



Living Megalithic Traditions of the Karbis in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Megalithic tradition is a living tradition in the world and Karbi of Assam is one of the few communities who has kept this tradition alive. So far, in Assam, other than their own Karbi Anglong district, a large numbers of Karbi pockets are found in Assam, especially in the districts of Kamrup, Nagaon and Morigaon. In these villages, they are usually assimilated to the Assamese culture by language, but have kept their other traditions alive. So, based on the fieldworks in certain pockets of Karbi inhabited areas, this paper has been made where the concept of erection of megaliths has been found through primary data collection.

Introduction

Assam is a rich state in terms of megaliths. Edward Gaits in his book A History of Assam has mentioned about the abundance of megaliths in Assam, as the state was large and undivided at that time, which included present day Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. Manipur was an independent Kingdom at that time which was inducted to the Republic of India in 1949.

Megalithic distributions in Assam

The Karbi people are found mostly in the plains areas of Khetri of Kamrup district, Neli (near Nagaon), and Silsang and Chenimur. These sites are named as:

Chenimur, 78 archaic megaliths and 27 living megaliths, Dharbam has all living megaliths, 33 stones while 13 are newly created with cement at present, Diksak site contains 51 pieces of megaliths, and there's no distinction between the present and archaic, the field is mixed one, Khamar has 93 archaic megaliths and 27 present megaliths, and this site also contains one dolmen, Teteliguri is a Directorate of Archeology protected megalithic site with 177 pieces of archaic megaliths. The other sites on the border territories of Morigaon and Karbi Anglong districts include Bowlagog, Silsang and Sokatigora. These sites are now described below:

Chenimur

Chenimur is a site located in a Karbi village of Kamrup district named as Chenimur, 3 km from the Digaru Air Force station. The village contains 2 megalithic sites, one archaic and the other present,

where the traditional rituals of erection of megaliths are done. Today, due to change of time and change in rituals and manpower in the society, the size of the megaliths is decreased and these are less than 0.60 meter in height, around 0.30 meter in width and 0.40 meter in girth. The modern site now contains 40 small monoliths and the archaic site contains 78 megaliths. The largest megalith measures 1.52 m x 0.66 m x 0.93 m. the archaic site is now deserted by the people and no death rituals ever been practiced here anymore. The rock type of the megaliths are gneissic rock and the geomorphology of the area belongs to the pre Cambrian era.

Dharbam

The megalithic site of Dharbam is a unique one as with time, because today, people have constructed megaliths with cements. Now, if the meaning of megalith itself defines it as made of stone, then there is a debate regarding this cement plastered monoliths among them, and why they have abandoned the concept of stones in such an ethnoarcheological tradition in it. While having a discussion with the villagers, priests and the local people who practiced this system in the village, they were of the view that due to lack of manpower, and many of the youths are not interested in such activities anymore, people now prefer to call labors who are expert in the works of cement and bricks, and as a result, the concept is becoming popular. Moreover, the concept of Karbi hymns and other rituals of sacrifice are continued here also. So from a ritualistic perspective, these may be considered as monoliths. So, here I would like consider the two different monoliths, as 1st generation and 2nd generation monoliths, where 1st generation will be the stone monoliths and the 2nd generation will be the cement monoliths.

1st generation monoliths are small, and 27 such monoliths are seen, which are less than 0.60 meter. The local people said that this site was established in 1950, and since then, it was continued till 2000. From 2000 onwards, people moved to the concept of cement and bricks, thinking it would be cheaper and better, but it is more costly due to labor charge and these labors are usually non Karbi people. However, it has certain positivity, like people who are not willing to erect stone monoliths, are at least continuing the tradition of *chomankan* where Karbi rituals and hymns are uttered, and here they have put the epitaphs, names of the deceased with the date of death and the *chomankan* performed. So, these patterns of monoliths are working like living historical documents to the researchers.

Diksak

Diksak is situated 8 kmm from Khetri in Kamrup district, Assam. The village is inhabited by the plain Karbi people with their mother tongue as Assamese. In this site, out of the 51 megaliths, only 4 were found to be of bigger size. The largest size was found to of 1.52 m x 0.91 m x 1.22 m. the two megaliths standing at the western sides are believed to be the guards of the village from evil spirits. This is a common feature of the Karbi villages everywhere. The rest 47 megaliths are found to be of small size and the maximum lengths of these are found to be of 0.60 meter. The four bigger megaliths are all more than 100 years old and the smaller monolithic tradition has started in the village from the decade of 1970s. The megalithic tradition is continuing here.

