

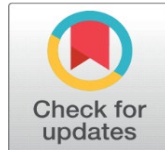
LIVING MEGALITHIC CULTURE OF THE KOIRENG IN SENAPATI DISTRICT OF MANIPUR (INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

One of the main foci of attention as well as problem in the archaeological investigations on megaliths is to unveil the issue on how and why the prehistoric megalithic builders erected these monuments. Here many a times archaeologists go mainly with the ethnographic analogy to make a feasible clue to the present issue. The continuing system of erecting stone monuments by the Koireng Naga tribes of Manipur can make to reveal it. The present paper thus tries to report the living tradition of erecting megalithic monuments, particularly the composite ones – such as menhir and dolmen (called seifun) by the Koireng tribe to commemorate the accession of a new village chief (khuoreng) by performing a feast called khulakphun nikho. The present study reveals that the erection of the megaliths in the Nagas society also appertained to the accession of a new village chief, in whose name the monument is erected. Hence such monuments manifest as the external symbolic storage related to the status of an individual as a village head.

Keywords: Megalithic monument, Seifun, Koireng, Manipur

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study deals with the living tradition of erecting megalithic monuments among different tribes of the Senapati District of Manipur. As one of the few places in the World where megaliths are still being erected, the Senapati district in Manipur represents an ideal locale. While the tradition of erecting megaliths has ceased in many parts of the globe with the coming of Christianity and modernization, stone erection as memorial monuments is still prevalent in the state of Manipur, particularly in the Senapati District. Megalithic monuments are seen to build still using traditional methods and formalities, such as the use of vines or creepers and wooden logs for dragging large stones and using a large labour force or manpower to quarry, move, and erect them. The persistence of this traditional practice has obvious appeal from an archaeological standpoint and has received some previous attention in descriptive works conducted by many scholars and administrative personalities. However, in addition to the logistics associated with finding, quarrying, and moving

these large stones with relatively simple technology, heavy expenditures of rice and livestock are required to feed those who provide labour for making the great feat. These feasts at different phases of erecting megaliths and the large investments incurred have obvious relations with a better understanding of how megalith buildings are related to socio-economic and political benefits which make them unique.

Within the district, there are several tribes belonging to the larger Naga fold that received particular focus of megalithic tradition, and these including Mao, Maram, Poumai, Liangmai, Zemei, and Koireng. These tribal communities possess unique village polities with a strong political integration among them. There also seems much overlapping between the cultural traditions, though each has its own language or dialect.

Out of the six major tribes mentioned above only two namely Poumai and Koireng are found to be practicing their age-old megalithism to this day. During the field study (2011-2016) two instances of erecting megalithic monuments have come across, practiced by two Naga tribal groups. The first one was in the year 2012 by the Poumai tribes of the Oinam Hill village, and the other by the Koireng tribe of Utonglok village. The erection of large stone monuments, accompanied with *feast of merit* was also performed in the year 2004 at another Poumai Naga village called Liyai. It is seen that raising of megaliths by two different Naga tribes is done with different purposes – for the Pomaies it is to enhance one's social status by way of giving feast, and for the Koirengs to commemorate the accession of throne of a new village chief. The raising of composite megalithic monument i.e. menhir compositely with dolmen (called *seifun*) is done to commemorate the accession of a new village chief called *khoureng* by performing a feast called *khulakphun nikho*. The Poumai tribe on the other hand performed *kosodotah* or *zhosotoh* to enhanced status of the performer in the society by erecting monolith in his name by way of performing a series of expensive feasts. The details given below try to highlight the different process as of raising monuments among the Koireng tribe and of giving feast.

