MEGALITHIC CULTURE AS A SYMBOLICAL BOUNDARY OF PAN-NAGA ETHNIC COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF SHEPOUMARAMTH IN MANIPUR NORTH-EAST INDIA

KABA DANIEL
Ph. D Research Scholar
Department of Political Science
North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong-22, Meghalaya, India

ABSTRACT

The practice of Megalithic culture is as old as the Shepoumaramth Nagas. This megaliths culture has been closely associated with these communities since time immemorial. Thus, studying and conceptualizing the ethnography studies of ethnic communities and tribal communities of late 20th century, scholars and writers could notify an alternative approach of studies of ethnic movement. Such as ethnic construction, ethnic identity, ethnic boundary, ethnic conflict and ethnic pacific resolution by mean of pictorial representation of symbols and markers. Thus, relating the new alternative approach of ethnic groups and tribals studies, the author shows and discusses that how megaliths culture posited as symbolical boundary of Shepoumaramth Nagas areas of Manipur as socio-cultural attachment.

Keywords: Megalithic Culture, symbolical boundary, pan-Naga ethnic community and Shepoumaramth

The Shepoumaramth Nagas is conglomeration of four Nagas tribes of Makhel origin. ‘Shepou’ denotes of ‘Poumai Nagas and Ememei Nagas’, ‘Maram’ denotes of Maramai Nagas and ‘th’ denotes of ‘Thangal Nagas’. These tribes mainly concentrated at Tahamzam (Senapati) district as dominant populations except some Poumais settled at Phek district of Nagaland State. The present study is a description of a community’s customary behaviors, belief and attitudes in its entireness in relation to the megalithic culture of these tribes. The Megalithic culture that existing play a crux role in the social and cultural life of the Shepoumaramth Nagas. The author while undergoing research on politic of boundary making and maintenance of tribals studies found this Megaliths Culture practice remains as the chief element of symbolic boundary of cultural markers to Shepoumaramth Nagas in particular and some of pan-Naga ethnic community in general. Perhaps, similar cases may also co-exist in other ethnic communities and
tribal base communities in North East India. Therefore, the paper is an attempt as a sample piece for future researchers.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

The term megaliths derived from two Greek words ‘mega’ means ‘big’ and ‘lithos’ means ‘stone’. Thus, while these big stones have utilities and uses for human purposes, it becomes Megalithic Culture. The Megaliths use as signs and symbols becomes symbolic boundary. Thus, megaliths applied to structure or monuments of rudimentary characters consisting of huge rough undressed stone as well as elaborately dressed stone of sophisticated type commonly as Menhirs, Dolmens, Cromlechs, Stones Circles, and Stone Henge. Megalith also can be defined as a burial mark in the form of huge stone appendages either rough unhewn boulders or dressed stone slabs. Megaliths are one of the natural gifts of the earth. When it is used by rational beings, it is usually called megalith cultures. The ways of using these natural gifts varies from society to society and from culture to culture. The megalithic culture dates back to Neolithic period which was about 8000 to 4000 years from now. The role of myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols. Symbols such as emblems, hymns, festivals, habitats, customs, linguistic codes, sacred places and the like were powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture and fate of the ethnic community. So, in ethnic communities human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, have an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity of ethnic communities.

METHOD APPROACH STUDIES

The methodological approach for the present study has been adopted both Social Sciences Research methodology and an anthropological approach. Conceptualizing, the existence of megalithic culture of many places in Shepoumaramth Nagas areas as a symbolical boundary of Pan-Naga ethnic community. The author selected the few villages to make an in-depth study and analysis. The researcher selected Sümai (Saranamai) and Phyamai (Phuba) villages of Poumai Nagas; Makhel village of Ememei Nagas and Willong village of Maram Nagas. These villages will be frequently mentioned by the author while studying and analyzing the megalithic culture of Shepoumaramth Nagas areas.

MEGALITHIC CULTURE OF SYMBOLIC BOUNDARY: THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

The concepts of the megalithic culture according to Ronald S. Stroud is to have been originated from the Western European countries of the Neolithic and Copper Ages, differentiated by the presence of monuments made of large stones. There is a great contention regarding the origin of megalithic buildings or monuments in the world of cultural studies. Some scholars trace, its origin to Egypt while others animadvert it to be a survival of the Paleolithic cave burials.