Bowlagog: the site of living megalithic tradition captured

Bowlagog, a site located in Neli of Assam in Morigaon district made no difference in the beginning, when the systematic fieldwork began here. Like other sites, the Karbi village contains 2 megalithic sites, one archaic and the other as living one. The site has been studied by our team from both anthropological and archeological perspectives. Here we got involved in the direct participant observation from time to time which began in 2008 and continuing till 2021. It has been observed that, this village has preserved the traditional roots and the hymns related to their megalithic erection in a systematic manner, and

due to that, the chief village priest Mr Kosheswar Timung and his associate priest Bharat Teron are getting the special thanks from every research team visiting the site. The ceremony of the erection of the megaliths is described below:

At first, the male members of the family, from the family of the deceased person, accompanied by the same clan proceeds to the forest area, where flat stone slabs are found. They collect 2 pieces of flat stone, where one piece will remain stand and the other piece will be lying on ground. According to their tradition, this is a symbolic concept where the standing stone represents the deceased person and the lying stone represents the sitting tool. It means, this is a resting place where the souls of the deceased people are sitting there, and they believe that the soul is immortal.

Now, the hymns used in the Karbi ritual of erection of megalithic stone are given below:

Stanza I

*Lungle arnam nangsar
Lar arnam arni
Naliayok maan daan pisi
Haneke ne asoayok laangpone
So hazar pisi neke
Sarpo aading badi
Sarpe aading badi*

Stanza II

*Haneke maan naang pisi
Daan naang pisi
Naaliayok finamosi laangpone
Haane laalong laang pongsi
Faaksaang o saang pisi
Haaneke sarpo aading badi
Sarpe aading badi*

Stanza III

*Zaabadi maan naangpi dohe
Daan nangpi dohe
Haaneta labadilo
Maan nangpi e
Daan naangpi e
He arna marni
Naaleok naaliyok haane
Sarpo aading badi
Sarpe aading badi*

Stanza IV

*Niyomka koriye
Kaaronka koriye
Naaleayok sonman laangpiyehe
(deceased person's name) naaliyok haane
Faak saang naam pi
Oi saang naam pi*

Haane sonman ka koriyo
Naalio naangso ayok
Naangsu ayok
Haan naangpi dobe

Stanza V

Naangso ayok
Naang ayo ayok
Naali nok haani kori na need
Bughni kori na need
Na naale ayok maan naangpi dobe
Daan naangpi dobe
Naangso ayok
Naang oso ayok
Naang ayo ayok
Naale ayo ayok
Naalile kiya guri lagile
Kiba muri laage pusi
Naali ayok haane
Maan naangpi dobe
Daan dongpi dobe
Hey arnam hey arni
Hey Ishwar

Translation of the hymns

The villagers believe that the village is ruled by the Gods and Goddesses who are protecting them as their children. They have some *thaan*, a kind of temple belonging to some Gods, whom they worship as pair. They call their Gods as *Burha Burhi*, i.e. the revered old man and his wife. In this way, the *thaans* found in the village includes *aandhari burha burhi thaan*, *bhakati burha burhi thaan*, and *jankraam burha burhi thaan*. Although there is no relation of these *thaan* to the monolithic rituals, the hymns are chanted in the names of these Gods and Goddesses too, as they are considered as spiritual rulers of the village, ruling over river, forest, tree or any other totem objects observed in the village.

The first stanza of the hymn means “O Lord, this is your land, and we are all living in your land on your mercy and love. Today we pray for peace of the soul of our deceased person, and we are erecting 2 pieces of stones in return of a certain price with your due permission. May his soul rest in eternal peace, we pray for your blessings, on behalf of the villagers.”

By reciting the 2nd stanza, the Gods are praised and asked to carry the 2 pieces of stones.

The 3rd stanza means about the procedure of carrying the stone is followed. The 2 cowries are thrown into the river and as payment of the stones to the Gods, and the priest cites the hymns at this moment. Also, the piece of land where the stones would be put are also considered as the plot of the land purchased from the Gods in return of the cowrie shells.

The 4th stanza means that god is informed that the rituals are covered in due process, in the name of the person concerned, so that his family does not face any problem from evil spirits.

