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Newly Authentic Architecture in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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The Ethnology Museum in Ha Noi has in its grounds a collection of disparate traditional buildings, each representing the architecture of one of Vietnam’s ethnic groups. The most recent addition to the Museum’s collection is a Bahnar rong (communal house), completed in June 2003 by a team of twenty-nine Bahnar craftspeople. In remote Mamasa Toraja in south-central Sulawesi there is a small timber church. It is of timber construction, with a simple gabled roof. A stubby tower rises from the roof and the church would be entirely unremarkable except that instead of having a steeple, the tower is capped by an elaborate timber superstructure topped with a shingled saddleback roof.  

While there has been an upsurge of appreciation and interest in what has been termed ‘vernacular’ architecture, there remains the persistent assumption that traditional architectures exist outside the flow of historical and therefore architectural development. As such, both of these examples would seem to lie outside the limits of contemporary architectural interest. One seems to be a reconstruction of a traditional building type, the other a simple appropriation of an identifiable local form. However, both might also be considered to demonstrate the agency of minority communities to negotiate the passage of both skills and meanings into the contemporary world. They each display the capacity of minority traditions to pragmatically negotiate identity and cultural history by translating and adapting their own architectural languages.
The assumption is always that, because certain central elements of the culture have been destroyed, killed in effect, the culture itself must be dead. But this is based on the model of an organic body, in which, for example, if your lungs or heart were torn out the effect would be fatal. It's common sense.1

One of the notable features of travelling in southeast Asia is the extensive variety of traditional architecture. Many ethnic groups are distinguished by unique and sometimes spectacular buildings, to the extent that some traditional villages have become attractions in themselves. However, at the same time, over the last hundred years all southeast Asian peoples have been subject to profound changes in their social, political and cultural environments. So what happens at the local level? How do small communities or ethnic groups negotiate the passage of their own traditions into a contemporary world that seems largely imposed upon them? There has been a certain amount of discussion in Asia of what being both 'modern' and 'Asian' might mean in a postcolonial context preoccupied with nation-building and rapid urban development. As Lawrence Vale has perhaps most succinctly outlined in relation to architecture, deciding upon the forms and symbols which might be utilised to represent identity is a selective and politically charged process.2

In this context, what of minority communities' ability to translate and redefine their own architectural languages, and thus negotiate the passage of skills and meanings into the contemporary world? How do they pragmatically negotiate symbolic identity, cultural history and performativity to form valid contemporary architectural expressions? The architecture of the Bahnar in Vietnam, and the Toraja in Indonesia, both regional minorities in their developing nations, will be discussed in this context as a means of exploring the passage of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' into the contemporary world.

The Bahnar are an Austronesian group whose native lands are in the south-central highlands of Vietnam. This area is one of the most ethnographically varied in southeast Asia, its mountainous and inaccessible terrain being home to a number of minority groups long forced from the lowlands. The dominant building in a Bahnar village (as well as with some related groups such as the J6rai, Jõlõng or Sôdang) is the rong, or communal house. Situated generally in the centre of the village, the rong is vastly bigger than the houses that surround it. Traditionally the rong is constructed of timber piles and framing, with bamboo and thatch lashered together with rattan, using similar techniques to other buildings of the region. The rong is, however, distinguished by its massive axe-blade shaped gabled roof, which can be over seventeen metres tall. Its traditional purpose is twofold. Firstly it is a dormitory for young men, who are customarily separated at the age of ten to twelve. Secondly it is a meeting hall. It is the place for rituals, feasting and celebrations, as well as the reception of important guests to the village. Village decisions and judgments are also traditionally decided in the rong, and in the past, the rong also served as a guardhouse, in which preparations for battle were made and weapons were stored.3