According to Guha in 1937, in India, the classification of Indian’s animadverts that human skeletal remains of Palae-Mediterranean, resembling that of proto-Egyptian type, found at Aditanallur and believably introduced megalithic culture to India. For instance, the Dravidian linguistic group of South Indians shows
unique presence of this ethnic racial boundary strains the Tamil Brahmins of Madurai, Nairs of Cochin, and the Telegu Brahmins form the fine culture of these megaliths practiced. Megalithic culture also has been studied from international of many islands of the Pacific, Madagaskar, and most part of the Australonesian arena, reported from the Orissa, South Indian States, North-East Indian States for the first time, studied systematically known the megaliths as symbolical boundary in India. The reality is that Stone Age people left the marks of their identities, habitation by megaliths in worldwide nations as their symbolical boundary, ethnic boundary and tribal boundary.

In Manipur, the first archeological report of megaliths has been known from Tahamzam (Senapati) district of Shepoumaramth Nagas areas of four tribes, the Poumai Nagas, Ememei Nagas, the Maram Nagas and the Thangal Nagas. A point to substantiate, Banerjee (1904) and T.C. Hodson (1900) had taken the measurement of standing megaliths found at Willong one among the old village of Maram Nagas. T.C. Hodson (1908) contributed the ethnographic account of the Nagas and Meities of Manipur in which relate on the archeological attests on the erection megaliths stand of Shepoumaramth Nagas of Tahamzam (Senapati) district. After T.C. Hodson, acknowledged in his book, as early as 1929 by W.Y. Singh also did investigation as well as excavation begins in Manipur. Thereafter, the Government of Manipur has found and declared 24 archeological sites and monuments protected under the Manipur Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1976, which includes the megaliths available at the Shepoumaramth Nagas areas only. According to Bokul Mutum, Megaliths culture of Shepoumaramth Nagas areas has recently been recognized as a living culture of the people of Manipur by the department of State Archeology, established in 1987 but in the existence villages of the region gradually vanishing. The Shepoumaramth Nagas, the practiced of megalithic culture has been as old as their arrival to this part of the region. No doubt, known the significance of megaliths, there is a growing pressure in favoured of the preservation of megaliths culture from the people of the region and the state government as well but less initiative from the government side.

This megaliths culture is one of the fact prove that Nagas are the aboriginal or origin settler people of this hills tribal areas and no others till then. The Megaliths culture also marker of chief element of Pan-Naga ethnic boundary in the Nagas Hills prior to colonial setting. A point to be mentioned here is that in the world of modernity paradigm shift this traditional megalithic culture is gradually vanishing but Shepoumaramth Nagas areas of Tahamzam district, Manipur is very much alive till date and needs to preserve it. These megaliths are the chief elements of the cultural marker and development of any living civilization world. Megalithic monuments are also found in the areas inhabited by Anal Nagas, Kabuis/Rongmei, Liangmeis, Zemeis of Zeliangrong Nagas at Khoupum and Tharon (Tamenlong district), Tangkhul Nagas of Nungbi (Ukhrul district), Koireng Nagas, Maring Nagas and the Nagaland state of Tenyimi Nagas in particular and other non-Tenyimi Nagas in general.

From the politic of historiography of ancient world history we know that before the Neolithic age arrived, stone was man’s first aid in the struggle for existence, the first symbol of man’s power, his first tool and his weapon as well. For the Nagas, stone posited an essence symbol because most of the Pan-Naga tribes were mostly traced their origin from caves and waters routes. What inseminated as valued study of
megaliths symbol is the inter-relationship of all aspect of a cultural ethos of one identity. Findings of prehistoric and proto-historic archaeological remains us by exploration and excavation become the best means for the reconstruction of the culture and history of the ancient people and for apprehension how these traditions have been handed down to the next generation of primordial cultural ethos.

The Shepoumaramth Nagas have taken megaliths as an important cultural object. This similarity also found almost all the Pan-Naga tribes, particular the Tenyimi Nagas of Makhel origin which Shepoumaramth Nagas from the same trends. The Shepoumaramth Nagas used these natural gifts culturally in various ways, which ultimately became the distinctive identity and marker of ethnic boundary of Pan-Naga ethnic community. It is to be worth mentioned that the pilling and installing of such stones have entailed a big festival since time immemorial and this practice continues till date. No other communities in the Manipur State practice the pulling and erecting of stones for upholding memory like these tribal groups. These tribal groups, the younger generation is taught the customary way of pulling and preserving such Megalithic Culture. This Megalithic Culture of Nagas also proved to be truth that Nagas are non-Indian. Both the cultures are lot of dissimilarities.

