



# Living Megalithic Tradition among the Munda Communities of Upper Baitarani Valley: An Ethnoarchaeological Investigation

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**Abstract:** The tradition of building Megalithic monuments remains widespread among tribal and non-tribal groups across India. In most areas, these practices are directly or indirectly connected to the cult of the dead; however, in some regions, aspects of this tradition have likely changed over time. The current paper provides evidence of the Megalithic monuments built by the Austro-Asiatic communities of the Upper Baitarani Valley, mainly the Mundas and their sub-communities (Bhumij and Ho), who settled in the hilly area of the Baitarani River Valley, to understand the ancient Megalithic tradition, using current tangible and intangible ethnographic data. The present study shows the distribution of living megaliths in the Upper Baitarani Valley throughout history, as well as the presence of both ancient and recent burial sites of Mundas at various ancestral locations.

## Introduction

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The disposal of the dead is one of the most ancient traditions in human history, dating back to prehistoric times. The ideas behind ritualistic disposal give rise to the concept of ancestor worship. Over time, this idea evolved into more advanced burial customs, resulting in the erection of monuments as memorials. This development led to the Megalithic culture, which spread globally across various periods, including the Neolithic in Europe and the Chalcolithic and Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent. In India, Megalithic monuments are primarily associated with the Early Iron Age and display a distinctive range of burial traditions and related material culture. Megalithic burials are found not only in India but also reflect a similar tradition in Europe (Chapman 1981; Hodder 1982a; Bradley 1998), Africa (Laporte), Southeast Asia (Sahi, 1991; Mohanty

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and Selvakumar 2002:313-352), and other parts of the world (Child 1948; Drinot 2009:15-32). During the Iron Age, a variety of megalithic structures are evident in different regions of the country; predominantly, the southern and central parts of India provide significant evidence of this cultural tradition (Sundara 1975, 1979: 331-340; Sudyka, 2011:359-89; Mendaly 2016:1-4). Numerous ethnic communities in southern, eastern, central, and particularly northeastern India continue to practise this tradition. However, due to urbanisation and the influence of other religious developments, many changes have occurred in these cultural practices.

### **History of living traditions in the Indian Context**

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The history of research into such living traditions was initiated by European missionaries and ethnographers who worked on ethnological accounts of various ethnic groups across different geographical locations during the British period. In this respect, pioneering work was undertaken by Edward Tutie Dalton (Dalton 1867) and (Ball 1872). Systematic accounts of funeral rites for almost all the tribal communities and ethnic groups of India have been compiled with detailed ethnographic insight in the book *'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal'*, marking the first account of ethnological study of Indian tribes and castes (Dalton 1872). Subsequently, Breeks (1873), Walhouse (1878), Fawcett (1896), Hodson (1911), Roy (1912; 1915; 1921), Shakespear (1912), Gurdon (1907), Hutton (1922; 1926; 1928; 1931), Mills and Hutton (1929), Grigson (1938), Krishna (1938), Krishna Iyer (1939; 1946), Haimendorf (1939), and many other ethnographers and anthropologists have published their works on different tribes of South India, the Chotanagpur Plateau, North East India, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. In eastern India, various tribes in Odisha and Jharkhand have been surveyed and studied by colonial ethnographers and Indian anthropologists after Independence. In the state of Jharkhand, S. Shekhar conducted an extensive ethnoarchaeological study on the living megalithic tradition of the Munda and their sub-clans. During his survey, a large number of both ancient and recent megalithic ancestral sites were traced, and a detailed study on the mortuary practice of the Munda communities was undertaken by the scholar (Shekar et al. 2015; 2019). In Odisha, Von Furer-Haimendorf conducted a thorough ethnographic survey, focusing on the ethnographic accounts of the Gadabhas and Bondo tribes (Haimendorf 1943). He provided an in-depth analysis of the living Megalithic tradition of these tribes and categorised them into two groups: first, as memorials for the deceased, and second, as seats for deities. More recently, B.K. Mohanta (2002 & 2015) investigated the mortuary practices and contemporary Megalithic traditions of the Ho tribe. Taking

an ethnoarchaeological approach, he recorded current ethnographic data, including various rituals associated with both primary and secondary mortuary practices, funeral processions, material culture, documentation of burial monuments and their locations, as well as the roles of gender and social organisation. Considering the aforementioned works on ancient Megalithic culture and tribal megaliths, this research aims to investigate the continuity of the practice of creating burial monuments over the dead body from ancient times to the present day. The ethnographic data, found in the form of living traditions, prevail in Odisha. The Mundas and their other two branches, Bhumij and Ho's, have been selected for the research due to the large-scale Megalithism followed by them.

### **The Megalithic Tradition in Odisha**

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The state of Odisha is among the most significant regions for tribal groups, with 62 major types of ethnic communities representing various language families. However, since the very beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, numerous ethnographers and anthropologists have initiated investigations into the tribal people in the state of Odisha, publishing many reports. The present work focuses not just on the socio-economic condition of tribal groups, but rather the research covers other aspects such as mythological beliefs, funerary customs, megalithic tradition, food habits, traditional knowledge, and their settlement pattern in different ecozones (Roy 1912; Das 1931; Das & Chatterjee 1927; Elwin 1945). Nevertheless, there are just a few research papers that concentrate on the funerary rituals and megalithic tradition, a unique cultural tradition found among the tribal groups in this part of the country. The study of the living megalithic tradition of the tribal community provides information not only on past human lifestyles to some extent, but also on other aspects. Thus, knowledge of the living megalithic tradition is helpful for us to understand the history of early Iron Age communities that settled in this area thousands of years ago and initiated megalithic practices. It would also enable us to trace the past of those communities that follow Megalithism today.

