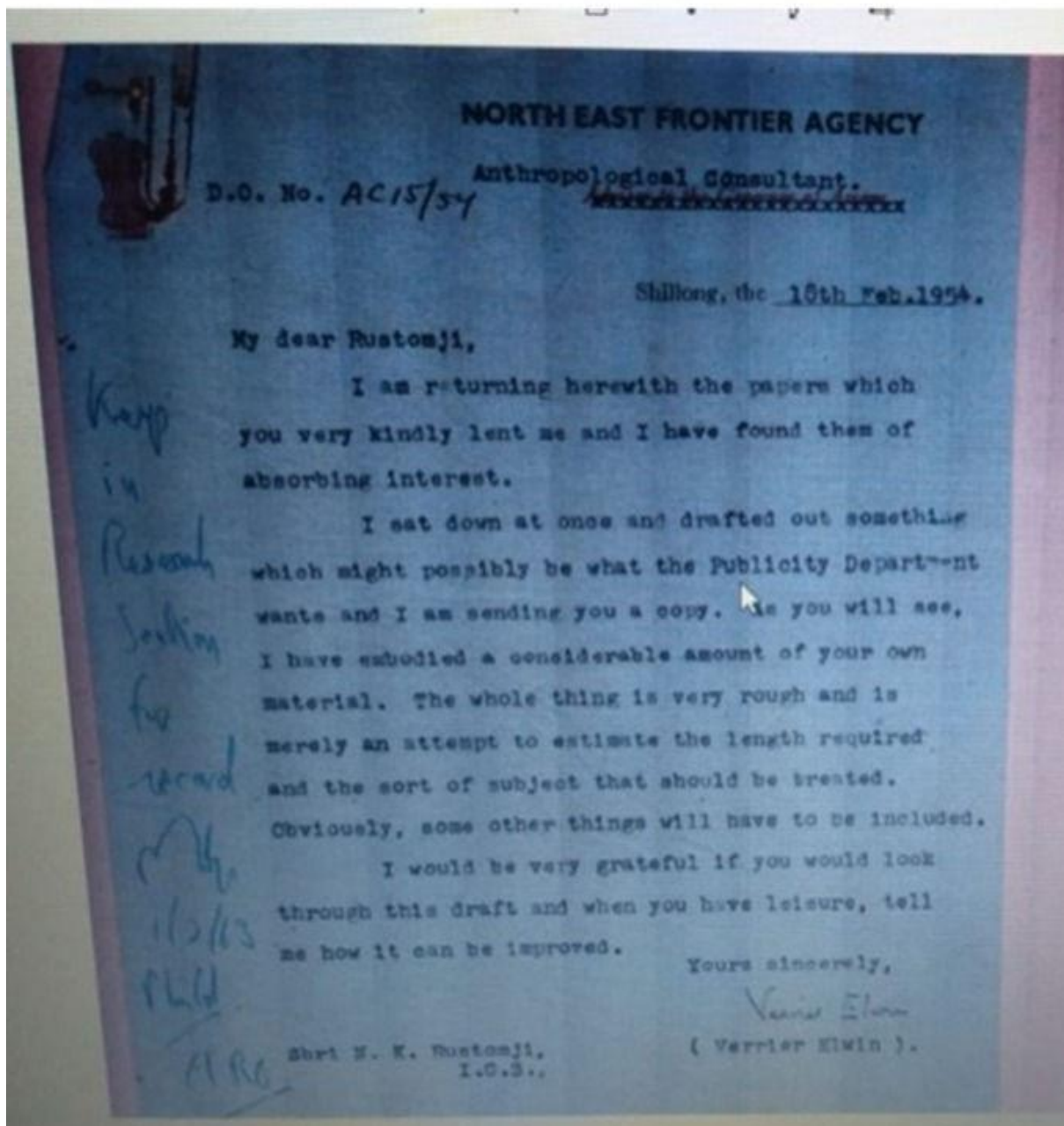


Birth of a Museum: the ethnographic museum movement in Arunachal Pradesh

Updated: Jan 13, 2022

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Communication between Nari Rustomji and Verrier Elwin: file no. R/26/58, Report of Verrier Elwin tour to Wanchu Sub-division of Tirap Frontier Division during November-December, 1954.

Arunachal Pradesh is one of the youngest states of the union of India, sharing borders with China, Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar. The hill constituency is home to twenty-six major scheduled tribes and more than one-hundred sub-tribes, sharing their lineages with Tibetans, Bhutanese and Burmese communities that surround the extended Eastern Himalayan region. Every single tribal group has their own distinctive culture which creates a platform for further scientific study in the region. In short, this Himalayan region is the 'pandora's box' for anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists, botanists, wildlife conservationists, museum curators and historians to explore tribal oral history, culture, artefacts, inscriptions and folk literature. In this blog we make a preliminary attempt to genealogise the ethnographic museum building project in Arunachal Pradesh through its emergence in three phases – formative, constructive and analytical.