Megaliths of these tribal groups can be acquired or owned for funeral or memorial purpose of other peoples but to Shepoumaramth Nagas and others Nagas in general of megalithic practice, its go through numeral rites and rituals performances and seeking omen before stone has been erected. For instance, Shepoumaramth Nagas the installation work is done according to the observation of men through dreams. The selection of the stone is made according to the interpretation or prediction of the dream’s omen. For the megaliths erect, various rituals stages performed such as sacrificial of animal, preparation of rice beer, ropes seeking, etc. are a few mentioned here. Thus, megaliths rising are all done accordingly with stages of ritual performances.

MEGALITHIC CULTURE: THEORETICAL ANALYSES OF SHEPOUMRAMTH NAGAS

Geographically and topographically mapping and studies, the Shepoumaramth area is of deciduous type of forests in which many indigenous tribes makes their habitation. The land is hilly and with thick forests, in which there are many spots such as stone avenues, cemeteries, and terraced fields. By the side of footpaths leading to jhum fields, one can see megaliths either natural or installed by individual members or villager as whole. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note as Bokul Mutum (2002) remarks that how these people drag such a big stone up the hill slopes, mostly from the bottom of a stream to a great distance. There must be a great effort controlled and directed by own customs. These primitive people are of good physique. They are brave, and string by reason of their activities. A megalith cannot be brought up or pulled in a day.

As such the above light statement is true by fact that there are specific geographical locations only where megaliths can be erected. Custom indicates that megaliths cannot be erected at all places. The specific areas for installation are by the side of a terraced field or a jhum field, near footpaths or by the road side, in one’s domicile, on burial grounds, in the courtyard of the village Veo (chief) in Poumai Nagas’s term, or
burials ground, by inter-village footpaths, at village outskirts, and other important public places but no other places. The location of megaliths can be seen in two dimension either a natural location or a manmade location. The former are unused megaliths and appear to scatter haphazardly while latter megalith are used and erected by the villagers are found in a particular area in a cluster and has cultural significant. A rich man can erect a memorial stone megalith with the help of his fellow villagers by way of performing feasts. However, there was not discrimination between poor and rich men but do fall equally in the web of social construction. Neither social caste stratification system nor beggar exists in these tribes. Different kinds of houses are found constructed in accordance with the social position of the householders. Different types of distinctive symbolic cultural decorations placed on the houses of families like erected memorial stones or status achieving stones. Such symbols, culturally entail, are marks of various decorations on the front parts of their houses. These kind of houses include the Veo (Chief)'s house, the man who raised megaliths, the man who possesses a high economic position in the society. Thus, a house typology with its specific decorations marks cultural symbol related with megaliths culture and community identity. In the Poumai and Ememei areas of Tahamzam district, a mark likes ‘Y’ or ‘X’ called ‘Chikai, made of wood, or zinc or iron placed on the gable of the front roof of the house, marks a cultural symbol for the hosts who have performed ‘Zosou (Poumai) or Ozo-ooso (Ememei), a feast for the dragging of megalith. Other families who do not perform Zosou or Ozo-ooso are restricted to put such a mark or decoration on their houses. Thus, Chikai depict out a man’s social and economic status in his society by showing a cultural symbol upon his house front and dress too. These variations usually appear in the structure and artistic decoration of a house and dress are cultural markers of symbolical boundary of the Shepoumramth Nagas communities.

I. The Poumai Nagas

The Poumai Naga villages, megaliths is found till date such as Phyamai (Phuba), Sümai (Saranamai), Khumai (Tunggam), Chomai/Veymai (Tungjoy), Zaimai (Liyai), Nahmai (Koide), Hiimail (Purul), Ngimai (Oniam), Zhamai (Lakhamai), Vafümai (Lai), Zhifümai (Phaibung), Raimai (Ngairi), Dumai (Khungdei). In short, megaliths is practice all the Poumai Naga villages. But for research indepth analysis, the author exclusively selected Saranamai village and Phuba village from Poumai Nagas' villages. The village Saranamai is situated at a distance of about 32 kms from N.H. 39 Imphal- Dimapur road). Megaliths are located on the top of Sümai Deichi (hill) range. At Sümai Ngu (Saranamai village) the approximate number of megaliths erected by the villagers is shown within parentheses against the types noted in local names. They are Zosouchu (268 Menhir) Chadeichu (3 Menhir ), Chukho or Neisha Chukho (10 Cairn), Raikhobu (49 Dolmen), Chutou or Chuhao (12 Stones Circles), Chupou (107 Flat Stones). Every clan in the village like Paomai, Doumai, Yumai and Ramai raised their respective foundation stones. About 500 megaliths are found in the village excluding unused ones. At Phyamai Ngu (Phuba village) megaliths are located in the heart of village, at side of Rüri and Chaori rivers, Rabu, Piveh, Peihsaochu and between Phyabu and Khoubu village. Zasosochu at the side of footpath Rüri (10 Menhir), at the side of public washing place Chaori Dziilia (300 Menhir), Chukho or Neisha Chukho (9 Cairn), Raikhobu (25 Dolmen), Chutouh or Chuhao (2 Circle Stones), Chupou (1 flat Stone) called PaihrasüThoupo (grand-mother’s a place for drying rice paddy) between Phyabu and Khoubu of Phyamai Ngu (Phuba village).
II. The Ememei Nagas