In the state of Odisha, there is very little evidence of megalithic sites, and most research work focuses on the typology of burials. It examines their individual and common features, as well as comparisons with those in other parts of the country and elsewhere in the world, along with the associated belief systems of Megalithism (Pradhan 1987; Behera 1995; Behera et al. 2017, 965–91; Hussain/Mendaly 2018, 625–46). The evidence of Megalithic remains reported from the excavated site at Amudda, in the Middle Mahanadi Valley region, has led to the discovery of several Megalithic structures, primarily represented by Menhirs with or without cairns, cairn circles, and

dolmenoid cists near or on the Iron Age–Early Historic settlement sites (Behera et al., 2017: 965–991). Nevertheless, the research into living megalithic traditions among primitive groups in Odisha began in the pre-independence era and has continued to the present. However, the state of Odisha has revealed many surviving megalithic sites associated with tribal communities such as the Bondo, the Gadabas, the Gonds, the Ho, the Parajas, the Saoras, and the Mundas (Fürer-Haimendorf 1943; Mendaly 2015:1–6; 2016:1–3; 2017: 930–43; Mendaly 2019; Mendaly/ Hussain 2018: 594 – 605; Basa 2015: 751 – 70; Mohanty 2015; Mohanta 2015).

### **Megalithic Tradition in the Upper Baitarani Valley**

The study area is located in the northeastern portion of the Keonjhar district of Odisha, bounded by the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand to the north, the Jajpur and Bhadrak districts to the South, the Mayurbhanj district to the east, and the Angul and Debagarh districts to the west. Keonjhar is situated at the convergence of the Gondwana formation, the Chhotanagpur plateau, and the Eastern Ghats, providing an advantageous climate and topography for creating residential and cultural environments for the populace. The Upper Baitarani Valley is situated between the Gonasika-Gandhamardan Hills Range and the Anandapur Plain, a significant geographical area in the northern highlands and plateaus of Odisha. The river Baitarani and its catchment areas were also significant in the past due to their strategic location, geology, geography and suitable geomorphology for the development of archaeological settlements in that region. Geologically, the region is formed by granite of Archean formation. The region is culturally represented by the Mundas, Ho, Santhals, Bathudis, and Juangas, who believe in nature worship and animism, living their lives through slash-and-burn cultivation, collecting wild fruits, and engaging in subsistence activities such as hunting and fishing. Across the upper Baitarani Valley, the majority of the living tribes are the Mundas and the Hos. Both communities belong to the same lineage, separated during their movement into the region, hypothetically from the Ajabgarh region of Uttar Pradesh, crossing Rohtas and Palamu in adjoining areas of Bihar and the northern part of Jharkhand, around the 6th century B.C. (Roy 1912). It is possible that during this period, they migrated to the surrounding regions of Singhbhum and settled in the Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Sundargarh districts of Odisha.

As mentioned earlier, no research has been undertaken to trace the megalithic tradition in the upper Baitarani Valley. This is the only research conducted in this area to investigate the continuation of the megalithic burial tradition in the study region. During our field investigations between 2019 and 2025, we reported as many as 250

living megalithic ancestral burials across 20 localities in the upper Baitarani River valley. All the sites were researched using insights from ethnoarchaeological studies of megalithic monuments, which are based on the living megalithic traditions of the Mundas and Ho peoples, who currently inhabit the region. Archaeologically, it is also necessary to trace the continuity of Megalithic tradition in the area to understand the antiquity of the Megalithic sites.

### **The Mundas and their Origin and Ethnicity**

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The Mundas are spread across Odisha and other regions, belonging to the Kolarian branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family, mainly speaking Mundari. They call themselves '*Horo-ko*' and their race '*Horo*.' The name '*kol*' may be derived from '*Horo*'. They have various branches, including Mahli, Bhumij, Nagbansi, and Kompah Mundas, with their own clans. The Mahli are divided into Kompah and Ho Mundas, who mainly inhabit districts in Jharkhand and Odisha. During migration, some Mundas cultivated the Panch Pargana plains and areas near West Bengal, earning the names Bhumij or Bhumiyas for being the first land tillers. The origin of the Munda tribe is a topic of scholarly debate, and there is no written evidence to confirm their successive migrations in ancient times through various parts of India (Roy 1912: 205). Very little evidence is available regarding the Mundas, largely through myths and legends. The legends of the Mundas provide some insight into their original geographic location, from which they may have migrated to the Chotanagpur Plateau. According to the Munda cosmological legend, Ajabgarh is said to be the place where their first parents were created by *Singbonga*, the Sun God, the supreme deity of the Mundas (Roy 1912: 206). The Mundas themselves believe that they migrated from the northern regions.

### **Settlement and Subsistence Pattern**

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The Mundas live in large, permanent villages, consisting of five to ten hamlets (*dih*), sometimes more than ten, alongside a village (*bata*). They typically settle in the highest areas within a forested, hilly region to access natural resources easily. The Munda homesteads cluster together without any orderly arrangement, connected by narrow, irregular roads, locally known as Horn. Generally, the Mundas avoid constructing south-facing houses, as they view this as a bad omen for prosperity. Instead, they usually build houses that face either east or west, and occasionally, the houses face north. The houses feature low mud walls supported by wooden posts, with raised floors positioned one to two feet above the ground. Each house has heavy wooden doors made from two separate

planks. Windows are absent in traditional Munda houses. The roofs are typically tiled, although poorer Mundas thatch their roofs with a type of grass known as *Sauri*.

The subsistence pattern of the tribal communities is based on the agro-pastoral economy; most people are seasonal cultivators and cattle herders in forested areas. Settled cultivation is their primary occupation, although they sometimes also practise shifting cultivation. Paddy is the principal crop grown, and rice serves as their staple food. Agriculture is supplemented by one or more subsidiary occupations, such as hunting, fishing, and collecting various types of forest products. They gather honey and the roots of different medicinal plants, and engage in hunting and fishing. However, they belong to the labourer class, often working in other people's plough fields as daily wage earners. Female family members spin yarn from the bark fibre of a deciduous flowering shrub, dye it with vegetable and other natural dyes, and weave clothes that are both durable and artistic. In addition, they produce various handicraft products, such as bamboo jars and earthen pots, and local markets are very favourable for selling their goods to earn income for their livelihoods. Some have attained proficiency in several crafts, including mat-making, bidi-making, brewing traditional drinks (rice beer or *Handial/Kusna*), carpentry, masonry, and leaf pot-making. These activities provide them with additional income during their leisure time. Most people rely on selling traditional drinks during the summer season, with female family members primarily engaged in producing and distributing liquor.