Traditionally remote from the affairs of the Vietnamese state, the views of the country's ethnic minorities have largely been of peripheral concern to the central government. The Viet Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) did not traditionally inhabit the highlands, but pressure for land has gradually forced their settlement there. Numbers of Kinh rapidly increased particularly under the internal migration policies enacted the late 1980s, and since then indigenous communities have found themselves subject to social, cultural and political discrimination as highland areas have been developed in favour of settlers' housing and cash crops.4 While this situation has been partially redressed in recent times, peoples such as the Bahnar remain on the fringes of wider Vietnamese society, with their own customs under threat. However with doi moi (the Vietnamese equivalent of perestroika) and the opening up of Vietnam to foreigners in the last decade has come increasing outside interest in the nation's minority cultures. Some of this interest has been political or aid-based, but mostly through the agency of tourism. The provincial town of Kontum in the highlands has become the local centre for a growing industry based on the mountain scenery and ethnohistorical colour of the local populace, thus stimulating interest (and economical benefits) in local traditions. The rong, being by far the more spectacular indigenous structure in the area, is thus slowly developing another role, as a prominent signifier of the local people's distinctive culture. So far, however, mass tourism is in its infancy (the area was only opened up to foreigners in 1993) and new rong are rarely constructed, though the existing ones are becoming tourist attractions for the increasing numbers of visitors trekking out of Kontum in search of scenery and local colour. There have been some governmental attempts to accommodate needs for indigenous building typologies, though these have not always been successful. Doris Kim Sung relates an account of mistaken construction of a Bahnar rong for a J6rai village. The J6rai are a group related to the Bahnar and also have a rong, superficially similar to that of the Bahnar though quite different in its composition, purpose and siting. The new rong, thus remains unused by its J6rai owners.5

Based on a mixture of handed-down method, local memory and ethnographic evidence from the Museum, the rong in Ha Noi was constructed using traditional materials, tools and techniques. In the publicity surrounding the rong, its construction was described as 'a story of international cooperation to rescue a traditional feature of Vietnam's central highlands from oblivion', and 'a unique testimony to traditional Bahnar building styles, all but wiped out by the tribulations of history and a modernising drive.'6 Similarly, its importance was noted, as well as for Vietnamese visitors, foreign tourists, for 'the Bahnar themselves that a characteristic feature of their daily life be preserved for the future and opened up to a large number of enthusiasts'.7 From these comments might be extracted one of two assumptions. The first is that Bahnar traditional architecture is endangered, almost extinct. The second is that by constructing this 'traditional' building that some aspect of Bahnar life (not just its architectural forms) might be
preserved, even revived. The initial response to the second suggestion might be scepticism, that such a construction, so far way from Bahnar lands, might have a bearing on their culture as a distinctive living entity.

To consider this further in the context of a minority people, it is useful to compare the Bahnar with the Toraja, who have a longer history of dealing with incursions from the outside world.

The Toraja live in the highlands of southern Sulawesi, Indonesia. There are a number of different groups within Torajan lands, most distinctively the Sa\'dan Toraja who occupy the central area (known as Tana Toraja) including the government and market centres of Makale and Rantepao, and the Mamasa Toraja, who inhabit the Kalumpang valley, a more isolated area some fifty kilometres to the west. This was until recently an isolated area, and so while Torajans are now largely nominally Christian, their indigenous culture has remained far less affected by outside influences than that of many other minorities. A fair minority still adhere in some part to their traditional animist belief Aluk to Dolo ('the way of the ancestors'), which is most spectacularly characterised by elaborate funerals involving buffalo fighting and sacrifices, as well as extended embalming and interment rituals. Also spectacular are banua Tongkonan, traditional Torajan buildings, in particular their tongkonan or 'origin houses'. Tongkonan are ancestral homes, though their significance extends further than conventional understandings of this role. They are not only places for a family to live and meet, but are also integral in the ritual affairs of the community. As Dawson & Gillow note:

To the Toraja, the tongkonan is more than just a structure. The symbol of family identity and tradition, representing all the descendants of a founding ancestor, it is the focus of ritual life. It forms the most important nexus within the web of kinship. Torajans may have difficulty defining their exact relationship with distant kin, but can always name the natal houses of parents, grandparents and sometimes distant ancestors, for they consider themselves to be related to each other through these houses.\(^9\)

