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HERO STONES AND OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS OF LIANPUI MIZORAM

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Abstract: A large number of memorial stones, numerous anthropic holes, few “Y” shaped wooden posts and one petroglyph site were found at Lianpui during the course of village to village survey for antiquarian remains in the villages of Mizoram in 2011. One of the unique features of the memorial stones of Lianpui village are the elaborate and intricate carvings of various motifs. They have depiction of a central human figure along with other figures, birds, animals, mithun heads, gongs, lizard, etc. Similar motifs are also found parallel to the petroglyph found at this village. It is proposed to discuss these remains that reflect the culture of the Mizos prior to their adoption of Christianity and forsaking of past practices.

Keywords: Hero stones, cup marks, old pathways, Lianpui

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Introduction

The Mizos abandoned many old traditional beliefs and practices after their conversion to Christianity. The introduction of Christianity brought a profound change in Mizo cultural life as they started to evolve towards modern culture and adoption of Roman script. Shamanic rituals have also been almost abandoned in the wake of Christianity. The migration of the Mizos after crossing the river Tiau had been done mostly

from the east to other directions in the early stage of their movement and settlement in the present region of Mizoram. Lianpui being located in one of the easternmost parts of Mizoram, the study on the archaeological remains at this village reflects some aspects of the traditional culture of the Mizos which will help in the reconstruction of cultural history of Mizoram prior to the introduction of Christianity and writing system in Mizoram.

Historical background of Lianpui

Lianpui is a small hilly village of Mizoram located on mountainous border area of India and Myanmar. It is 54 km away in the southeast of Champhai district headquarters. The Tiau River, the natural international boundary between India and Myanmar, flows in the east of this village. It is said that Lianpuia, a famous chief of the Palian, decided to move further west across the river Tiau in the early 18th century CE after the murder of Chief Lalvunga, who ousted him from Farzawl village located in the Chin Hills of Myanmar near Lianpui. His subjects first settled on a hillock called Mualbawk at a little distance from the present village of Lianpui and later shifted to the present location. So this village was initially named as Mualbawk after their first settlement in the area. Later it was renamed as Lianpui after their chief Lianpuia who had founded this village.

Nature of Archaeological Remains at this Site

This village has been thoroughly investigated for its archaeological potentialities as a part of village to village survey for antiquarian remains in the villages of Mizoram. The survey showed that this village has a rich repository of archaeological remains that existed in the form of carved memorial stones, petroglyph, “Y” shaped/ forked wooden posts, remains of old pathways and a number of holes on the rocky surface. The archaeological remains in this village can be broadly categorized into five groups - engraved memorial stones, anthropic holes, petroglyphs, ‘Y’ shaped wooden posts and old pathways.

Engraved Memorial Stones

Memorial stones are found erected on the top of a small hillock which is located in the north western side of the present habitation area of this village. They are of various dimensions. They are locally known as Lungphun-Ropui. These memorial stones are one hundred and fourteen in number - some are in fragmentary condition and others in intact. They are erected in eight alignments -

four are in the north-south orientation and another four in East-west orientation. This village has the second largest memorial stone site in Mizoram. The rows in east-west orientation are long whereas those in the other orientation are short.

The largest memorial stone measures 1.87m high, 1.37m wide and 20cm thick and the smallest one is 20cm high, 23cm wide and 15 cm thick. Some of them have been uprooted from their original place and erected in this place to save them from further destruction due to re-use for gravestone or other purposes. In the past many of such memorial stones have been destroyed for using as grave stones, jubilee stones and other household works. They are raised on the low platform made of stone slabs. These memorial stones are having depictions of human figures, animals, tools, weapons, birds, fish, gongs, reptile (lizard), etc. These figures on the memorial stones are represented mostly in profile. Many of them are broken and features on these memorial stones have become faint due to thick crust of lichen and moss as well as weathering. Such type of engraved or carved memorial stones is also found in some of the other states of Northeast India such as Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. They are also found in many other villages of Mizoram like Vangchhia, Sazep, Zotlang, Farkawn (Chaterjee: 1979: 9, 25 -26; Lanlhminglua and A. Sarkar, 2017), Dungtlang, Samthang, Khawbung, Biate, Cherlun, Pukzing, North Vanlaipai and many other villages. Villages in the Chin Hills of Myanmar also have such memorial stones (Franqois Robinne: 2015: 199-241). Some of the memorial stones of Lianpui having motifs are discussed.