### **Recent Field Investigations**

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The burial ground serves as a key landmark for all village settlements within the Munda community. Analysing the distribution patterns of Megalithic sites can reveal insights into the movements and settlement patterns of people in this region from long ago. Extensive fieldwork was conducted over four seasons for this purpose. The comprehensive field survey aimed to document the ethnographic records of the Munda tribes in the upper Baitarani valley of Keonjhar district, while also conducting archaeological investigations in that area. Additionally, the survey focused on thorough site documentation to observe recent changes related to rituals associated with the Megalithic tradition in the region. As the community still practises the Megalithic tradition, it was also essential to document the current mortuary practices of the Munda tribes. This paper presents the results of the fieldwork conducted for the aforementioned aims, providing detailed information on the living Megalithic tradition in the region. During fieldwork, 20 living Megalithic sites and over 250 living Megalithic burials were documented in the Anandapur, Ghatagaon, Patana, and Saharpada blocks of

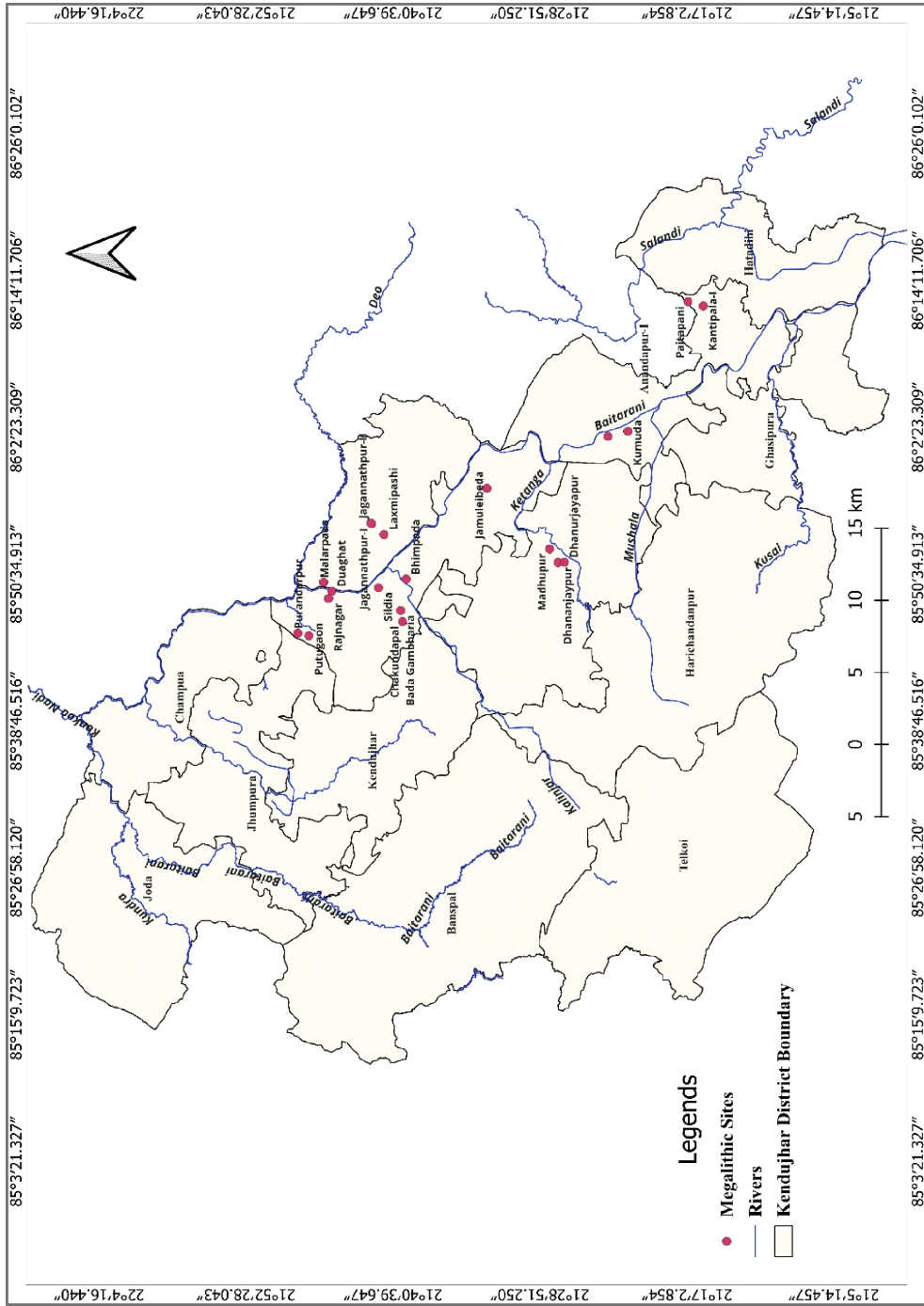


Fig. 1: Map showing the distribution of living Megalithic sites in the Upper Baitarani River valley.