The 5th stanza recites to the God is like a thanks giving to God, for well being of the villagers and the

closing of the chanting as O God (hey Ishwar).

The hymn is translated in brief for all the readers in such a way that they can understand the process of the erection of megaliths. This chanting of the hymns continue through the rituals in parts, and as a result, the variations are found within it.

Now, the process of erection of the stone is briefed up below:

1. At the time of collection of the stone, the *Kathar*, i.e. the priest chants the hymn. This is the beginning.
2. After the collection of the stones, they place the monolith in a place inside the forest for a while and wash it with water. At this time also, the priest recites the same hymn. Then the stones are tied in a bamboo, just like a dead body and 2 persons belonging to the same clan of the deceased person carry the stones to the megalithic field. The person who took active part in the cremation/ burial of the deceased person becomes the chief guest of the day, and he must dig the land to place the monolith on the ground.
3. After digging the ground, the monolith is placed on the ground, in the shape of a menhir. According to their beliefs, the standing piece of stone represents the deceased person while the flat lying stone is considered as the sitting tool, where the person will sit.
4. After the monolith is fixed, it is washed and dressed up as a person with a white cloth, in case of a male, and red or other colorful cloth in case of female. In case of deceased female, artificial jewels like plastic bangles are also used. Before doing so, all the monoliths in the field are washed with water from the right side. The monoliths belonging to the Timung clan are placed on the right side, and others to the left as Timung clan people are the priest clan people.
5. After this, beetel nuts are offered to each monoliths, showing as respect to the deceased and all other deceased in the past.
6. As part of the ceremony, the sacrifice of animal plays an important role among the tribal people and the Karbis are also not an exception to this rule. They sacrifice pig and fowls and make blood bath of the newly erected monolith. It is a symbolic way of offering the meat to the deceased person. In case of male, male animals are sacrificed while in case of female, female animals are scarified.
7. As the sacrifice is over, and the monolith got the blood bath, the ritual isn almost over. Behind the megaliths, 4 persons in equal gender ratio seat together, 2 men and 2 women. They are offered the food first and then the food is distributed to the other people present in the ritual.
8. After the feast is over, the people start crying together and bid final farewell to the soul of the deceased to leave, and the erection of the megalith comes to an end.

See photos to understand the process (fig. 1-8).

Analysis

There are several theories in relation to the origin and history of megaliths, but none of these could sustain well because any of the ethnoarcheological concept usually not free from doubts. Megalith is a worldwide phenomenon and these are found in Europe, Asia (Korea, Asian Russia, South East Asia), Africa (Nabta Playa), North and south America, where the human facial structured megaliths of Easter island of Chile are the most famous. Fergusson believes that this megalithic tradition was diffused in a common center (Fergusson, 1920: 42-46). WHR Rivers associates it with the use of metal and with a class of people who carried out their ideas to the different centers by the Sea (Rivers, 1913:

491). In the opinion of Quatritch, an Egyptian wave traveled to south East Asia, bringing it with the solar cult and the use of beads (1951: 168-177). The striking similarities between Indian and Egyptian megaliths which are also connected with those of Babylonia and Assyria have been pointed out by some writers (Walhouse, 1913-14: 278f). P Mitra believes that a strong wave came to southern India by sea and when it traveled to the North East, it had contact with Egypt and other countries as well (Mitra, 1927: 335-38). The dolmen site of Silchang is unique in terms of its arrangements and plan as a royal assembly. The customs and traditions attached to these structures provide some interesting clues about the Tiwa administration in bygone days. Moreover, it also indicates socio-political connections with their counterparts in the Jaintia hills. The Jaintias are well known for their rich tradition of megaliths, evident at the site of Nartiang, in Jowai in Meghalaya. As mentioned earlier, Nartiang has one of the largest concentrations of menhirs (*moo shyngrang*) and dolmens (*moo kynthai*). There are hundreds of menhirs with table stones or dolmens in front (Rao 1991:113). The site is currently protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and a compound wall has been made with an entry gate (Hazarika, 2020: 351-375). On the other hand, Assam megaliths do not belong to a specific period, and in this regard, JP Mills pointed out that an archeological characteristic of Assam of worldwide fame is its wealth of megaliths. However, today, the chronology of Assam megaliths through the Karbi megaliths have been pointed out as 13th century, by chronological dating of SN Rao, works of SK Bhuyan in Deodhai Buranji and finally through the research work of Dhritiman Sarma in 2010.