This memorial stone (Fig.4.1) has depictions of two mithun heads one above the other and a row of animals on the lower part. Over them is a row of four birds. Behind them a human figure is depicted standing beside a forked tree stump or post. Over them is the central human figure. But half of its body is missing. In front of it, a row of eight of human figures is carved. A lone lizard (?) is shown on the top of this stone.



Fig. 4.1: Memorial stone

engraving of a mithun is shown below the beer pot. It appears to be a later addition. This one is the latest memorial stone in this group. The inscription in Roman script indicates that it was erected on 1920 CE.



Fig. 4.3: Memorial stone



Fig. 4.2: Memorial stone

Another memorial stone depicts a central human figure in standing position (Fig.4.2). He holds a spear in his right hand and left hand is akimbo. A necklace adorns his neck. He is smoking with the help of a smoking pipe and a beer pot is shown under his right elbow. Holding of spear denotes that he might be a warrior. The name of this person is written in roman script and the year inscribed is '20.2.1920'. An indistinct



Fig. 4.4: Memorial stone

Wild life including two animals one above other and four horn bills in the same pattern are depicted on the upper portion of the third stone (Fig.4.3). Several characters are depicted jumbled

and two of them are shown holding pointed long sword which is not familiar among the tribal people in this area. They may be the captured slaves following the inter-clan wars or village raids. The fact that they are portrayed in unnatural postures is meant to heighten the humiliation forced upon them. The lower part of it has depiction of numerous human figurines. A central human figure is depicted among them. He holds a spear on his right hand and a severed human head (?) in his left hand. He is adorned with a stylized plume on his head and a shield is shown on his right side.

The fourth stone is also beautifully engraved on its front side (Fig. 4.4). One can see the main character in standing posture surrounded by busts along with two other less human figures with full body, celt type weapons, shields, one forked post/stump, gongs, a ladle and animals. The human figure depicted in the left of the forked stump is typical as he holds a long sword in his left hand and a rounded shield in his left hand. This type of shield and sword is not common in the art of Mizos in the past. These busts and full form of two human figurines might denote captives captured by the central figure during the village raids/wars. The central figure holds a spear on his left hand and raised his right hand. He has a sword with cover hung on his waist. These illustrations indicated that man is a warrior. His ability, nobility and richness is reflected by carving of human busts and animals, gong, shields and forked/Y shaped post.



Fig. 4.5: Memorial stone



Fig. 4.6: Memorial stone

The fifth stone has depiction of a prominent human figure (Fig. 4.5). He holds a sword in his right hand whereas left hand holds a smoking pipe. He has a well carved plume on his head. A large sword cover is shown on his waist. Minor human figures, a forked post, one animal, one shield and one dish (?) are depicted on different parts of this stone. One large tortoise is shown in the lower portion of this stone.

The sixth stone has depiction of a central/prominent human figure in the middle (Fig.4.6) He holds a spear on his right hand and a decapitated human head (?) on his left hand. He is adorned with a beautifully knit plume on his head, a smoking pipe on his mouth and a sword cover on his waist. One can see animal heads, animals, mithun head, necklaces, shields, gong (broken), weapons, one forked stump/post and animal heads. The lowest portion of the stele shows an engraved line of members of the clan/villagers.

The seventh stone portrays a prominent figure of a person shown standing position (Fig.4.7). He holds a spear on the right hand while a curved sword (?) on left hand. His torso is covered with two necklaces. A well knit bunch of hair is shown in the left side of the head. Plume appears to be a later addition. In the upper part of the stele

gongs are shown while the lower left corner has depictions of two rows of mithun heads. These mithun heads are indistinct.



Fig. 4.7: Memorial stone



Fig. 4.8: Memorial stone

The eighth stone has depiction of a central/prominent human figure in the middle of the stele (Fig. 4.8). He holds a spear on his right hand and a decapitated human head on his left hand. He has

beautifully carved plume on his head, a smoking pipe on his mouth and a sword with cover on the waist. Two crudely depicted animals and one shield is shown on the upper part of this stele. One forked post is seen in the right side of the central figure while one shield and one human figure are carved on the left side. An animal is carved in the upside down position below the shield. One can see an engraved line of members of the clan/villagers in the lowest portion of the stele.