Table 1: Distribution of living Megalithic burial sites in the Upper Baitarani valley, Keonjhar district

<i>Sl No.</i>	<i>Site name</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Block</i>	<i>Tribes</i>	<i>Latitude</i>	<i>Longitude</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>Direction</i>
1	Kantipala-I	Kantipala	Anandapur	Munda & Ho	21°15'44.00"N	86°12'8.24"E	Menhirs, Dolmens & Capstones	N-S
2	Paitapani	Kantipala	Anandapur	Munda & Ho	21°16'57.91"N	86°12'29.10"E	Dolmens, Capstones	N-S
3	Kumuda	Kumuda	Anandapur	Munda	21°21'47.66"N	86°2'3.98"E	Menhirs	N-S
4	Kaduabahali	Kaduabahali	Anandapur	Munda	21°23'22.93"N	86°1'39.15"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S
5	Dhananjaypur	Dhananjaypur	Ghatagaon	Munda	21°27'23.92"N	85°51'31.37"E	Menhirs & Capstones	E-W, N-S
6	Dhanurjayapur	Dhanurjayapur	Ghatagaon	Munda	21°26'53.66"N	85°51'32.89"E	Capstones & Cairn cists	N-S
7	Madhupur	Madhupur	Ghatagaon	Munda	21°28'4.03"N	85°52'36.05"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S
8	Jagannathpur-I	Jagannathpur	Saharapada	Munda	21°42'23.89"N	85°54'37.98"E	Dolmens, Capstones	N-S
9	Jagannathpur-II	Jagannathpur	Saharapada	Munda	21°42'27.00"N	85°54'41.64"E	Capstones & Cairn cists	N-S
10	Laxmipashi	Laxmipashi	Saharapada	Munda & Ho	21°41'23.85"N	85°53'46.21"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S
11	Malarpada	Malarpada	Saharapada	Munda	21°46'14.27"N	85°49'55.55"E	Capstones	N-S
12	Bada Gambharia	Bada Gambharia	Patana	Munda	21°40'3.16"N	85°47'39.35"E	Capstones	N-S
13	Bhimpada	Bhimpada	Patana	Munda	21°39'36.68"N	85°50'10.96"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S

<i>Sl No.</i>	<i>Site name</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Block</i>	<i>Tribes</i>	<i>Latitude</i>	<i>Longitude</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>Direction</i>
14	Chakundapal	Chakundapal	Patana	Munda	21°39'54.21"N	85°46'46.15"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W
15	Jamuleibeda	Jamuleibeda	Patana	Munda & Ho	21°33'7.18"N	85°57'29.40"E	Menhirs	E-W
16	Sildia	Sildia	Patana	Munda	21°41'49.63"N	85°49'29.14"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W
17	Duaghat	Rajnagar	Patana	Munda	21°45'34.27"N	85°49'12.65"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S
18	Purandarpur	Purandarpur	Patana	Munda	21°48'18.23"N	85°45'49.61"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S
19	Purugaon	Putugaon	Patana	Munda & Ho	21°47'25.18"N	85°45'37.22"E	Menhirs	E-W
20	Rajnagar	Rajnagar	Patana	Munda & Ho	21°45'50.42"N	85°48'37.00"E	Menhirs, Capstones	E-W, N-S

Keonjhar district (Figure 1). Most of the sites provided evidence of living practices and are categorised into different localities in the northern part of the study area (Table 1). This survey was conducted on a village-to-village basis, aiming to investigate various aspects of the living Megalithic tradition, such as the structural details of the megaliths, stone quarrying, the mode of stone transportation, funeral customs, and associated rites and rituals related to different circumstances of death, based on the life cycle and other beliefs among the Mundas.

### **Distribution and Typology of Living Megalithic Sites in the Upper Baitarani Valley**

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The Megalithic types observed during the fieldwork in the Keonjhar district are mostly capstone burials, dolmens with four vertical orthostats, and menhirs (Figures 2 to 6). Considering the continuity of the tradition at the same Megalithic complex, the nature and architecture of the three mentioned types can be further explained as follows:

#### **Capstone burials**

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These are nothing but a stone slab to cover the mortal remains. The slabs are mostly irregular in shape, but some of the evidence shows a roughly semi-circular, square, and rectangular shape. The average measurement of these slabs is sometimes more than 1.5 m in length and 1 m in breadth. The thickness averages about 0.25-0.40 m.

#### **Dolmens (*Saasandiri*)**

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Dolmens in the region differ from the well-known South Indian dolmens; instead of having orthostats, these dolmens feature four vertical stones to support the capstone. They are identical to the dolmens constructed by the Khasis of Meghalaya as well as those built by the Gonds of Central India (Gurdon 1907: 109-112,132-154; Hutton 1933: 167-169; Elwin 1945: 80; Haimendorf 1945: 73-86). Even in the northern and southern parts of Jharkhand, these dolmens built by the Mundas are similar, indicating direct links between the ancient structures and their recent counterparts (Shekhar et al. 2014; Shekhar and Joglekar 2015; 2016).

#### **Menhirs (*Biridiri*)**

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Menhirs are identical to classical Megalithic monuments. Symbolic carvings have been observed on the surfaces of some menhirs. These are found in isolation, either on the

outskirts of the Mundas' village settlements, within the villages, or along the roads. Menhirs can also be found within clusters of capstones and dolmens. During our fieldwork, we observed that the Mundas construct capstone and dolmen megalithic burials on their private lands, situated very close to the residential village area. In contrast, only a small number of burials are found on barren land. Most of the menhir



Fig. 2: Capstone burial of Munda tribes in the Upper Baitarani valley.



Fig. 3: Capstone and Cairn heaps type of burials from the Upper Baitarani Valley.



Fig. 4: Menhirs (Memorial Stone) type burial of the Munda tribes of Upper Baitarani Valley.



Fig. 5: Two large-sized memorial pillars of the Munda tribes found in Sildia village.



**Fig. 6: Dolmen-type burials of the Munda tribes of Upper Baitarani Valley.**

sites seem to have been erected on barren highlands, away from the settlements of the present population, particularly along the highway. Sometimes, both barren land and agricultural land are used for the construction of menhirs, a type of megalith.