Tongkonan are distinctive due to their immense saddleback roofs. The origin of these roof-forms has been the subject of much speculation and they have been variously likened to the forms of buffalo horns or boats.\(^9\) A corollary of all this symbolic identification is that the tongkonan is seen as a living entity, not just the seat of the ancestors, but an ancestor itself. Tongkonan also have other anthropomorphic characteristics, each having a personal name, being considered as part of lineage tongkonan (as a family multiplies, the tongkonan they construct are referred to as daughter-tongkonan, of the mother-tongkonan). Tongkonan can even 'marry' each other.\(^9\)

While many new houses are conventional 'Bugis' style buildings (a kind of pan-Indonesian/Malay timber building with a raised floor and a low hipped-gable roof) or rectangular concrete bungalows, others are hybridising these imported typologies with local traditions. The most common is a double-storey dwelling, the first storey of which is treated like a hipped-roof timber bungalow, either on the ground or raised on piles, perhaps with a front or perimeter verandah. The second storey is then constructed as a full banua or tongkonan rising out of the roof of the bungalow, the spaces within it serving as sleeping areas. The saddlebacked roofs of banua are also no longer restricted to traditional or reconstructed buildings. Government buildings have prow-like protrusions coming out of their otherwise conventional hipped roofs or otherwise have full saddleback roofs rendered in concrete. Saddleback forms similarly sit about shops and offices as well as on church towers such as the Mamasa Torajan church.

Such a development might be seen as a debasement of noble traditions, ancient concepts bowdlerised. However, such a pejorative approach may be, at least in part, misplaced. The cultural anthropologist James Clifford has described how such views might be considered as part of a general Western attitude of nostalgic regret towards the vernacular cultures of the world. In this view, traditional culture are inevitably undergoing "fatal" changes as they come in contact with modernity. He identifies what he describes as a 'salvage paradigm', which is a desire to rescue the 'authentic' culture that is being destroyed by historical change.\(^*\) The idea of the salvage paradigm is embedded in Western notions of history and authenticity and assumptions about 'other' cultures beyond the West. History, in Western terms is considered to be linear, going ever forwards, forever progressing. In 19th century Europe this view of societal evolution led to consideration of societies in terms of their progress from savagery to barbarianism to civilisation (with Western European industrial civilisation, of course, being the most progressive). In the 20th century, anthropology became more relativist, dividing humankind into discrete 'cultures', each of which was considered to have its own intrinsic characteristics. However within this, cultures that were seen as 'primitive' or 'tribal' were also seen to stand outside the flow of history, in what Clifford describes as the 'ethnographic present'.\(^9\) This gives them an ambiguous status, implying that such cultures are intrinsically static and unchanging. It also implies that any change that does come them must be entirely externally derived, and serves only to corrupt and degrade the 'original', a loss of Eden, as it were. Indigenous traditions can only resist or yield to it. They cannot innovate, they produce modernity, and this is where the 'salvage' element comes in. The mission of the enlightened West is to realise that its inevitable progress involves the dissolution of other traditional cultures, and so it must attempt to salvage them before they disappear. The 'ethnographic present' remains selectively pre-modern.

Essentially, Clifford's opinion is that Western opinions about indigenous degradation are based on an attitude that allows little agency to peoples considered to be not only outside the progressive trajectory of Western modernity but moreover, outside the whole current of history per se.\(^9\) Communities
of what might be termed the 'fourth world' have traditionally considered to have little capacity of development, as if existing in an a-historical continuum. As a result, change is inevitably seen as both detrimental (a culture that is static in nature can only 'lose' if it is altered) and externally imposed. While it cannot be denied that the exterior forces of colonialism and nationalism, laid over a sometimes long history of enmity and discrimination between a minority group and a majority culture, have wrought change, much of it forced, upon minority cultures, to see their resultant contemporary culture as entirely debased is, in a way, to perpetuate the paternalistic attitudes of colonial and national masters. The possibility, remains, in Clifford's view that even in a compromised state, minority communities retain some agency over their condition, some negotiating power over the direction and character of their culture's future. This is a view that while not implying a lack of critique as to the realpolitik of the situation provides for a more positive reappraisal of contemporary material culture. This is a point that seems to have some agreement amongst anthropological observers of traditional southeast Asian architectures. Roxanna Waterson, for instance, acknowledges the agency of minority groups to remake their traditions to suit changing conditions, saying of the Torajan adaptations to their traditional house type that '... it still continues to function as a vivid and condensed symbol, with which all can identify, of that it means to be Toraja.' Similarly Kis-Jovak et al also note;

... the case of a Protestant church north of Rantepao brings the process full circle: a tongkonan-like top-piece crowns the church tower, making the building one with what the tongkonan has always been: the social and religious symbol of a community.