Photo: Marching through the beaten tracts. Indian administrative officer tour of NEFA during winter 1954. *File no R/26/58: Report of Verrier Elwin tour to Wanchu Sub-division of Tirap Frontier Division during November-December 1954*

The formative phase

In the Himalayan frontier of Eastern India, the earliest expeditions were undertaken in the late nineteenth century, when the British were exploring an alternative trade route to Lhasa, the commercial capital of Tibet. In this process, they discovered a small section of tribal people in every pocket of the extended Himalayan region, like the 'Zomias' – an unruly, independent, warrior-like people who remained untouched by modernity and imperial administration. The tour diaries of the colonial officers of Assam were the reference point for understanding the culture of the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through the works of hill administrators such as John Philip Mill, John Henry Hutton, Nari. K. Rustomji, Verrier Elwin, Hipsan Roy and anthropologists Christopher Furer von Haimendorf, B.S. Guha and Sachin Roy, we are able to obtain a 'thick description' of tribal life and culture of the state.

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These hill tribes have multiple stories of origin and migration. Through museums, it was possible to document their endangered material culture. In the formative stage, the collection of artefacts was used for research purposes carried out by the Anthropological Survey of India and Indian administrative officers. During this period, the Indian administration conducted the first census in 1951 to make sense of the linguistic, ethnic and demographic structure of the North East Frontier Area (NEFA), making reference to the 1945 census that was held just before India's independence. Atypically, the 1945 census did not record the hill tribes of the NEFA. The census was conducted on the foothills of the Balipara, Lakhimpur, Sadiya hill tracts of Assam.^[1] Therefore, the 1951 census attained importance for planned development of the Excluded Areas of Assam. The post-Independence Indian government used new terms such as 'development' and 'integration' in the census of 1951 to assimilate the NEFT (North Eastern Frontier Tracts) tribes into the idea of India. Soon after this, the hill administration deployed military patrols and survey parties to demarcate the boundaries of the dense forest areas of the extended Himalayan region. It was a big challenge for the newly independent Indian administration to demarcate her area in the NEFT region since this was disputed by the Chinese government, who did not recognise the Mac Mohan Line and was making inroads into Tibet.

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In the formative stage, the seed of nationalism was planted in NEFA through the deputation of mainland Bengali and Assamese graduates in newly created administrative and clerical posts. The isolation policy of colonial administration was reversed by a new wave of immigrants from Bhutan, Tibet and the emplacement of [Chakma and Hajong refugees from Chittagong Hill Tracts \(East Pakistan\)](#). The Five-Year Plan came up with new policies to govern the tribal frontier. Creation of tribal museum was on top of the plan of political officers and anthropologists working in the region advising the Government of India and the first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who appointed his confidant Verrier Elwin as Anthropological Adviser to the Government of [NEFA](#). Building new museums were presented as a means to preserve tribal identity in order to safeguard the interests of tribal people, enshrined in the doctrine of *panchsheel*. The idea of establishing a central museum at Shillong^[2] was initiated by L.N. Chakraborty, the history research officer for the NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency). The plan for the museum's construction was initiated by Nari Rustomji, the advisor to the governor of Assam. In 1953, the scheme was shared with all political officers and schoolteachers to collect tribal artefacts and document oral literature. Parallel to these schemes, the Hindi language was introduced to first-generation tribal school students, making it an integral part of the school curriculum. The *devanagari* script was introduced to document the oral history of the tribes of NEFA. The objective of the formative stage of the museum movement in Arunachal Pradesh was to nationalise the frontier.

The constructive phase



Photo: Indian administrative officer tour of Arunachal Pradesh during winter: File no R/26/58 Report of Verrier Elwin tour to Wanchu Sub-division of Tirap Frontier Division during November-December 1954.

The constructive stage was a period of 'institutionalisation' and 'formalisation' of the museum in NEFA through the creation of a research department in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. The momentum took shape under the supervision of Verrier Elwin. He was appointed as Advisor to the Government of Assam for Tribal Affairs. Under the guidance of Elwin, the proposal for setting up a museum was approved in 1955 and the central museum was established at Shillong. At this point, Elwin took full responsibility for building a research department with the help of B.K. Shukla, the political officer of the Subansiri division. Elwin worked meticulously with political officers and hill administrators of the NEFA and created an official platform for documentation through the promotion and collection of tribal artefacts such as war dresses, headgears, machete, weaving objects, beads and other objects of tribal culture. Elwin's personal collections, photographs and artefacts were also added to newly developed museum at Shillong, which was curated by Mrs Nilima Roy, the first female curator of the museum (1956-60).