A significant feature of these sites is that the menhirs are roughly aligned, with the large stone at the centre of the row. In some cases, a single menhir is also erected to commemorate the deceased person. As an ethnographic parallel, this feature can be observed in the menhirs raised by the present-day tribal community, particularly the Mundas and their branches in the neighbouring regions of Keonjhar district. The distribution patterns of megalithic sites indicate that the Mundas utilised a distinct but limited landscape for both burial and habitation. The ancient megalithic builders probably settled in the higher landscape of both northern and southern Jharkhand, near water sources. Subsequently, as they migrated towards the north-eastern and north-western regions of Odisha, they settled in both the plain and hilly areas of Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, and Sundargarh districts, depending on both forest products and agriculture.

### Raw Material Resources

Most of the living Megalithic sites are found near hills, hillocks, and outcrops of sandstone and granite. In the Patana block, sites are situated close to granite hills and outcrops. A large number of both dressed and undressed stone blocks are found on the nearest granitic rock outcrops; probably, these are the stone quarry sites by the local tribal communities where they collected stone blocks for the making of ancestral megalithic burials (Figure 7). Several Megalithic monuments and nearby rock outcrops exhibit similar dressed stone with quarry marks made by iron chisels, suggesting that iron may have been employed for stone quarrying. In some areas, the geological formation primarily consists of granite gneiss, which naturally splits into layers. It appears that these stones could have been shaped by the local Munda communities



Fig. 7: Dressed stone used for the megalithic burials found on the nearest granitic rock outcrops.

using iron tools. They might have transported them using a country cart or carried them on their shoulders by a group of people.

### Funerary Rituals

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The Mundas follow both cremation and inhumation as primary funeral practices, with varied funerary rituals depending on the nature of death in different geographical regions. In most sites within Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts, complete inhumation is practised, while recently, cremation has also been performed in some areas. The mortuary rituals of the Mundas can be divided into four parts. Just after the death the *Sasan-Karam* ritual is carried out at the home by the family members just after the death of a person (Figure 8).



Fig. 8: View of the *Sasan-Karam* ritual, a symbol of the deceased person's purification.

### Topa (Burial)

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Most Munda communities in Keonjhar District bury their dead in a north-south-oriented grave, often without using a coffin. A wooden or bamboo structure is constructed at the bottom, featuring corner posts and a timber floor. After death, the body is anointed with turmeric and mustard oil and then covered with fresh cloth. Relatives carry the body on a cot to the burial site, where rice, mustard seeds, or stones mark the spot for the ritual. The body is placed in the grave, surrounded by wooden plates or bamboo sticks, along with funerary items such as rice, bowls, and personal belongings (Figure 9). If death occurs on an inauspicious day, a live animal may be kept in the grave. A thread is used to help the spirit leave, and the grave is sealed with timber

plates and sticks. Relatives throw soil into the grave and depart quickly, believing this prevents sickness. A mound is built over the grave, and a water pitcher is placed nearby for the *Umbul-ader* ritual.



Fig. 9: A grave is dug in a North-South direction, and the corpse is buried within the grave.

## Rapa (Cremation)

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In some parts of Keonjhar District, cremation involves a ritualistic process following death. Family members inform villagers, and a messenger informs relatives elsewhere. The body is anointed with turmeric and mustard oil during a ritual called *Sasan-Sunam*, accompanied by mourning songs, except for children. For elderly or women's bodies, *Paiki* musicians play traditional instruments during the funeral. If no cloth is available, the body is wrapped in new fabric or tied with an unused thread. It is then placed on a cot or stretcher and transported to the cremation site, often stopping at a designated spot outside the village for a ritual called *Umbul-ader*. The body is laid on a north-south pyre, with the head facing south, and a coin and burning charcoal are placed in its mouth. After igniting the pyre, water is sprinkled over the nearly burned body, and bones are collected by married women. Some ashes are spread inside a room, and bones are stored in an earthen pot soaked in oil and turmeric, which is hung on the house roof or buried until the *Jang-topa* festival. The Munda communities perform this ritual minimally. Although no formal cremation burial was recorded, detailed information was obtained through personal interviews with the Munda, Ho, and Bhumij communities.

## Umbul-ader (Calling back the shadow)

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The ritual to summon the shadow of the deceased is performed either on the same night in cremation cases or on a specific day before leaving the funeral ground in burial cases, often on an odd-numbered day such as three, five, seven, or nine days after the funeral. For children or young individuals, it is held on the third or fifth night; for elders, on the seventh or ninth night, or later, but within the same lunar month. If death occurs on the last day of the month, all rituals are conducted that night. During the ceremony, ashes from the funeral are spread inside the *adin* or taken from the *chitlha* if buried. At midnight, relatives visit the site with four *tiril* branches arranged in a cross and tied with creeper, creating a cradle and a hut covered with twigs and grass. An earthen pitcher is placed over the grave, and a relative offers *Handia* to the spirits, requesting the shadow's return. The structure is then set on fire, a cock is sacrificed, its leg circles the structure thrice, and the spirit is warned to return. The structure is struck with a branch, set on fire again, and a cock's legs are kept on the ground during the shadow's return. A procession then proceeds, with one person carrying a wooden seat, another with a cock, others striking ploughshares or pouring water, and the doors are locked while lamps are extinguished. At the house, questions are asked to verify the shadow's identity before

allowing it inside. Offerings are placed in leaf cups on the *adin*, and if disturbances are observed, the shadow's return is confirmed. If not, the ritual is repeated.

### **Hayom (Shaving ceremony)**

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The morning after the *Umbul Ader* ritual, family members, led by *Paahan* (a village priest), gathered at the graveyard for a symbolic cremation of an effigy representing the dead. The priest shaved the deceased's father's head, created a clay effigy from soil, and placed a *caurri* where the heart is. Others cut wood for a miniature pyre. *Paahan* made three small balls and bread from *atta*, which were placed on the effigy over the pyre and set on fire. The bread and *atta* balls cooked on the pyre symbolise offerings. After burning, the effigy was broken, and its remnants were placed in a sealed urn with bread and a beaded necklace made from new thread. An uncooked rice offering was made at the grave, and the vessel was taken to a nearby pond for a shaving ceremony. The deceased's father entered the water, deposited the vessel, and took a ritual bath, after which others followed, concluding the ceremony.

