishan shimplakshan Achut is a carving that displays the number of family members in a tiny triangle. Manuirei is a parallel line motif that signify bountiful harvest. Karkaoran (cobweb) is a motif that has been carved to keep evil spirits from severing the rope that ties the dwelling together. Hali symbolises virtue.²⁵ Riksi (Comb design) is not just a decorative but carries cultural meaning and

significance. It symbolises cleanliness and discipline reminding the household to live in an orderly and well-disciplined manner, just as a comb arranges hair neatly. It is a kind of motif which is also being use in Tangkhul textile. Such a sculpture is a symbol of society's great regard for women.



Figure 11. Comb carvings: Hungpung Village(left), Phungcham Village (middle) and Lunghar Village(right).

Khongphei (Plate design) is a circular pattern which represents the practice of sharing food and welcoming guest, a symbol of hospitality and generosity. After hosting a feast of merit, families often carved plate designs on their homes to showcase their social achievement. The plate motif reflects the offering of food and kindness to others.



Figure 12. Plate motif: Longpi Village (left) and Lunghar Village (right).

Shangkha khangareo is a geometrical motif carved like a chessboard representing a type of game that depicts a hunter and a tiger playing together.



Figure 13. Shangkha khangareo and khongrei hongva motif: Hungpung Village.

Khongrei hangva is a motif carved on the Lengchengkui of the Hungpung

chief's house that shows the 7 clans of the village.²⁶

Heavenly bodies motif

Their closeness to nature and animism is demonstrated by the sun, moon, and star carving motif.²⁷ They thought that such a motif signified good fortune and that their developing children would gain from the positive influence of light and shine in their lives and homes. It signifies the light and brightness of the house.²⁸



Figure 14. Heavenly bodies motif: Longpi Village.

An examination of the devastating impact of modernization and urbanization of Tangkhul Traditional Architecture:

1. Modernization and Urbanization have led to replacement of natural (wood, bamboo) with modern materials (Concrete, steel, cement). One can also find that there was a huge decline of traditional craftsmanship and construction techniques. This shift compromises the cultural significance and authenticity of traditional Tangkhul architecture.
2. Urbanization has influenced shift from communal to individualized living spaces. Adoption of western style floor plans and room configurations becomes very common. It also decreased emphasis on communal areas (Courtyards and communal halls). These changes alter the social dynamics and cultural practices embedded in traditional Tangkhul architecture.
3. Modernization has also resulted in the loss of symbolic motifs and decorative elements. It reduced significance of traditional architectural features (door carvings, roof designs). This erosion of cultural symbolism threatens the Tangkhul community's connection to their heritage.

Preservation in the face of modernity

With the rapid modernization of Manipur, Traditional Tangkhul architecture faces challenges as new materials and designs gain popularity. While many Tangkhul people adapt to modern architectural trends, there is also a resurgence of interest in preserving the traditional designs and motifs that define their

heritage. Initiatives to document and preserve traditional Tangkhul architecture are gaining traction, with scholars and community members working together to keep these cultural symbols alive.

This balancing act between preserving the past and embracing the future is an ongoing process. For many Tangkhul families, retaining aspects of their traditional homes within modern constructions allows them to honour their roots while making practical adaptations.

Conclusion

The Traditional Tangkhul house stands as a testament to the rich cultural identity and profound symbolism embedded within Tangkhul Naga heritage. These homes are not only places of shelter but also repositories of ethnic motifs that narrate the community's values, beliefs and histories. Architectural elements, from the shape of the house to intricate carvings and arrangements, reflect the interconnectedness between the Tangkhul people and their land, spirituality and social structures. The symbols and designs are carefully chosen, encapsulating tales of ancestral knowledge, reverence for nature and expressions of resilience. Through these architectural choices, the Tangkhul people preserve and communicate their cultural identity, offering both an aesthetic and spiritual connection to their roots.

As modernization and urbanization continue to transform the cultural landscape of the Tangkhul community, it is imperative to recognize the significance of traditional architecture in preserving cultural heritage. This study underscores the need for community-led conservation initiatives, cultural education programs and sustainable development practices that balance modernization with cultural heritage conservation. By embracing their rich cultural legacy, the Tangkhul people can ensure the continued relevance and vitality of their traditional architecture, thereby safeguarding their unique cultural identity for future generations. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of cultural identity, architectural symbolism and community resilience, inspiring further exploration and preservation of the Tangkhul people's remarkable cultural heritage.

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