Rang Taiba’s Stone: A Study of a Megalith in Maram Khullen, Manipur, India

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KEYWORDS

Megaliths, large stone structures, are seen aplenty in some regions in Northeast India. This paper discusses the megaliths found in the Maram areas in Manipur, India, and its cultural significance. Interestingly, these megaliths continue to have a living tradition connected to them, and hence are considered history markers to the local populace. One of the most important megaliths among them is the ‘Rang Taiba stone’ (morphologically a capstone). This stone is regarded sacred and important by the Marams to this day. Taking one particular stone, this anthropological study showed the importance of cultural context in understanding the meaning and importance of megaliths.

Introduction

The term megalith generally refers to a large stone structure or monument standing either alone or with other stones. The word comes from the ancient Greek word megas meaning great and lithos meaning stone. Megalithic culture, by definition, therefore, refers to a culture distinguished by the presence of monuments of large stone structures used for funeral or other ceremonies. According to V.G. Childe (1946), the term was originally introduced by antiquarians to describe a fairly easily definable class of monuments in Western and Northern Europe consisting of huge undressed stones and termed in Celtic as dolmen, cromlech and menhir. Glyn Daniel (1962) adds that the term can be applied to all constructions using very large roughly dressed slabs of stone. In reality, however, the meaning of megalith is not always connected with large stones, but sometimes smaller stones as well (Yondri, 2006). Therefore, while megaliths are understood to be huge stones, in some places objects of smaller stones or other materials such as wood should also be classified as ‘megalithic’ if those structures are used for a certain objective, such as worship of an ancestral spirit (Marak, 2012).

Megaliths were known to appear first in the Neolithic times as the ‘stone henges’ of later Neolithic Britain and continued through Bronze Age till Iron Age. The origin and chronology of megaliths is still unsettled. However these structures largely relate to Iron Age times and often described as burial complexes. Nevertheless, these ancient stones are still found to be of relevance to many living communities in the world including Northeast India. These living traditions, including beliefs and practices connected to the stones is what is referred to as “living megalithism” (Marak, 2012).
North-East India occupies a prominent place in the archaeological map of the world because of its rich megalithic remains. Realizing its significance, J.P. Mills (1993:3) writes: “An archaeological characteristic of Assam of worldwide fame is its wealth of megaliths”. It is one of the few places in the world where monuments of this type are still erected and it is agreed by all that the custom of erection of megaliths started since prehistoric times. Megaliths are distributed over a large area in North-East India. The greatest concentration is in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya where large fields occur at Cherrapunjee, Mawphlang, Lailynkot, Laitkor, Jowai and Nartiang (Godwin-Austen, 1872; Gurdon, 1914). In Manipur, megaliths are found spread over Naga dominated districts of Chandel, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati and Churachandpur. These are areas occupied by Anals, Liangmeis, Kabuis, Maos, Marams, Tangkhuls and others (Devi, 1993). In North Cachar Hills, megaliths are found at Nenglo, Bolosam, Kobak, Derebora and Kartong (Mills and Hutton, 1929). They are also found widely in the Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong in Assam (Bezbaruah, 2004). In Nagaland, megaliths are found extensively in the Kohima and Phek districts (Jamir, 1998).

Megaliths in Maram Areas

The Marams are tribals of North-East India and they belong to the ethnic group of people called the Nagas. Maram tribes are mainly scattered in various areas like Senapati district, Tadubi Sub-division and also Kangpokpi region. They have close affinity with Koireng, Maos and Angami, Poumai, Zeliangrong and Thangal groups. Along with the special Mongoloid features, Caucasoid traits are also found in the people of the Maram tribes. Many scholars have considered Marams as a part of Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid race. They linguistically belong to the sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan family. According to Linguistic survey of India the dialect of Maram tribe comes under Naga group which show Austric linguistic characteristics.

The Marams are a patrilineal society and they are known for their rich cultural heritage. The village headman or the King functions as both religious and secular head, being assisted by a council of village elders in his role as secular head and by a village priest in his role as a religious head. There are more than thirty Maram villages scattered in the geographical expanse generally known as the Maram Area. As per Census 2001, the Maram Nagas number about 37,340 in total. According to UNESCO database on endangered languages, the number of speakers is 37,000 (based on India Census 2001).