### **Megalithic tradition of the Ho's & Bhumij Tribes**

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In ancient times, when the Ho were nomadic hunter-gatherers, they believed that death occurred due to the direct or indirect influence of spirits, and no other causes were considered responsible for death (Majumdar 1929: 39). In Ho society, the soul of a departed person is treated as Bonga (God), residing in the house and looking after their welfare. This is the reason they used to bury or cremate the dead near their habitation area or sometimes in their courtyard. Generally, each clan has its own separate funeral ground where they cremate or bury the corpse (Mohanta 2015: 704). The Bhumij do not have a distinct tradition of their own. Since they are one of the sub-tribes of the Mundas and are considered a Hinduised tribe, both Mundari and Hindu traditions influence their funeral rites (Dalton 1872: 171-173). The Bhumij primarily practice cremation as a funeral rite, and burials as a secondary option; they deposit cremated remains under stone slabs or dolmens, with rituals that vary depending on the cause of death and regional customs. Among the Ho's and Bhumij tribes, to cover the body of the corpse within the burial dug in the burial ground, they currently use fresh bamboo sticks. Unlike the Mundas, the Bhumij and Ho tribes also perform similar rituals such as *Topa* (burying the corpse), *Rapa* (cremation), and *Harr-garri* (ceremonial deposition of remains under a dolmen, also called *Saasandiri* in Mundari). These rites are quite similar, with most ceremonies being identical.

## Funeral customs in cases of unnatural death

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The Mundas, Bhumij, and Ho, all three branches of the Austro-Asiatic race, believe in worshipping both benevolent and malevolent spirits. They believe that when a person dies of natural causes, they turn into a benevolent spirit that looks after the welfare and prosperity of the village. However, if a person dies due to unnatural causes, they become a vicious evil that causes calamities and death in society. Such deaths are called *birjane*, and there are different terms in Mundari for people who died from various unnatural causes. These individuals are given a separate mode of disposal, away from the village graveyard. They are occasionally honoured by villagers and appeased through various sacrifices. In cases of unnatural death, no special treatment is given to the body; it is cremated or buried at a different location, and the remains are buried away from the village. Mostly in cases of unnatural death and deaths that took place away from their native place, these tribes erected Menhirs like a memorial stone to commemorate the death of the deceased person.

## Articles associated with graves

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The grave articles used by these three communities during different stages of the funeral procession are mainly related to the concept of 'purification' of the corpse and its remains, so that it can join other ancestral spirits of the clan in their heavenly abode. Vermilion, mustard oil, and turmeric symbolize purificatory agents of the soul. The idea of life after death is reflected in offerings of rice and other grains, which are placed with the corpse either on the funeral pyre or inside the grave. The same concept also explains why money, personal belongings, and weapons such as sickles, knives, bows, and arrows, as well as ornaments, are kept with the body. In recent burials, modern elements have been added to the grave articles, such as liquor bottles instead of traditional country liquor. Many other favourite items or personal belongings are also placed over the grave. The orientation of graves among the Mundas is always from north to south, with the head facing south. To mark this alignment, they erect an upright stone at the southern end of the grave. The Mundas believe that their original home was in the northern direction in ancient times, and their ancestral spirits remain there after death. Therefore, during inhumation and cremation, they position the head toward the south and the feet toward the north so that the soul can easily find its way and move toward the north in the dark world.

## Changing Tradition of Megalithic Culture

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Among the Munda community in the Upper Baitarani Valley of Keonjhar district, we have observed several changes in their megalithic practices and beliefs surrounding

death rituals. Currently, some Munda and their sub-clans prefer to use cemented structures instead of cairn heaps or stone slabs (Figure 10). When asked why, they explained that some Munda individuals have been greatly influenced by other religions, and cemented chambers require less human effort compared to sourcing and handling stone materials. Overall, those who choose stone slabs or erect memorial pillars often need more wealth, since searching, selecting, cutting, and transporting stones from quarries is difficult and involves many people. Additionally, family members of the deceased are committed to providing all necessary facilities to complete the rituals, but building a cemented chamber typically requires only five to ten people. Sometimes, it is not feasible for common folks to observe the entire ritual process, especially nowadays, when most lower-class families prefer constructing concrete chambers. On the other hand, some higher-class individuals burn their dead. A major issue is the lack of cultural awareness; during road construction, many megalithic structures were destroyed, and due to neglect, these structures received little care. During explorations in Keonjhar Sadar and Anandapur subdivisions between 2022-24, we found many memorial pillars along village roads. Every year, villagers performed ancestor worship at these sites, but many of these pillars were later destroyed due to roadwork and development projects initiated by the government. Today, due to urbanization and the influence of different religions, castes, and communities, we see many changes among tribes like the Ho, Bhumij, Gonds, and others, especially in their social organization and cultural practices. For example, like the Mundas and Gonds, the Ho also prefer to burn their dead. After cremation, they collect the ashes and store them in a small “*Pidha*” type structure, typically about one to five feet tall. Originally, this practice was not part of the Ho culture; it was likely borrowed from the Hindus. The evolving cultural system is a continuous process influenced by factors such as environmental changes, migration, and the impact of other communities, cultures, and religions.

Changing traditions due to the influence of other religions is not only seen in Odisha; similar changes have also occurred in other parts of India. However, today we do not see the same rituals and traditions that were practised a few years ago among ethnic communities. Some of these practices are influenced by Hinduism, while many others are influenced by Christianity. Nowadays, very few villages still practice the megalithic tradition. In addition, the tribal populations settled in urban and semi-urban areas have almost forgotten their traditional beliefs and practices. They do not understand why they were practising these traditions; some do not believe in ancestral souls or evil spirits. However, people living in hilly regions still practice the megalithic tradition, although a few changes have occurred in their ritual processes. Ultimately,

the process of cultural change has created obstacles in ethnoarchaeological research. Since we are using and conducting ethnoarchaeology, we always need to try to uncover the truth behind the Megalithic culture, which began during the Iron Age in India and has continued into the modern era.



