

Jarai Tomb House Conservation

Tomb house - An artwork of Jarai People

Tran Ngoc Thu Hang

Curator

Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

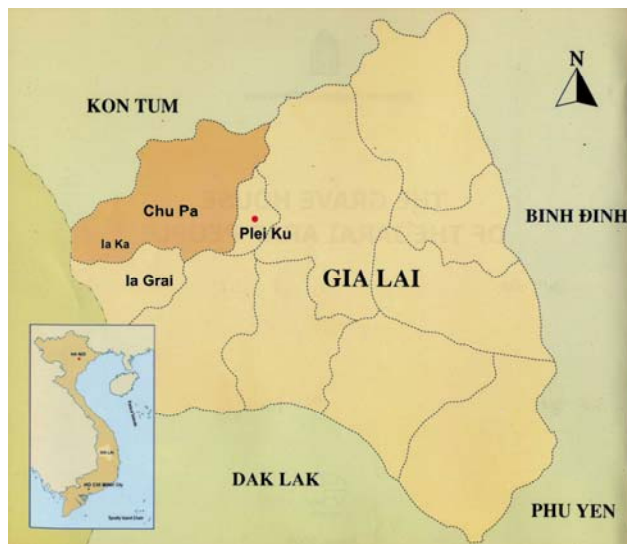


Abstract

Conservation issue is one of the most necessary parts for all the dwellings in displaying at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. The museum chooses the grave house of Jarai people to reconstructed and introduce to the public because of its unique. This grave house shows the arts of carving, painting, decoration, and architecture of the entire community. This paper puts on discussion its values as well as the influences of climate and of human factors on Jarai tomb house in term of conservation and restoration.

Introduction

Background



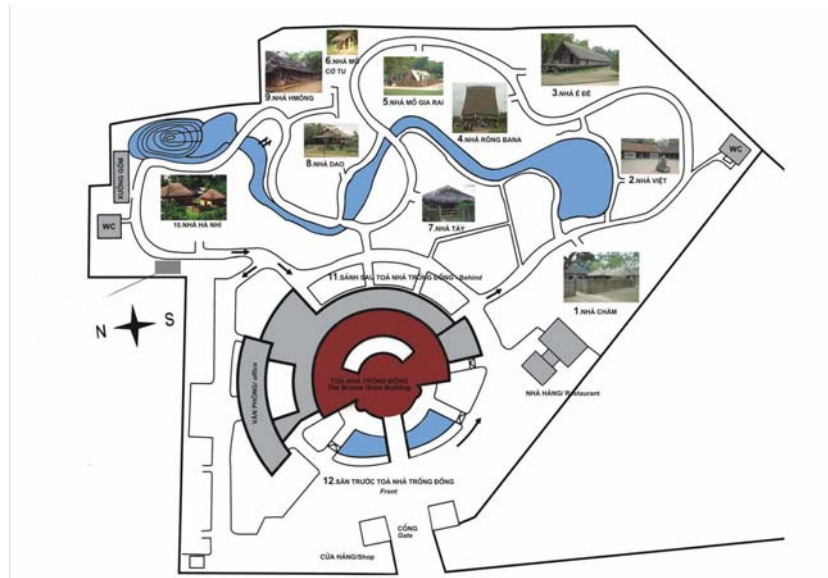
A grave house of the Jarai Arap has been on display in the open air section of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology since December 1998.

A group of the five Jarai Arap inhabitants built this grave house in their Mrong Ngo village (Ia Ka commune, Chu Pa district, Gia Lai province). The grave house was then transported to Hanoi and rebuilt on the museum grounds by those five people from local province.

During 10 years up to present, the grave house was repaired four times. The roofs was renewed every 2 or 3 years, in 2000, 2003, and 2005; and the entire the grave house was repair and renew in 2007 but still use the previous statues.