The different types of megaliths found in Maram area of Manipur include the following (Devi,
Menhirs: Menhirs play a vital role in the megalithic culture of the people of Maram. They are known as *Tisum* in their local dialect. They are raised during the lifetime of a person to attain the highest position in the social hierarchy or even after death as a memorial stone. Alignments, consisting of carefully oriented rows or series of standing in a square or diagonal plain, are common among the Marams.

Capstones: Capstones consists of stone slabs of various sizes and circular or rectangular in shape. They are placed directly on the pit either for primary or secondary inhumation. At times, it is used to cover the pit where skulls of human beings and bones of hunted animals are buried. At other times it is used for covering the burial pit of the deceased along with grave offerings. They are generally found inside or outside the village settlement area. Capstones are found in large numbers among Marams of Manipur in villages like Willong, Sangkungmei, Karam Khunou, Maram Khullen, Maram Centre, Maram Kabanum, and New Maram. These are placed in a rectangular pit, covering a primary burial while in some cases it is also used for covering the pit for secondary burial. A secondary burial pit contains skulls of enemies and hunted animals. The largest capstone found among the Marams measures 200 x 96 x 31 cm.

Cairns: Cairns are abundant in Maram area of Manipur. Every Maram village has at least three cairns in every clan habitation area which also functions as watch towers for each clan. One of the finest structures is seen at Willong Khullen, one of the Maram villages in Senapati District. This structure has a flat top surrounded by dresses slabs at regular intervals to serve as seat.

Stone Circles: Stone circles in Maram villages forms a constituent part of an avenue. At Willong Khullen one circle is constituted by 14 menhirs out of thirty-two stones in the circle. Another stone circle consists of twenty-five menhirs out of 109 standing stones of the avenue. Out of these twenty-five stones, twenty-two are in the circle and three remaining huge slabs form a separating wall dividing the circle into two.

Besides Stone seats, Dolmens are also found in Maram villages. Different types of megaliths found in Maram villages which are listed with local names, classified type and functional types (Devi, 2005: 151).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Local name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Beitung</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
<td>Associated witness stone with dolmens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ranii Atu</td>
<td>Cairn</td>
<td>Watch tower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tisum</td>
<td>Menhir</td>
<td>Memorial stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arou Atu</td>
<td>Small heap of stones with platform</td>
<td>Grave stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tirosum</td>
<td>Large horizontal slab</td>
<td>Stone seats</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In Willong village, there are numerous numbers of megaliths standing on the left side of the village. Most of these megaliths were erected by the ancestors of the present inhabitants of the village, which possesses cultural significances. Over 500 megaliths are found in this village, out of which 200 are arranged in circle or in cluster and were erected by their ancestors. Each of them bore their names on the stones. These stones are mostly menhirs and flat stones. Some of the important kinds of megaliths found in the Willong village are *Beitung* (Menhir), *Tüsum* (Menhir), *Atu Chaga Kamaitui* (Small alignments), *Arou Atu* (Small Cairn), *Atu Mei Ogija* (Dolmen), Capstones and *Spung Hoibina Rang* (Menhir) at Maram Khullen village (Daniel, 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Small Alignments</th>
<th>Representing male members of the village</th>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Atuchaga Kamatei</em></td>
<td>Monolith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Atu amei ogija Phnigung Khei Karanjiahga AtuwaiKhei bamle</em></td>
<td>Capstone or Hoodstone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rang Taiba’s Stone**

Every tomb has its story and its significance. It marks an end of a life and pass on its legacy. The Rang Taiba’s tombstone (see Figure 1) too has an interesting story and significance. It plays a significant role in the history and culture of the people of Maram. It is regarded sacred and is well protected by the locals living in the area. It is said to carry a bad omen if offerings are placed at the tomb by anyone from outside the community. A menhir (see Figure 2) of about 8 ft. tall is seen standing near the tomb. This menhir was erected by King Taiba’s son Rang in memory of his father.

The Rang Taiba’s tombstone is a capstone burial site located at Maram Khullen village of Senapati District, Manipur. It is situated at a hill-top and dominated by the people of the Maram Nagas. The tomb is near the Maram king’s house and there are 10 more capstones scattered around it. These burial sites are collectively known as ‘*Bongnamei*’ in local dialect.

According to local lores, Taiba was one of the king of the Maram Nagas. Before he passed away, he gave an instruction to his people that on his death, his body should be buried after 7 days. When the king died, the people waited till the third day, but the body began to decay giving a foul smell. So they decided to bury the deceased king. While the preparation was going on for his funeral, the body disappeared mysteriously. The people who came for the funeral were astonished. Not a single person knew how and where the body disappeared.