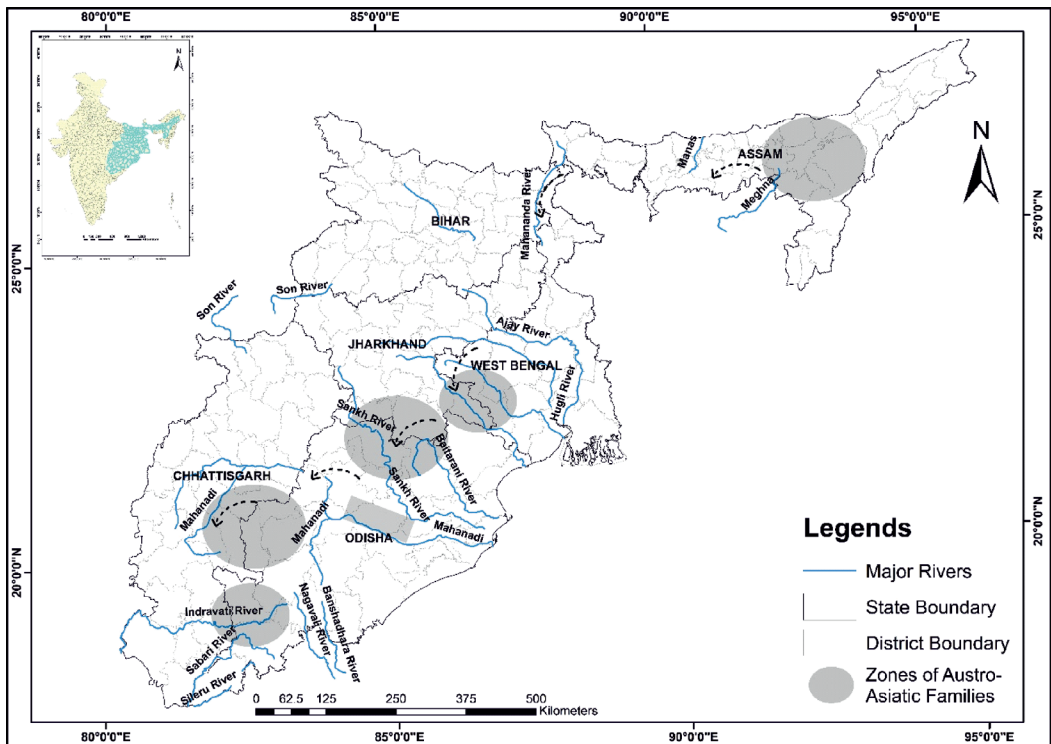
Fig.10: Concrete Memorial Platform of Ho Community.

## Discussion and Conclusion

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Recent research shows Austro-Asiatic populations share a language family and genetic ties, with historical migrations between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent dating back to pre-Neolithic times. They are classified into three branches: Munda, Nicobarese, and Mon-Khmer. In India, groups such as the Khasis, Jayantiyas, and Mundas, and subdivisions such as the Bhumij, Ho, Santhal, Kharwar, Juwang, and Sora, reside mainly in the Northeast, Eastern, and Central regions and share cultural traits. Genetic studies suggest migration into South Asia during the Neolithic, with

sex-based admixture. The region's Megalithic tradition includes complex ceremonies, with monumentality as a key trait. Most Austro-Asiatic communities cremate their dead, raising stone monuments as bone repositories and memorials, especially in regions inhabited by Mundas, Bhumij, and Ho. These monuments have archaeological parallels, studied through limited excavations. To address research gaps, the author conducted an ethnoarchaeological study of megalithic traditions among the Munda and other Austro-Asiatic communities, drawing on ethnographic data.



**Fig. 11: Map showing the important zones of the Austro-Asiatic families in the Eastern Indian context.**

Evidence of ancient megalithic structures in eastern India, especially Odisha and Jharkhand, is limited. It is only in the context of the middle Mahanadi valley that the excavation at Amudda (Behera et al., 2017) reveals valuable Megalithic remains connected to the Iron Age. Megalithic sites in Jharkhand have seen minimal study from freelance explorers over the years (Ball 1872; Beglar 1872; Dalton 1873; Roy 1916a: 61-77; 1916b: 481-487; Mitra and Bose 1936; Topno 1955; Patil 1963; Imam 2014), focusing primarily on ethnological studies. Notably, a 1965-66 excavation at

Khuntitoli yielded significant findings, including cremated burial remains and grave goods like beads and ornaments, but no further extensive excavations have occurred since then (IAR 1965-66: 10). In recent years, a large number of both ancient and recent megalithic monumental sites of the Austro-Asiatic communities were discovered in the Ranchi-Hazaribagh and Chaibasa-Chakradharpur Plateau of Jharkhand state (Shekhar et al. 2015; 2019; 2021). The tradition of Megalithism is still practised by the Austro-Asiatic communities in that region, especially the Mundas, Ho's, Bhumij, and Gonds in the states of Odisha and Jharkhand. The Austro-Asiatic communities occupying the Chhotanagpur plateau continue to engage in the practice of constructing megalithic burials for both deceased individuals and cremated remains. In light of this tradition, the author conducted three seasons of exploration in the upper Baitarani Valley region. These investigations resulted in the identification of several ancestral sites where these communities are still engaged in the creation of megalithic structures, primarily characterised by menhirs without cairns, cairn circles, and dolmenoid cists. All these reported sites are situated very close to the Microlithic and Neolithic tools-bearing sites. Though the upper Baitarani valley shares borders between Odisha and Jharkhand, mainly the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha and the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, there are similarities in the rituals, myths, and traditions associated with the disposal of the dead by the ethnic tribal communities. Still, it is a living megalithic tradition followed by the Munda, Ho, and Bhumij tribes of this region, involving the creation of megalithic burials placed over both buried bodies and cremated remains. The main difference is that, instead of practising direct burial as a primary ritual, the Austro-Asiatic communities of the Jharkhand region follow the practice of secondary cremated bone burying as the primary type of ritual. In contrast, the earlier practice, extensively used by the Munda and related tribal communities of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts in Odisha, remains prevalent, but the Austro-Asiatic communities of a few areas also practise the secondary bone burying ceremony.