The traditions continuing since prehistoric past till present is in fact an important information for the archeologists and anthropologists, as past present continuum can show sufficient light about the culture of the region and the people, both in the past and the present format. In fact, the society is dynamic with time and space. Currently, the conversion to Christianity is said to change the traditional tribal culture, but in reality, it is found that the tribal traditions and Christian traditions have continued in the form of syncretism.

This process of erection of megaliths is termed as Chomangkan, which is a derived word from the Khasi language, meaning Khasi dance, but here, the death ritual has got nothing to do with the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya. The term has been derived among the Karbi people because in historic period, the Karbis became the subjects of the Khasis, and eventually certain words and rituals entered the Karbi society (Stack and Lyall, 1908). Earlier, Karbis called this ritual as *arleng karbi*, which literally means death ritual. In this matter of the name as Chomangkan, 3 probabilities have been found:

9. It is well known fact that the Karbis in order to get rid of the oppressions perpetrated by the Kacharis took refuge in ancient Kingdom of Jaintipur. During this period, they came in contact with the Khasi culture, the youths learnt some Khasi dance and used it during death rituals, then known as *arleng karbi*. In fact, on the night of the erection of megaliths also, dance is performed and hence, the name was adapted automatically by them as *Chomangkan*. The dance called *nimsokerung* by the Karbi boys and girls have some similarity with Khasi dance.

10. The Karbis might have been compelled to learn some customs related to the Khasis, and this dance of the customs, though this information doesn't have any specific documentation, rather a fieldwork collected information from the Karbis.

11. The 3rd probability refers to the performance of the dance in relation to the death ritual of Thong Nokbe, the great Karbi hero, whom the Karbis hold in high esteem. When the Karbis were living in Jaintipur, because of his heroic deeds, Muslims could not invade the hills areas of Jaintipur to present day Karbi Anglong (Sarma, 147-148).

The 3rd point is very important in the context of Islamic invasion of Assam in relation to Thong

Nokbe, and this point is important to make a legendary character real. In fact, the first Islamic invasion occurred in Assam in 1227 AD by Bakhtiar Khilji and if Thong Nokbe is the person to fight against such Islamic invasion, and if the first Karbi megalith was erected in memory of the deceased father of Thong Nokbe, then it can be summarized that these Karbi megalithic traditions started among the Karbis c. 13th century AD. Moreover, SN Rao conducted the radio carbon dating of associated finds of Markdola megalithic site in Karbi Anglong, and the absolute dating found of the associated finds of pottery also revealed the fact as belonging 13th century AD. So combining the concept of radio carbon dating method by SN Rao, Islamic invasion and fight between Thong Nokbe and Islamic invaders, it can be concluded that the Karbi megalithic tradition started from 13th century AD (Sarma, 2014: 173).

Conclusion

After following the historical facts, present traditions with changes, the megalithic tradition of the Karbis have been well preserved among them, while the site of Dharbam has shown specific change through the transition towards cement brick structures, but it is from ritualistic perspectives, purely may be considered as megaliths or monoliths, as the rituals remaining same. Moreover, Assam is a heterogeneous state of India, where several communities are living under peace and harmony despite their cultural and religious differences, under the umbrella term of unity in diversity. So, it is a very appreciable way to see that the Karbi tribe, with their population of 528,000 lakhs out of 32,000,000 population of Assam, have never lost their traditional items, and hence, it gives a ray of hope to the world that despite being minority, or even due to Christianity or conversion to other religions, culture and society keep certain harmonies of traditional blends, which keep the culture alive forever.

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Figures



Fig. 1 - Two cowrie shells are offered to the river in exchange of the stones from the jungle



Fig. 2 - The stone is considered as the deceased person and is washed like a dead body



Fig. 3 - The stone representing the deceased person is carried to the megalithic field



Fig. 4 - A relative of the deceased, who conducted the funeral of the deceased person is offering water in all megaliths



Fig. 5 - The Chief Priest Mr. Kosheswar Timung is dressing up the new megalith



Fig. 6 - A male pig is sacrificed and offered blood to the newly erected megalith



Fig. 7 - 4 persons are chosen as chief guest and they sit beneath the megaliths



Fig. 8 - Final prayer and sending the soul of the deceased to the eternal world