On a side note, Taiba’s daughter was married to a man from the Mao tribe. On hearing about her father’s death, she started her journey from Mao village to Maram village. When she reached Maram village, the spirit of her father appeared to her near an escape route (made in almost every Maram village for evacuation in emergency situations) (Figure 4). He asked her, where she was going and she replied “she had come to attend his funeral”. Her father was pleased and told her, he has no property or valuables to give, but as her husband belongs to Mao tribe, the Mao people will receive the blessing of harvesting earlier than the Maram people. It is because of this, the Mao people harvest earlier than the Maram people every year and this tradition is being followed to this very day by the Mao and Maram tribe.
They never found Taiba’s body and the tomb do not contain his body. The tomb stone is a representation of his burial site. Beneath the capstone lies only his property and valuables.

Discussion

Like other living communities in Northeast India, such as the Khasi and Jaintia (Godwin-Austen, 1872; Gurdon, 1914; Roy, 1963; Bareh, 1981; Sen, 1981; Mawlong, 1996), even among the Marams, the living nature of megaliths is seen. Many types of megaliths differing in morphology and function are seen, such as menhirs, dolmens, cairns etc. Interestingly, megaliths, which are morphologically similar, have different functions too. For instance, the Beitung is a menhir which is used as a judiciary stone. It is a witness stone used during trials.

On the other hand, a Tisum is morphologically a menhir, but functionally a memorial stone. Thus, it is not the morphological characteristics of a stone that is important, rather it is its functions that define its inherent cultural meanings. This meaning is an inherent part of the socio-cultural context.

Local lore plays a very important role in the creation of importance and persistent use of megaliths among living communities. The Rang Taiba tomb continues to be sacred to the people of Maram. It is the burial site of king Taiba who is considered to be the father of the Maram people. Due to such socio-cultural implications, important rituals and activities continue to be performed at this site. Annually in the month of December or early January a post-harvest festival called ‘Kang-He’ is hosted which lasts for 3 days. It starts from the 16th day of the lunar month of the Marams. During this festival no form of domestic works are carried out. It is believed that no seeds will thrive even if planted and firewood collected for domestic uses will rot. It is a complete period of rest for the people. The king and the people gather near the tomb and various forms of indigenous games and sports are played. Among these, the most popular one is wrestling in which the participants compete naked. This game of strength exclusively for males is expected to become a new attraction to the visitors to the region. Naked wrestling has been an important event of the festival as it provides an opportunity exclusively to the men to test their strength.

A significant belief of the people is that, the tomb stone has the power to regulate rainfall. If annual rainfall is less, they perform rituals and the tombstone is struck once with a staff. They believe that, this ritual will compel their deceased king Taiba to send rain in the land. In case of excessive amount of rainfall the tombstone is struck twice to stop the rain.

Additionally, the present day Mao-Maram agricultural practices too have its genesis in the folklore of king Taiba. Due to the affection shown towards the dead king by his daughter, the spirit of the dead king supposedly blessed the daughter. Since she was married to a Mao man, thus the blessings bestowed on her spread over the whole Mao tribe. Therefore, even today the neighboring Maos are seen to harvest before the Marams.

Conclusion

Cultural meanings and interpretations are found to be contextual in all aspects of socio-cultural life. The present paper revealed how a megalithic stone, the Rang Taiba stone, has its genesis in the Maram oral traditions, thus reiterating the living nature of this stone.
The burial site not only tells us a story about a king, but also signified the rich culture and strong beliefs of the Maram people in the afterlife. This can be seen in the story of the mysterious disappearance of the king's body and his appearance before his daughter after his death. It also showed how a king has the power to even decide the time of harvest. The people of Maram look up to Rang Taiba’s tomb as a mark of their unity and prosperity. To this day, the tradition of capstone burial is still in practice though in a smaller scale.

References


Appendix

Figure 1: Rang Taiba’s tomb stone (Capstone)

Figure 2: A monolith (erected by King Taiba’s son in memory of his father)
Figure 3: The Maram King’s house and its surrounding with the Rang Taiba tomb stone at the left corner

Figure 4: An Escape route in the village (where King Taiba’s spirit is believed to have met his daughter)