Function

Jarai people have a practice of burying several deceased persons in the same tomb. Each burial plot can hold up to a dozen persons or more. Therefore, the tombs and the grave houses are usually large, and contain 30-40 or more deceased persons. To make preparations for the ceremony of abandoning the graves, it takes several months to build a new tomb with elaborate decorations.



Size

The grave house in display in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology is a *bxat char* house. It is 8.25 meters in length, 2.25 meters in breadth and has two small doors oriented toward the East. The surrounding fence consists of hundreds of round tree trunks which are sunk in the ground and tightly arranged like walls. These fences have 27 statues made of *ca-chit* wood. These wooden pillars are 25 to 35 centimeters in diameter. The upper part, seventy centimeters to one meter in length, are chipped and carved into statues, while the lower part (with a length of about one and one half meters) are left untouched and planted about 60 centimeters deep in the soil. The statues, or couples of statues, are set one to two meters apart. The grave house compounds, including the surrounding fences, covers about a 45 square meters area.

Materials and Construction

The grave house made of trees in the forest usually *na-san* perfumed trees, *na-pac* trees with a red bark, *ca-chit* trees etc., bamboo and vines for its construction. Jarai men chip the columns, erect the house, carve the statues, draw the decorations.

After completing the frame of the house, people build the roofs, and then the 4 fences and plant the wooden statues therein. On each of the corners of the grave house or near the foot of each main column big stone are buried. These stones then will be enable the offspring to subsequently be able to identify the site of the grave house long after it has fallen into ruins.

Technique

Decoration and frieze of the roof were applied a indigenous technique.

1. The roof



The bamboo screen, which is put on the roof, is woven the *nham dur klau* technique which make it possible to produce, on the screen, diamond-shaped and triangular designs. Then, these designs are color painted and more details are added to them. Later, after weaving the bamboo screen, people no longer paint their decorative designs but draw different decorations on the two main roof components of the Jarai Arap grave houses are mainly drawn.

The brush is a sharpened bamboo stick the end of which has been crushed and blunted. Some bamboo frame templates with 4 different designs are made so that many persons can use them to draw the basic patterns: the tree stem, the circle, the diamond-shaped figure, and the sine curve.

The paint is made with a kind of soft stone (*khor*) which is dug from the soil. After discarding impure and irrelevant materials, the soft stone is crushed into a smooth powder. Then, the smooth powder is mixed with a solution of sugar cane and *poh-pe* tuber to obtain a red paint. In order to further enhance the red color of the paint, people add some seeds from the *sut* plant. This operation is supervised by an elderly and experienced villager.

When the drawn decorations become dry they turn into a light red color, roughly similar to the color of the basalt soil in the Central Highlands. As a result, the Jarai could harmonize the 4 colors in the cemetery with their surroundings: the red color of the drawn decorations with the soil, the dark green color with that of the forest, the yellow color with the sunshine, and the whitish color of the bamboo screen exposed to rays of sunshine.



As usual, decorations are jointly made by a number of villagers. The screen is spread on the soil or on the roof of the grave house so that many persons can draw simultaneously. The elderly and experienced villager makes the measurement, divides the screen into squares and bands for drawing different decorations in accordance with general models and patterns handed down from previous generations. He makes drawing frames, and decides the number of designs, their types and how to draw them. He provides guidance to the young on how to use the frames, and how to draw in order to obtain the desired decorations. He himself draws the most difficult motifs.

2. The frieze



The wooden ornamental band originates as a round tree trunk which is cut and chipped into a plank. The plank is then covered on both sides by engraved decorations in the form of triangles and is put on the ridge of the grave house.

At first, the decorations are drawn on the plank. Then, with one hand, the artisan puts the sharp point of his knife on a decoration and with the other hand hits the back of the knife with a pestle, thus cutting the decoration into the wood, keeping with the decoration's drawn lines. The cutting is done from left to right, from top to bottom and from the outside to the inside parts of the plank. Following the removal of all irrelevant debris, a row of decorative figures emerges.