2. LIVING MEGALITHIC TRADITION AMONG THE KOIRENG

The Koireng forms one of the smaller tribes in Manipur, which was referred by Hodson (1911) as 'Quoireng' and by Shakespeare (1913) as 'Kolhen'. It is a common belief among the people that their original homeland is *Kolram*, the present Karen State of eastern Myanmar. Koireng village are found scattered in the Sadar Hill areas of the Kangpokpi District. The tribe has a number of patri-clans, such as *Shong*, *Yei Tielu*, *Thamtu*, *Uirei*, *Khonglung Meriam*, *Mikan*, etc, (Kabui, 1987). Some clans also have sub-divisions. Among them, it is believed that *Shong* and *Yei* clans forms the important ones, where they have the prerogatives of being the village chiefs. Other dignitaries are to select from other clans. It is seen that the office of the chief (*Khoureng*) is hereditary and primogeniture in nature. So the eldest son of a chief will inherit the office of the chief, and if he has no male issue, the eldest son of the chief's younger brother shall inherit the office. The accession to the office of the chief is related with the installation of a stone seat locally called *seifun* (*sei-stone, fun-seat*), which is to be raised along with a single standing stone behind the seat. Such raising of stone seat is categorically done ceremonially (locally termed as *khullakphun nikho*) which marks formal accession to the office by the new chief, and without it he is not recognized as a bonafide chief.

The present description of erecting megalithic monument is a generalised account of erecting *seifun* related with the accession of the new chief Mr. Rongneishong Hemshutsong, who became the fifth chief of Utonglok Koireng village on 17/05/2013. Back then, his father Mr. Rongneishong Thangkri (1955-1985) was the second chief of the village, after the first chief Mr. Rengshong Thangsuohung (1943-1951) and his family migrated to another village. Mr. Thangkri had four sons and three daughters. His heir held office of the chief since 1955 till the present times. After the death of Mr. R. Thangkri in 1985, his eldest son Mr. Rongneishong Hemson (1987 till 2004) inherited the village as the third chief and served for 17 years. He was then succeeded by his younger brother, Mr. Rongneishong Hemkhup who served as fourth chief and ruled for 7 years (2005-2012). The third son, Mr. Rongneishong Hemshutsong (20013-till date) now became the fifth chief succeeding his brother. After his death his younger brother Mr. R. Shokam will inherit the chiefship. Now after the demise of Mr. R. Shokam the chieftainship will pass on to Mr. R. Hemson's sons and so on. It is noteworthy here that Utonglok Koireng village has a unique system of inheritance of holding the chieftainship through primogeniture of particular clan. Given below is the brief detail of the formal accession of Mr. R. Hemshutsong the fifth chief (*Khoureng*) of the Utonglok Koireng village.

Ceremony of accession of a new village chief is done only at the completion of the last rites of the deceased chief i.e. on the death of a chief. At such times, the village council (*khuo*) will formally conduct meetings to select the new chief from among the possible successors which at most cases are the younger brother of the deceased chief or his eldest son. On the contrary, if the deceased chief does not have any younger brother or a son, then preference will be given to the eldest lads among the *Shong* clan. If there is no such successor to inherit the chieftainship from amongst the family line, then the village council (*khuo*) will take over the charge temporarily. The intending chief is to fulfil certain requirements demanded by the tradition of chieftainship: that he should be physically unblemished i.e. he cannot have any birth defects, he cannot bear twins offsprings, he should practice village endogamy but not polygamy. After the village council completes its cross-checking, the final decision of the *khuo* is taken and informed to the selected candidate so that he may be prepared for the upcoming accession of the chieftainship. This day marks the beginning of the ceremony of *khulakphun nikho*. Prior to his accession to the chieftainship, he must become the member of the *khuo* as *panchi* (representative of the clan). In case of the chief, he will represent the *shong* clan. Should there not be enough time for the new chief to become *panchi* (representative of the clan), the ceremony of ordination as *panchi* can be performed on the same day of the accession. The process of finding stones for this ceremony of accession is the exclusive duty of his fellow clansmen. This responsibility is assigned to the person whom he has complete faith in fulfilling some criteria: that the stone should not be brittle, it should be able to withstand the heat of the sun failing which it is considered as a bad omen for the chief, causing many problems during his reign. The stone can be taken from any place from within the village territory. The site for the erection of the new monuments is generally next to the older *seifun* on its right-hand side. The feast usually continues for five days. But in case of accession of the fifth chief (Mr. Rongneishong Hemshutsong), the feast went on only for two days for which a bull and a pig is offered for the public consumption. The pig for ceremonial sacrifice is given by the village council. During these feasts, meat and rice beer are served lavishly and the young males of the village are urged to carry suitable stones which were earlier chosen through a ritual. It is the duty of the youth of the village to search and bring the suitable stone block which was selected earlier. As the stone is not of large size, they can collect within the stipulated day. When the stone is in the designated spot, the village priest (*thempu*) purified the stone by using a new broom and a leave. Then the hole is dug to raise the menhir, the priest of the village (*thempu*) conducts a ritual of purification by pouring rice beer and sprinkle blood of the killed animals onto the stone. Now the new chief is to erect the stone and all the able bodied male of the village help him in erecting the *seifun*. After that the new chief sits on the dolmen and the village priest (*thempu*) performed rituals by chanting hymn. Every villager that witnesses the accession ceremony blesses their new *khuoreng* (chief) and thus the ritual is completed. The newly selected chief is now a full functional chief after the performance of the *Khullakphun nikho* ceremony of raising *seifun*. The Koireng regards the *seifun* megalith as a living image of the chief. It was informed that when the chief dies the coffin have to carry three times around the *seifun* he erected, it is believed among them that the *seifun* die along with the owner. The village drum donated by the chief too buried along with him. It is the responsibility of the new chief to donate a new drum for the village by performing a feast called *khuongthak* or *khuongmei*, which means inauguration of a new drum. The death of a chief is a crucial period for the village council (*khuo*); the members of the council has a duty of performing the funeral. The rituals are performed by the village priest (*thempu*). Funeral rituals are completed by cleaning the chief's house and by sacrificing a dog, of which the head of the animal is hung on to a pole erected beside the grave of the deceased chief. This ritual is called *inthiar*. The last rite, known as *borhe* is performed only in the auspicious month of *chaipi* which falls in the month of March.