Fig. 4.9: Memorial stone



Fig. 4.10: Fish and other animals

The ninth stone depicts a prominent figure of a person shown standing position (Fig.4.9). He holds a spear in his left hand while a smoking pipe with the right hand. He is adorned with two necklaces. The tenth stone has depiction of a big fish on its upper part (Fig.4.10). Its fin and mouth is denoted by incised lines. A gong is seen below the fish. A row of three deer are engraved in the middle of this stone. Still a pangolin type of animal is visible in the lower part. It appears to be later addition.

Purpose behind erection of Memorial Stone

The purpose of erecting of memorial stones in this village could not be assessed due to the non-availability of any written records about them. Ethnographic information from the villagers is also not adequate for same. They told that Lianpuia, the Palian Chief, erected them. Under this circumstance it would be better to study of the practices of erecting memorials among the various ethnic groups who settle in Mizoram and Chin hills of Myanmar. The raising of memorials on the graves is very popular among the chins in the chin hills of Myanmar. Besides erecting them on the graves they also erected at the village gates, on the roadside, pathways leading to cultivated field. Such engraved memorial stones are found in other villages of Mizoram. They are not associated with the graves. In the similar way the ones from Lianpui are not also associated with any mortuary remains. So they might be erected as memorial stones.

Petroglyph

One site having petroglyphs is also come across on the eastern slope of a mountain known as the Lung Ziak Tlang (the mountain with engraved stone) at a distance of about one kilometre away in the south of the present settlement area during the survey. In this locality petroglyphs are carved on a rock outcrop. The eastern and the northern faces of this rock have been selected by the artist of the bygone days for carving petroglyphs. Rows of human figures are major theme. Besides

them, animals, birds and a fish can also be seen. A large crack is emerged on the eastern face of this outcrop. These carvings have been heavily suffered due to presence of lichens and mosses on them.



Fig. 4.11: Petroglyph site



Fig. 4.12: Anthropic holes

The eastern face has been divided into two parts for engraving of images. The mentioned crack is emerged between these two parts. The right part has depiction of a big fish. One sword on the top of the fish and another two swords near its lower fin can be seen. In the left side of the fish near its tail lies a forked post. Besides them, three birds, two animals, one necklace, four gun powder cover/horns, two shields one above and one gong have also been shown. In the left part has a depiction of one main human figure. But the objects on both his hands are indistinct. Four long

rows of human figures one above other is seen near this main human figure. A shield is engraved on the lower left corner.

One can see three long rows of human figures one above other depicted on the northern face of this rock crop. The central human figure has been depicted on the left hand corner of the upper most row. His right hand is hanging down and his left hand is raised. It appears that he is holding an object on his right hand. But it is indistinct. Depictions of sword, shield and gong are visible in his left side. A large number of animals and birds are visible over the rows of human beings.

Motifs in this petroglyph have their parallels to those of memorial stones. So these petroglyphs might have been engraved as memorial for either a chief or a great warrior or village community as a whole.

Anthropic Holes

Numerous anthropic holes are prevalent on the sloppy rock surface in the middle of this village (Singh 2019: 115-128). They have been dug on the rock surfaces. They are circular in shape. Their dimensions vary in size from 10cm to 15 cm. They are only a few centimetres deep. The nature of their extension is irregular. A pair of three small holes is also found. They are almost disturbed due to construction of modern houses, fencing works of villagers and footpath. They might have been used for some ritual purposes unknown to us. But the small three pair is the game board which is played with small pebbles.

Y shaped posts (*Seluphan*)

Three forked/Y shaped posts are found in the same complex with the memorial stones. These posts are erected in a straight line on the south eastern side of the memorial stones (Fig.4.13). The Orientation of erection is north-south.

A rounded lump is provided on the upper portion of the arms of these posts and pointed tips are emerged from these lumps. They are heavily deteriorated due to the exposition to various weathering agencies of nature. They look down

the main road leading to the village. These posts are erected for displaying the heads of animals especially mithun killed for sacrifice.



Fig. 4.13: Y shaped posts (*Seluphan*)



Fig. 4.14: Old pathway

Old Pathway

We also come across remains of old pathways in two different localities of this village. One is on the north-western side of the present settlement and another is on the eastern side. They are made by cutting earth on the hill slope (Fig.4.14). Stone pavements are also provided on some parts of these pathways. They mainly lead towards the Tiau River flowing in the eastern side of the village. These pathways might have used for going to Tiau for fishing, hunting, gathering

and cultivation purposes. They might have also been used as migratory routes at the time of the migration of the Mizos from the Chin Hills after crossing the river Tiau in the past.