In recent years, the Jarai people have used metal sheets to make the ornamental band on the roof. The same cutting technique is applied to metal sheets which as different from wooden planks, are not easily broken. Cutting decorations is done with knives and also with chisels.

3. The statues

Along the four fences surrounding this tomb, there are 27 wooden statues. Jarai carve statues with adzes, following traditional carving methods that outline the shape with few details. There are statues of animal including a bird, dog, and monkey, and the figure of a gourd. Human figures are most frequent, including those sitting with head propped up in two hands, beating a drum, holding rice cooked bamboo, etc. The statues of pregnant women and of men and women displaying their reproductive organs of having intercourse are predominant.



Analysis

Historical value

They have been present in this region since ancient times, dating from after the Mon-Khmer but before the founding of the Champa kingdom. They cultivate swidden fields, using the techniques of crop rotation. In certain regions, they also cultivate wet rice paddies, working the earth with the hooves of buffalo. They barter their products at home and in other villages.

The village, base on the foundation of the extended matrilineal family, is the unit of self-administration and the basis of social organization. The communal character of the village is very strong, but they also have stratification between the rich and the poor.

Cultural issue: A belief of Jarai people about the life after dead

An essential condition for the ceremony of abandoning the tomb is a new grave house, which is built mainly with wood and bamboo just above the tomb. The Jarai believe that if the grave house is not beautiful the spirits of the deceased will be angry and will cause trouble and even harm to the living.

Many Jarai inhabitants are buried in the same tomb, and the body of the first deceased is put in the middle of the tomb, and his/her family is regarded as the “owner of the tomb”. How beautiful and how elaborately decorated the grave house is depends on the gender and wealth of the head of the family-owner of the tomb. If the body of the first deceased is a man, there would be no decorations on the roof, and very few statues in the fence. By contrast if the body of the first deceased is a woman and the family is quite affluent, the grave house would be beautiful and elaborate with many decorations and statues.



Through their grave houses, one can understand both the Jarai's funeral traditions as well as their concepts about death and the after-life. The construction of a grave house is always associated with the ceremony of abandoning the tomb; a ceremony that involves lively cultural and art activities in accordance with the customs of the community. The statues, decorations and ritual of these grave houses also show many traces of the ancient culture of South-East Asia.

Artistic value



Each traditional funeral house of the highlanders is like an artwork, simple and plain but harmonious, special, and invaluable. It can be said that funeral houses and statues are like museums of each ethnic culture, not only because of their architecture, sculpture, and decoration, but also because of the world view they embody. Also, inseparable from funeral houses and statues, the tomb abandonment ceremony offers plentiful cultural and artistic activities that are very interesting to research. There are also other statues but the Jarai village cemeteries and grave house differ from one another in term of statues and decorations. An author has used the term “the world of

grave house statues” to depict the big number of statues and the diversity of their themes and forms.

Problems

1. Climate

This is the greatest difficult for people to practice the conservation jobs. The original of the grave house from the North-West of Central Highland of Vietnam, where is the homeland of the grave house, only has 2 seasons in a year: sunny and rainy. The atmosphere is clear and clean. The average temperature is between 20°C - 26°C and 30°C -34°C, and the average humidity very low (about under 40%) and it rains from May to November of a year. The weather in Hanoi is much more different because it located in the northern part of Vietnam. It has 4 seperated seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter with an average temperature and humidity are quite complex.