The Ememei Nagas also practice all the villages. Of them, Kramei (Makhan Khullen), Makhripfü (Makhel), Pfosemei (Pudounamei), Rabvemei (Punanamei), Kahrimei (Kalinamei) are well practiced since times immemorial. Therefore, author analysis of Ememei community by taking these a few villages. At Mao gate traffic point; there is small hillock on which more than 15 megaliths are preserved by the State Archaeological department, Government of Manipur. They are chiefly of rough round flat stones, small flat stones, and menhirs of shorts heights. An attractive stone gallery (dolmen structure) in circular form piled up with small boulders, over which small and smooth flat stones are systematically placed forming a pond like structure, is witnessed in Song Song village of Ememei Nagas. Children and youths play out-door games in this structure. People enjoy the game sitting on this stone gallery. A number of resting or waiting sheds or seats made up by small boulders (cairn type) are also witness located on both sides of the roads or footpaths connecting to Pfosemei, Vümei, Rabvemei, Kahrimei villages via Song Song village. The communication of these people till date is on foot. Therefore, these megaliths sites become very important for the Ememeis to rest while travelling from one village to another village. Villagers’ vegetables transporters of Ememei community, megaliths sites are essential for them till date.

III. The Maram Nagas

The Maram Nagas also well practice, this megalithic culture. But the author cited the few villages like willong Khullen, Maram Khullen, Maram Bazar, Sangabung, Maram Centre, New Maram, Kavenamg as main sources. In the Maram Nagas area, at the Willong village, there are an uncountable number of megaliths standing on the left side of the village. Most of these megaliths were erected by the ancestors of the present inhabitant of the village. Each 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 them, about 130 in number were reportedly to be very old. To the east of this village, there is a small stream. It is place where widows used to take bathing. By the side of this stream, there are a lot of scattered unused megaliths, 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 Ogiaja (Dolmen), Capstones. Besides Spung Hoibina Rang (Menhir ) at Maram Khullen village also existed.

Maram Bazar is just located at the foot of N.H.39 Imphal to Dimapur road and the village Willong is located on the Maguilong hill range at a distance of 36 kms. to the North West from Maram Bazar. Every Shepoumaramth village has a tradition of keeping two or more entrance gates which are usually made up of planks having wall sculpture of human figures or skulls with over heaps of small stones. The construction and repairing of village gates are always held during the annual festival. At Maram Khullen village there are a number of memorial stones which stand till date. As narrated, there is a head of these stones which is known as Spung Hoibina Rang, the resting seat of stone for Rang Beirak, a folk hero. By custom, it is forbidden to sit on this stone by anyone and till date this is retained.
IV. The Thangal Nagas

The Thangal Naga villages well practiced this megalithic culture. But the author for collecting authentic sources, some exclusive villages are selected for the data information likes Thangal Surung, Takaimayankhang, Tumnoupokpi, yaikongpao (Tagaramphung).