3. THE SEIFUN

This structure is a combination of one or more type of megalithic structures, comprising menhir along with dolmen. Both the menhir and dolmen are erected on the same day, where the dolmen is served as seat and the menhir as a rear support of a sitting individual. This composite structure is constructed unhewn, where the menhir is planted just behind the dolmen, the dolmen on other hand are placed horizontally above the small or medium sized stones on the ground. These composite structures are erected to commemorate the new chief of the village and usually faces east, where the successor will always erect another composite structure on the right side one after another. This type is found among the Koireng of Longa Koireng, Sadu Koireng and Utonglok. The composite structure of menhir and dolmen called *seifun* is the seat of the new chief, where rituals are performed thereby commemorating his accession to the chieftainship. The village priest offers rice beer and meat to their supreme god (called *pathian*), to reaffirm the status of a full-fledged chief.

This feast plays a very important role in the Koireng culture as they believed that the megalithic monuments raised are the image of the chief who ruled over the village. It is always found in all the habitational area of the village settlement.

Khuongthak or *khuongmei* (inauguration or dedication of village drum) After the successful raising of the *seifun* another expensive feast followed is the inauguration or donating of the new village drum. This feast usually continues for six night and seven days and can be performed once in a lifetime due to its huge expenditure. There is a ritual dance at every stage of the feast accompanied by community feasting. There are three types of traditional dances performed during the ceremony. The first traditional dance is locally known as *kalamchi* which is performed by male members of the village by carrying elephant skin shield and a dao. The second (locally called *yaiphochengruut*) is also performed only by males and the last traditional dance (locally called as *waikhong laam*) is **performed by both male and female members**. This expensive feast can be performed by any member of the village council (*khuo*), but due to its huge expenditure it cannot be performed by every member, eventually however, it becomes the duty of the new chief (*khureng*). This feast is performed to achieve highest social status in the society during his lifetime and a better life after his death in the land of the death (*mithikhuo*).