An average temperature and rain during a year in Gia Lai and in Ha Noi

In Gia Lai

Monthly averages

	Avg low	Avg hi	Avg precip
January	23°C	30°C	1.25cm
February	23°C	31°C	1.17cm
March	24°C	33°C	1.72cm
April	25°C	34°C	7.46cm
May	26°C	33°C	15.87cm
June	25°C	32°C	NA
July	25°C	31°C	NA
August	25°C	31°C	NA
September	25°C	31°C	NA
October	25°C	31°C	NA
November	25°C	30°C	NA
December	24°C	30°C	3.46cm

In Hanoi

Monthly averages

	Avg low	Avg hi	Avg precip
January	15°C	20°C	1.55cm
February	16°C	21°C	NA
March	19°C	23°C	NA
April	22°C	28°C	NA
May	25°C	32°C	11.72cm
June	27°C	33°C	16.92cm
July	27°C	33°C	22.59cm

August	26°C	33°C	21.23cm
September	26°C	32°C	12.37cm
October	23°C	29°C	6.65cm
November	20°C	26°C	3.74cm
December	16°C	22°C	1.72cm

2. *Others reasons*



There have seen many changes many of priceless treasures because of them have now deteriorated over time because of rain and sun, termites and moths, threatened by forest fires and especially by trade in funeral house statues.

3. *Appearance*

Old styles and new comers at the local village

At present, in many Jarai villages, grave houses have metal roofs or tiled roofs. There are also some grave houses with decorated roofs, but the decorations are made on cloth with red-brown paint. Some Jarai elders remember that sixty or seventy years ago there were already roofs covered with decorated cloth perhaps because by drawing on cloth was easier and made a beautiful product.



It is unfortunate that during the past thirty years, since 1980 Center Highlands sculpture has undergone severe degeneration. This was a period during which there were two long wars under foreign armies of occupation, when a number of highlanders or montagnard ethnic groups were the victim of what George Condominas, a French ethnologist, has referred to as “ethnocide”. As a result, there is an urgent task to be accomplished on a national scale: saving what can still be saved of this original artistic and cultural heritage.

The problems concerning the tomb house at the museum

Deterations: colors changed, less organic colors, crack on woods, less durable bamboo screens.





Proposal

1. To prepare a complete documentation of the tomb house construction techniques, and material uses.
2. To study the anthropological changes in the community beliefs and practices, and how these influence to the construction technique and material uses.
3. To explore the current situation of the artisans and to access the possible threats of disappearing the artwork.
4. To conduct a survey of the structural conditions of the old tomb houses in that region and to explore the problems of the wood in different periods.
5. To set up a chemical laboratory in the museum for developing effective technique for wood and bamboo processing and preservation. Technique collaborations can also be made with other institutions dealing with wood preservation.
6. To organize temporary workshop with the traditional artisans and the young artists to disseminate the knowledge and skills of reproducing wooden sculptures and decoration that have been traditionally used in tomb houses.
7. To explore the possibility of supplementary use of wood and bamboo carving and artworks that would create market for

these heritage goods and services and would create a means of sustenance.

8. Make a buffer zone to keep the house a safe distance from the visitors.
9. Plan a education program for school children to visit the tomb house, communicate with the local artisans, attend to the ceminas, create and publish the booklet to introduce and help the discover more the culture of the Jarai people.

Method

1. Fieldworks: located the dwellings (temperature, humidity, light, pollution), check the status (harmful organisms: insects, fungus)
2. Study documentation: photos, films, recorders; books of history, geography, anthropology, etc.
3. Interview the local people, especially elderly person: stories, oral stories, legends, folklore, etc.
4. Discussion with the local people and administration about preserve their identity
5. Budget and decided what part should be repaired
6. Organising the procession

Results/Current Status of the Work

1. The successful of conservation job on this grave house will make a progress in conservation development
2. Preserve an identity of one minority ethnic group
3. Preserve and promote an artworks of decoration and sculpture
4. Increase the awareness of the local people about themselves and their own tradition, then they will contribute better to their cultural development
5. Introduce this unique works to the others
6. Enrich knowledge of anthropology and arts to the public
7. People can apply their decoration and frieze technique to create a useful product

Discussion & Conclusions

The influences of the temporary life onto Jarai people's view

Besides long-standing and familiar statues, with many statues carved with inspiration from the new life, such as European or American

soldiers, a nurse, a photographer, school children, soldiers, people riding bicycles, Ruxlan and Liutmila characters in the movies, etc. The creative artistic ability of Tay Nguyen people is very admirable. If men display that in the field of funeral houses and statues with only an axe, a knife, and a chisel, women can also develop similar talents in weaving fabric. They can even weave into fabric images of planes, guns, the star on the national flag, etc.