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In 1955, five more Frontier Divisional museums were commissioned and, later, in 1965, these museums were renamed as district museums of Arunachal Pradesh. There were few prominent research officers like Sachin Roy, who worked extensively in the 'Abor' belt, among the present day Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. He wrote his ethnography on the Abor, entitled 'Aspects of Padam-Minyong culture', which is still one of the classic ethnographic books for museumologists in India. He became the first curator of the National Museum in New Delhi. Roy curated the North Eastern section in the National Museum. He also proposed the idea of building the first ethnographic museum to Mrs Indira Gandhi in order to display the diversity of the Indian tribes; this museum is now known as the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) and is located in Bhopal.^[3] In the formative phase, after the death of Verrier Elwin and the transfer of Nari Rustumji from the NEFA to Sikkim^[4] in 1967, the research department expanded its mission to documenting tribal religion and more funds were allocated to restore the archaeological ruins of the NEFA. Under the stewardship of political officers like Mr P.N. Luther, who was then the additional advisor to the governor of Assam, undertook extensive tours of the NEFA to document the region's history in the late 1960s, soon after the 1962 Indo-Chinese war. In the following decades, the union government took further initiatives to improve road infrastructure and welfare programmes for the uplanders in order to protect the frontier region from the threats of Chinese aggression through the expansion of India's 'development state'.

The analytical phase





Arunachal State Museum, Itanagar, [photo credit](#)

In this period, the contribution of Dr P.C. Dutta who was then the director of research at Arunachal Pradesh, becomes important. During his tenure, the new phase of preservation and promotion of tribal cultural artefacts was constituted with the collaboration of the State Research department. Dutta was a trained anthropologist who introduced the idea of the overall development of museum culture in Arunachal Pradesh as well as took the initiative to author four monographs on the tribal people of Tirap district. In late 1980, the administration headquarters were shifted from Shillong to the new capital of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar. The state museum was built in 1988 and was inaugurated by R.D. Pradhan, the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh. Almost every district has its own museum today, and each district has its own tribal-specific artefacts related to their culture. In Tawang, the Indian state has created a war memorial in memory of soldiers who died during the 1962 Indo-Chinese border conflict. By doing so, the national government has built a symbol of nationalism in the frontier state by documenting the war artefacts and stories of sacrifices of the Indian army who fought with the People's Liberation Army to safeguard national territory. This type of memorabilia creates a sense

of patriotism among the tribal people, who now live under the protection of the Indian state. In the last decade, the analytical phase of museum development took place under the stewardship of anthropologists, musicologists and tribal elders. In this phase, the Arunachal state museum was renovated with the development of new assets and modern facilities like the North-East galleries, a conference hall and a reference library in order to promote tourism and a new way of educating the young generation of Arunachalis, who are becoming alienated from their culture through the influence of modernity, promoted by school education and the missionaries. In this process, the state modernised the galleries using 27 miniature dioramas, converted into life-size dioramas of major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Today, there are twelve district museums and two archaeological museums in Arunachal Pradesh.

The curation of new tribal museums in the post-Independence period not only advanced anthropological notions of 'tribes' but also cultivated a new imagination of tribal welfare and identity that developed out of a dialogue between Indian anthropologists, local political officers and field researchers recruited from the Anthropological Survey and other government departments in Arunachal Pradesh.

The museum movement in Arunachal Pradesh, through a post-Independence enterprise, carries the baggage of the colonial past. The significance of museums in Arunachal Pradesh illustrates how the project of nationalising Indian's frontiers started through the process of tribal integration during the 1950s and went hand in hand with the doctrine of *panchsheel*, which aimed to formally bring the tribes under the fold of Indian nation state with affirmative action, unlike the colonial period, when they were administered indirectly as buffer territories of the British Empire. The curation of new tribal museums in the post-Independence period not only advanced anthropological notions of 'tribes' but also cultivated a new imagination of tribal welfare and identity that developed out of a dialogue between Indian anthropologists, local political officers and field researchers recruited from the Anthropological Survey and other government departments in Arunachal Pradesh. The torchbearers of the museum movement in Arunachal therefore were non indigenous official draftsmen, foot soldiers and civil servant's from the plains trained to envision the composite idea of India, its 'unity in diversity' as a multicultural postcolonial nation with tribes as ethnic 'other' reinforced through museum displays in dioramas.

To conclude the best way to understand this 'othering' is reflected in this song,

*The sahib who lives in Shillong,
Has flown like a maina bird to these high hills,
And has perched on a tree in our village.
Our minds are full of happiness.*

*As the fish swim up the little streams from the greater river,
The sahib has come from the plains to our high hills,*

And our minds are full of happiness.

Song composed by Pomau villagers addressing Nani Rustamji during his visit to NEFA (1954)

Endnotes:

[1] These areas were under the 'excluded area' under the British Raj. [2] During British rule, Shillong was the capital of Assam. [3] Interviewed Prof. Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri, Department of Anthropology, Rajiv Gandhi University. [4] Sikkim is one of the North-eastern states of India.

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Census report

Census of 1951 in the NEFA Agency.

Census of 1951 in the NEFA Agency (Part -B)

Census of 1951 in the NEFA Agency (Part-C)

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