4. CONCLUSION

The present study reveals the socio-economic and political significances of the megalithic monuments that show how people could utilize natural stone blocks to fulfil these myriad functions within the larger perspective of Naga megalithism. The living traditions of erecting megaliths have been documented, from a Koireng village (the Utonglok). It is known that large stone monuments (menhirs) are erected for different purposes. The monolith erected by donor was done with the performance of *feasts of merit* for achieving a status in the society. And that of the Utonglok Koireng village was done in connection with the ceremonial accession of the new chief of the village held on 17/05/20013. Here erection of a small menhir along with a table stone (collectively known as *seifun*) was done in commemorating the accession of the new village chief (*khureng*), who became the fifth chief of the village after the death of the former chief. A chief is fully recognized as a bonafide king by his subject only after the performance of the ceremony (*khullakphun nikho*) where the erection of the two megalithic structures is made. There exists an attachment of the stone object with the very person who initiates to erect it after duly hosting feasts, and hence the individual's social is related to the categorical erection of the stone which shows how that person interacts with material culture and other fellow subjects through grand feast (*khullakphun nikho*). Naturally, there is reciprocity between actors (the donors) and the monuments in configuring the actors to understand themselves in society in terms of their identity and status. Status, as such, is the relative social position of an individual and is contingent on the significance and meaning that are accumulated in social life (ManiBabu, 2014). A status thus achieved by a Naga male through 'the feasts of merit were separated from the status of being chief or a member of a noble clan' (West, 1985). Also, this schema does not reflect to be the hallmark of a stratified society as stipulated by many in as much as in public architecture (Childe 1950).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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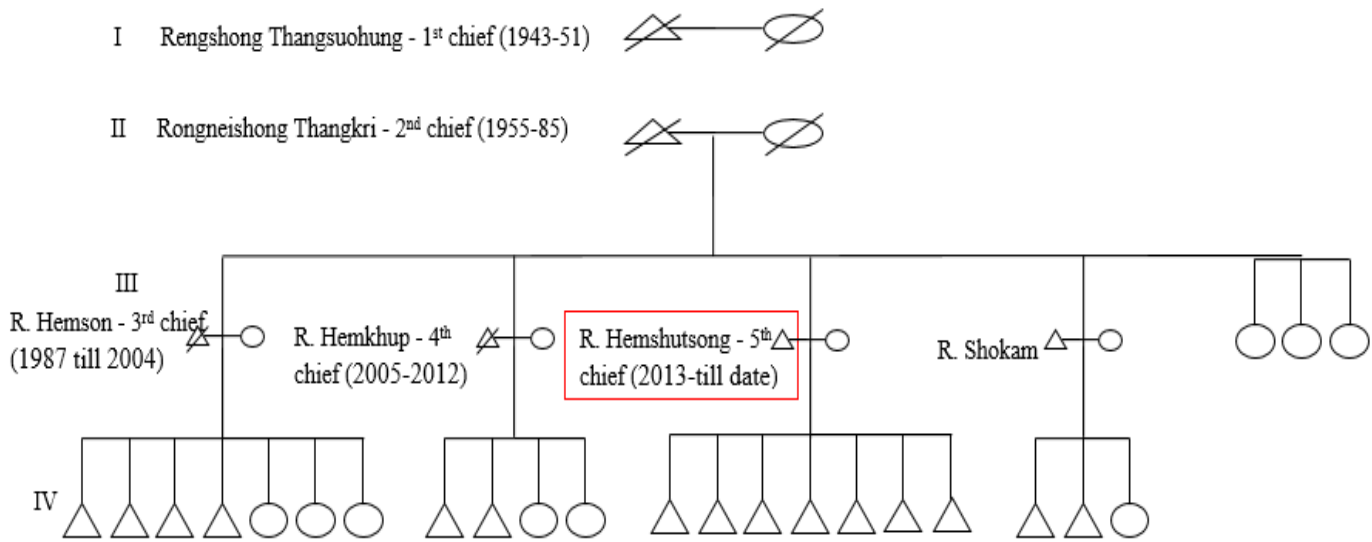


Figure: 1 A Short Genealogy of Koireng Chieftainship (Utonglok Koireng village)

21-34.

Koireng megaliths

Fig. 2 The three *seifun* in a row

Fig.1 Stone seats (*seifun*) of the new village chiefs at Utonglok Koireng village

- a) *seifun* of the 3rd chief name Mr. R. Hemson Koren, 1987; b) *seifun* of the 4th chief Mr. R. Hemkhup Koren, 2005; c) *seifun* of the 5th chief Mr. R. Hemshutsong, 2013.

Sadu Koireng village



Fig. 3 The chief of the Sadu Koireng sitting on his *seifun*



Fig. 4 The chief of Sadu Koireng along with researcher near the *seifun*



Fig. 5 Informants along with researcher near the *seifun* at Utonglok Koireng village



Fig. 6 Four *seifun* in row at Longa Koireng village