Architectural discourse has, however, been less enthusiastic. This is perhaps because architectural appreciation of traditional cultures has generally added to anthropological concerns an interest in the formal qualities of indigenous buildings. During the late 19th century, National Romantic movements in Europe greatly romanticised vernacular architecture, which they saw as opposing the evils of classical (Greek and Roman-derived) civilisation or the rapid industrialisation of the time. The traditional vernacular buildings of Europe, for instance, were seen as unsullied by these external influences, and thus the 'pure' and 'natural' architectures of their nation. This attitude is still present today, accentuated because so much of the way of life that the vernacular implies (from a distance) has vanished. Modernist architects also turned to the vernacular as inspiration, as endorsements of their functionalist aesthetic. Architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius made claims that based on their formal properties, the buildings of north Africa were proto-modernist. Similarly European modernists saw in traditional Japanese architecture forms that they imagined correlated with their own ideals.

While this selective appreciation of the vernacular has been somewhat culturally random, in the wake of international Modernism there has been a push for architecture to be more attuned to the particularities of different global locations. Such an attitude has been broadly termed 'regionalism', and stems originally from a response to the uncritical movement of modernity around the world. Regionalism purports to be supportive of locality; its landscape, culture, climate and particular history of building, and takes its legitimation from notions of localised authenticity. It has, however, also been questioned on the same grounds; on its parochialism, its focus on the past, and on its potential ethnic or cultural biases. An attempt to link the regionalist idea of locational specificity with the universalising mission of modernism has been termed 'critical regionalism'. Frampton's essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', the most important text on 'critically regionalist' architecture, suggests that ideally, it assumes an arrière-garde position, ... one that distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the archetypal forms of the pre-industrial past. However, this 'distancing' is still premised on the idea of 'universal civilisation'. It does not consider that the global or universal portion of such a position might be from elsewhere, from the non-West or from other world-views. In this sense 'authentic' regionalism remains a matter of dealing with climate and topography rather than cultural difference.

Champions of vernacular architecture in the 1960s such as Bernard Rudofsky, while they helped to promote the appreciation of vernacular buildings, in suggesting that they were 'architecture without architects', perpetrated the myth that vernacular architecture is "unselfconscious" and unspecialised, intimating that such buildings are inherently simple and unsophisticated enough to be produced without conscious reflection. Such writings tended to illustrate the way in which architectural critics tend to impose perceptions derived from their own background onto other cultures and peoples for whom they may have lesser or no meaning, 'seeing' separations where none exist and not noticing distinctions that may exist from other points of view. Amos Rapaport suggested that "what makes tradition is meaningful repetition", that the attributes of tradition were based on conservatism. The past was accepted as providing the answers for the present, and so continuity and repetition were emphasised. Traditional societies, in Rapaport's view lived in relative isolation from other societies, and so relied on their own social conventions. These, in turn constrained behaviour, fostering a collective rather than individual outlook, and cementing activities in habitual and ritual ways. This collective outlook also meant a reduced need for spatial differentiation and specialisation, as well as for separation between individual people. In a contemporary society, increased individuality, fostered by greater literacy and exposure to choices, leads to a breakdown of customary rules and a questioning of the authority of traditions. The influence of global religions such as Christianity and Islam are instrumental in this in that even in the absence of active persecution of

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old beliefs, their loss of authority weakens the social and physical fabric of traditional communities. For instance if a house-form is derived in part from a particular cosmological world-view, then it cannot survive once that world-view is overturned. The problem that such upheavals present for small local architectural traditions have been much discussed, and the generally generic building types that have replaced traditional buildings have been roundly criticised on aesthetic, environmental and material grounds. However architectural discussion on traditional buildings remains dominated by a commentary on the struggle between conservation and destruction, rather than one of translation and adaptation. 'Authenticity' is still seen as an inevitable casualty of such a struggle."