Together with changes in the life of ethnic groups, funeral houses and statues have changed considerably. In many places, it is common to see simpler and less decorated funeral houses that usually use new materials (covered by alloys of aluminum and zinc, tiles or white cloth instead of straw grass or plaited bamboo roofs; brick walls with stucco instead of wattles and fences made of wood; in some cases statues are even moulded from brick and cement); people also add new colors, use industrial paint for drawing; and statues have more and more themes, from stylized methods to realistic and detailed depiction. This process began a long time ago, with new style even in the first half of the 20th century, especially the statues of men wearing forage-caps or statues of Western men...

The lessons

Each traditional funeral house of the Thuong is like an artwork, simple and plain but harmonious, special, and invaluable. It can be said that funeral houses and statues are like museums of each ethnic culture, not only because of their architecture, sculpture, and decoration, but also because of the world view they embody. Also, inseparable from funeral houses and statues, the tomb abandonment ceremony offers plentiful cultural and artistic activities that are very interesting to research.

This grave house provides the new generations the knowledge about their own culture, understand their valuable technique in decorating and sculpture. The new generations might never meet these artworks if people like us do not pay attention and give a hand to preserve them. Firstly, it is a direction affect to own local new generations, they will be aware of their beliefs, their works through the grave house. Secondly, one they understand about their identity they will promote and preserve it by themselves, which is a better procession because they have a higher awareness about their missions to their own valuable culture. Finally, encourage the young try to learn, practise skills with the experienced elder people in the villages, and vice versa, the elder people transfer their knowledge as well as their experience to their next generations. It is the best way to preserve and conservation an unique artwork.

The great deal

Fortunately, the old-style statues are still preserved. The Jarai Arap grave house erected in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology display wooden statues in traditional Jarai styles and forms.

References

Nguyễn Tấn Cứ

1993 *Nghệ thuật tượng gỗ dân gian Tây Nguyên*. Culture Publisher, Ha Noi

Ngô Văn Doanh

1995 *Nhà Mộ và Tượng Mộ*. Vietnam Academy of South East Asia.

Phan Cẩm Thượng - Nguyễn Tấn Cứ

1995 *Điêu khắc nhà mồ Tây Nguyên*. Education Publisher, Ha Noi

Nguyễn Văn Huy – chief

1997 *Mosaic culture of ethnic group in Vietnam*. Education Publisher, Ha Noi

Nguyễn Văn Kự-Lưu Hùng

1998 *Nhà mồ Tây Nguyên. (The funeral house of the Centre Highlanders)*. The Gioi Publishers.

Phạm Lan Hương

2001 *Vài suy nghĩ về bảo quản hiện vật trưng bày ngoài trời (qua thực tế trưng bày ngôi nhà mồ Giarai) ở Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam*. Các công trình nghiên cứu Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam II. Published by Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

UNESCO

2001 *Vietnam's Cultural Diversity: Approaches to Presevation*

Phạm Văn Lợi

2003 *Hoa văn trên mái nhà mồ Giarai Arap trưng bày ngoài trời ở Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam*. Các công trình nghiên cứu Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam III. Published by Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

2005 *The grave house of the Jarai Arap people*. Ha Noi, Vietnam

Nguyễn Văn Huy, Vi Văn An, Nguyễn Trung Dũng, Phạm Văn Dương, Lê Duy Đại, Nguyễn Trường Giang, Lưu Hùng, Phạm Văn Lợi, Võ Mai Phương, Trần Thu Thủy, Nguyễn Anh Ngọc, and La Công Ý

2005 *Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam - Những ngôi nhà dân gian*. The Gioi Publishers, Ha Noi