During the course of our fieldwork in the northern part of Odisha and the Odisha-Jharkhand border area, we found that Munda peoples had settled mainly in mountainous and valley areas, but they still maintain a form of megalithic tradition, although many changes have been found in funerary rituals and megalithic structures. The cultural practice that the Mundas follow here continues into the Jharkhand state. There are a few regional variations that occurred in their beliefs in life after death, megalithic types, and funerary rituals differ from those of the Munda peoples who have settled in the northern part of Odisha, particularly in the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts. In the upper Baitarani valley, the Munda communities mostly performed direct burial of

the dead as their primary ritual, rather than using the secondary bone-burying rites. In Chhattisgarh-Jharkhand state, the Mundas follow three types of funerary rituals: *Topa* (Burial of the dead), *Rapa* (the Cremation Ceremony), *Umbul-ader* (Calling Back the Shadow of the Dead), *Jang-topa* (the annual Bone Burying Ceremony) (Shekhar et al. 2015); but such rituals are also practiced by the Munda tribes of the northern part of Odisha in general and the Upper Baitarani valley in particular.

Also, we have seen the changes in megalithic buildings like the erection of a large number of dolmens and stone slabs, which are not commonly found in Odisha. In the Odishan context, the evidence of stone slabs/capstones is found in greater numbers than the dolmens. The Mundas of Jharkhand state have erected their memorial pillars on their burial grounds, but when we come to Odisha, we find they erect such pillars not only in burial grounds but also at roadsides, depending on whether the death is natural or unnatural (Mendaly 2019). The Munda communities of the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts erected menhir-like memorial pillars within the burial ground, along the roadside, and behind residential houses. The burial grounds where dolmens and capstones were erected are primarily located on private lands near residential houses, with very few situated on government-owned land. The burial grounds are mostly situated very close to the Munda settlements and behind the residential houses. In cases of natural death, the Munda tribes built dolmens and capstone-like megalithic structures aligned north-south, but for unnatural deaths or when people died far from home, they primarily erected menhirs in both north-south and east-west directions. A unique aspect of the study area is that the menhirs were erected with and without skeletal remains. Evidence of cairn heap burials among the Munda, Ho, and Gond tribes has also been reported in the Saharpada and Ghatagaon areas of the upper Baitarani River valley. Both the Munda and Ho communities raise menhirs oriented east-west in cases of unnatural death, away from their settlement areas. They erect commemorative alignments of menhirs in north-south orientation for individuals who achieved a higher social status at public places, such as along the village road or within the settlement. Among the Ho's, burial and memorial stones are set close to houses. The present author observed alignments of menhirs near habitation deposits in different villages of Anandapur and Patna blocks in Keonjhar district. East-west alignments of menhirs are found in the jungle and near the current highway, likely erected by people in cases of unnatural death. During our field investigation, we observed numerous menhirs, ranging in height from 3 to 12 feet. The tradition of tall and heighted menhirs was also practised by the Munda tribes of Jharkhand and the Gonds of the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh. These alignments probably reflect their

belief in seeking blessings for the departed soul from the sun god, which may be similar to the present belief system of *Singbonga* (sun god) among the Mundas and Hos. Some isolated menhirs may have been associated with individuals who died unnaturally or used as landmarks for settlements.

The present study suggests that both ancient and modern megalithic communities share certain cultural traits, especially in funerary architecture, funeral customs, remains, and land use patterns for both the living and the dead. Although there are no ancient megalithic sites and monuments at a stratified level in the context of northern Odisha in general and the upper Baitarani River valley in particular, the Baitarani River borders areas between Odisha and Jharkhand, allowing us to trace its influence in the surrounding regions of West Singhbhum, Ranchi, Khunti, and Chaibasa-Chakradharpur in Jharkhand, where the presence of both ancient and current living megalithic sites and monuments was found. The close connection between current populations and ancient ones is evident in the cultural heritage of ongoing traditions and ancient sites. The ancestral sites of the Mundas, Ho's, and Bhumij show a long-standing continuity of megalithic traditions, reflected in current burial practices and evidenced by ancient megalithic remains and ethnographic data. Cremation burials appear to be a common practice, as most of India's Austro-Asiatic populations, including groups like the Khasis, *Karbis*, *Saoras*, and *Gadabas* from eastern and northeast India, and various Austro-Asiatic communities in Southeast Asia, have performed this tradition since ancient times, which continues to be seen in their funeral processions. In Jharkhand, secondary cremation burials are also common among the Mundas and their associated clans. A clear distinction exists, however, in the practices of primary burial versus cremated secondary burials among the Austro-Asiatic communities along the Baitarani River basin, especially in the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha. The practice of primary burials throughout the Upper Baitarani River Basin indicates a regionally shared tradition among the Austro-Asiatic communities in this area. The concept of monumentality is a shared cultural phenomenon among the Austro-Asiatic populations of the upper Baitarani Valley in the Keonjhar district of Odisha, as well as among communities in Southeast Asia and northeastern India. This connection is evident in the megalithic traditions observed in regions such as Indonesia and Laos, which are also reflected in the practices of local populations in Assam, Meghalaya, Odisha, and Jharkhand. Additionally, stone monuments are erected by Tibeto-Burman communities in Northeast India and by Dravidian-speaking groups in Southern and Central India (Figure 11). This phenomenon may be attributed to two primary factors: the universal nature of the concept of monumentality and the long-standing cultural

interactions that have occurred among these populations throughout history, stemming from migration and intermingling.

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