However, as has been argued by postcolonial critics, 'authenticity' is often a matter who is in the position to decide what is or isn't authentic, of whose authority is the arbiter of truth. This contention is reminiscent of Edward Said's argument that one of the most important factors in identifying current modalities of power is the way that the orientalising lens acts to authorise representations. Certain people (Europeans, whites) are given authority to speak for and about others (Asians, blacks). Within the boundaries of Asian nations dominant groups (Viet Kinh, Javanese) take on the authority to speak for minorities (Bahnar, Toraja). While Clifford takes a particularly broad-minded, some would say overtly relativist view of changing cultures, seeming to elide some of the realities of political and social disruption that cause such cultural tactics, in allowing for a little agency on the part of contemporary minority cultures he suggests a space in which they might make an ongoing cultural contribution to humanity at large. His argument challenges the idea that such cultures have no historical consciousness of their own, and suggest that contemporary authenticity does not depend on a salvaged past. 'Authenticity' can be produced as well as salvaged. The traditional within culture can be meaningful in the context of the present and the future. What is important then is not so much the credentials of the source material, but agency of the people whose culture it is. If they have the agency to reinvent or adapt their own traditions, then the ensuing culture is authentically theirs, whatever its relation to their past. In such a scenario hybridised buildings are 'newly' authentic.

The church in Mamasa Toraja is perhaps illustrative of one possible effect. Its composition implies a transference of meaning carried by a traditional form. The traditional banua saddleback roof-as-steeple brings with it a host of meanings for the people that use the church, notably suggesting the relocation of the ritual and social centre of the community. Where once the banua itself was the embodiment of their world view, the alteration to that world-view brought by Christianity has entirely erased this older meaning. The new religion has, in fact, legitimised its presence by identifying with the inherited meanings within the banua form. The new hybrid building proclaims a dual identity, a contemporary global one, and a local, specific one. It has been suggested that the presence of such a multiplicity of different ways of perceiving the world as valid, is what will distinguish the immediate future from the Western-dominated twentieth century. "Traditions", as Anthony Giddens puts it, imply the existence of 'formulaic truths', known only to the insiders of a given group, and so provide a privileged view of time and space to sustain them. The distinction between the present situation and past times, is that the impact of (Western) modernity and the access to other world-views caused by globalisation, involves obligatory choices about how to interpret traditions, and this is what local communities are making.

The application of recognisably ethnic architectural elements to contemporary buildings has sometimes been critiqued on the basis of agency, suggesting that their underlying purpose is to control ethnic identity within national contexts. Selective promotion of motifs in official situations can be seen to both legitimize folkloric aspects of ethnic cultures while at the same time eliding the social and political tensions surrounding minorities within a nation-state. However while both the transplanted rong and hybridised banua might be complicit in such external agendas, at the same time they do not simply represent either the simple 'handing down' of received conventions nor the wholesale appropriation of their meaning for political ends. Arguably both are 'authentic' in that they portray how their particular traditions are actually being translated and transformed by contemporary social conditions.
1 The author understands that illustrations would be valuable here as well as elsewhere in the body of the paper, however these could not be included in the printed text.


10 Imre Kis-Jovak, Hetty Nocy-Palm, Reimar Schefold, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, Banua Toraja: Changing patterns in architecture and symbolism among the Sa'dan Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia, Amsterdam, Royal Tropical Institute The Netherlands, 1988, p.36.

11 Kis-Jovak et al, Banua Toraja, p.36.


13 Clifford, 'Beyond the "Salvage" paradigm', p.76.


16 Kis-Jovak et al, Banua Toraja, p.116.


22 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Bloomington, Indiana University, 1989, p.88.


26 Giddens, 'Living in a Post-Traditional Society', p.75.