Dimensions, Terms, Structure and Purposes of Megalithic Culture in Shepoumaramth Nagas

Knowing the existing practice of megalithic culture from the above authentic communities sources. Pragmatically, to understand the megalithic culture of Shepoumaramth Nagas areas of Manipur, the author used under the common banner of ‘Shepoumaramth Nagas’ irrespective of four tribal communities. This megalithic culture is ramification of symbolic boundary of ethnic tribes. The kinds of megaliths found in the Shepoumaramth Nagas areas have been analyzed in the light of their structure, shape and size, and technique of carrying. The functional indept study and analysis is more entails than the mere collection of the structures themselves because a menhir of similar structure can serve multi-cultural purposes in these communities of symbolic cultural boundary. The kinds of megaliths found in Shepoumaramth Nagas areas from morphological and functional points of perspective can be grouped as Menhir, Cairn with or without Stone Circle, large and small Slab, Alignments, Small Cairn, Dolmen, Capstone, Horizontal Flat of small stone, Stone Circle, Cromlech, Sacred Stone, Grave Stone, and heap of small stone Cairn or Dolmen, different local terms given by these tribals Shepoumaramth Nagas communities as the languages and dialects variation. Fundamentally, this categorazation of megaliths is mainly fundament on the basis of their socio-cultural attachment. Menhirs are preponderantly found in these Shepoumaramth Nagas areas. But menhirs are used for multi-purposes. There are single and elongated standing stone slabs like a long beam stone structure. Very rarely a heap of small stones forming a large stone structure menhir type is also found in certain villages. It is unremarkably placed at terraced fields, Jhuming fields, by the side of village paths, of roads leading to another village, and in one’s dwelling place. A heap of stones piled up and forming a platform structure belongs to the cairn kind of megaliths. Cairn is by and large used as resting seats.

Cromlech, can defined as when menhirs placed in a circular manner or in a cluster like arrangement. This is found Poumai Nagas of Saranamai village, Phuba village, Tunggam village, Tungjoy village, Liyai village, Purul village, Koide village and Oinam Hill village. Similar is also found in Maram Nagas of Willong village. In Shepoumaramth areas of Poumai Nagas, Ememei Nagas and Maram Nagas areas, dolmens are formed by a heap of stones over which flat stones are consistently placed, to serve as stone seats. Thus, dolmen is serves for burial purpose, or as a public meeting place. Dolmens are sometimes known as druidic altars or stone table. Hug unhewn boulders kept in one or more circles enclose a heap of rubble, it is categorized as a cairn-circle. Sacred or holy stones for sacrificing purpose are mostly large flat stones placed horizontally, upon which sacrifice, offering and other rituals are carried on. An altar is similar with a sacred stone. Either a small or flat stone or a small cairn structure or an elongated boulder is used as a grave stone, a mark of respect to the deceased person. A big and large menhir having a considerable height and serving as a
watch tower for security measure, is found only in some villages like Willong and Maram Khullen villages of Maram Nagas. The highest menhir in the Ememei Nagas area is found at Makhel, the Pan-Naga historical origin village. In Poumai Nagas area found at Saranamai village, the first settlers village of Poumai Nagas. Of apart, at Saranamai village, village platform and stone seats are made up of heaps of stones in different shapes and sizes, over which small flat stones are placed in a chronological manner, usually serving as seats.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy behind of Megalithic Culture of the Shepoumaramth Nagas is controlled by the rules and customs for the expected behaviour of their societies. A large slab or village platform built of small boulders and flat stones are for the open court session of the village or any kind of public meeting or any decision making at village level, is held upon. In case of any dispute or crime, they depend upon oath taking stone for social justice. The natural objects like certain stones, trees, forest, stream surrounded by megaliths and caves are believed to have been supernatural powers. Big megaliths, mountains and big trees are perception to be malevolent spirits in primordial stage of these people. Each village is a self-independent unit till date. Apart from administration, administrative officials take part in the pulling of memorial stone, and the arrangement of the turns of the merit-seekers for collecting such stones. Thus, Megaliths represents in different forms and in different ways as significance for the Shepoumaramth Nagas. This also posited that there is a strong tie between political organization and megalithic culture of Shepoumais. While practicing of Megaliths culture, lots of rites and rituals to be performance and numbers of gennas to be observed behind Megaliths Erection. This Megalithic Culture is as old as these peoples. Thus, Megalithic Culture remains as symbolic boundary of cultural markers from traditional times to contemporary times of the Shepoumaramth Nagas. But after the arrival of the modern Western Christianity, Megalithic Culture practice become gradually vanishing day by day. For this, the State Government of Manipur needs to take initiative in order to preserve for the future generation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

6. Ibid.
8. V. D. Krishnaswami, Megalithic Types of South India, Ancient India, vol. 5, pp.35-45.
12. Ibid.
14. The author witnesses in these part of regions by visiting himself some of the villages. Unused mean natural one and not manmade megaliths.
15. Author himself authenticated eye witness source.
16. The author witness himself in some of these villages and further to get authentic information discussed with his fellow researcher scholar from the Thangal Naga tribe.