Discussion and Conclusion

Finding of large number of memorial stones in this Village during the survey suggests that the erection of carved memorial stones must be popular in this village in the past. From the observations from the scenes depicted on these stones it is found that a central human figure holding either a spear or a sword is a recurring artistic theme represented upon them. He is depicted with little ornamentation mainly of necklace and stylized plume. This prominent figure is shown standing by holding either a spear or a sword in one of his hands and around him animals, rows of human figures, mithun heads kept one above the other, birds, shield and other household articles are depicted. Carvings are made mostly on one side of the memorial stones. Few of them have carvings on both front and back sides. Carvings are done on nature surfaces without proper preparation. So the images are rough and smoothness are lacking.

Ethnographic information provided by the present inhabitants of this locality that these memorial stones are erected by the Palian Chief, Lianpuia. The same observation is also held by Malsawmliana (Malsawmliana: 2017:20). But the motifs and style of depiction on these memorial stones sometimes are different. Besides this, one of memorial stones has roman script and the year of erection in 1920. It indicates that the practice of erecting memorial should have been done for past many years. The Mizos before their migration in present day Mizoram while living in the Chin Hills between the fifteen and the seventeenth centuries had the practice of erecting memorials for the dead which had been continued to present day Mizoram (Hmar: 2010: 17). The same should be done when they settled in present Mizoram. Erection of memorial is the most popular form of remembrance for the dead. Generally epitaphs on a present day gravestone in Mizoram reveal the

achievements of the person and the family's hope for their future destination. These memorial stones in Lianpui might have been erected for the chief and the *thangchuapa*, a highly respectable person in the Mizo society. *Thangchhuahpa* is a person who attains *Thangchhuah*, a highly honourable and respectable social status. There are two types of *thangchhuah*- *In Lama Thangchhuah* and *Ram Lama Thangchhuah*. *In lama Thangchhuah* can be achieved by offering feast of merit while *Ram lama Thangchhuah* can be attained by killing a series of prescribed wild animals. Such animals are elephants, bear, sambhur, barking deer, wild boar, wild *mithun* and also a species of snake called *rulngan*, a bird called *vahluk* and a species of eagle *mu-van-lai* (Shakespeare: 1912: 64). Besides them, memorial stone might have been erected for the person who can kill men in war too. In regarding Shakespeare about the erections of memorial among the Lushais observed *that if the dead is not buried lung dawh or platforms erected in memory of the deceased is erected. These lung dawh in most cases, are merely a rough platform of logs placed beside the road just outside the village, but in case of chiefs and of men who have killed men in war, the platform is built of stones. A big upright stone is placed in the centre and on this various figures are roughly outlined, representing the deceased and sometimes his wife and children and the various animals he has killed* (Shakespeare: 1912: 85) In short such memorial stones must be erected for the persons whom the existence and development of the village depended. However memorial stones found from other parts of Mizoram particularly from Lianpui are not associated with any mortuary remains. So they might not be erected on the graves.

The possible reason for erecting of a large number of such memorial stones in this village are frequent territorial disputes, village raids and war that took place in this area when the Mizos settled there. These disputes might have led to war which gave birth to a number of memorial stones. Alternately, when they settled in this area they might have peace and tranquillity due to

successful farming on fertile lands on the bank of the river Tiau and its nearby areas and successful hunting and fishing in and around this river. There is a saying among the Mizos about going for hunting to the Rihdil Lake located on the bank of river Tiau. Success in farming, fishing and hunting might have resulted in a prosperous and peaceful life among the people who settled in this area. This peaceful life resulted in the emergence of a rich social group who can give feast of merit to the society. The abundant finding of animals, birds and fishes around this river might have facilitated a successful hunter who is also highly respected in the early Mizo society. Memorial stones might also have been erected for these successful hunters. Besides the chief and the other who can kill enemies, these rich influential people must also have a space for them for raising the memorial stones. The chief and such influential persons might have patronised the development of the art which can be seen on the memorial stones. Motifs depicted on the memorial stones are found on the petroglyph too. It denotes that these petroglyphs might have been created as a memorial.

Three forked wooden posts which are generally used for hanging of heads of sacrificed animals are also erected at this village. In the past, before conversion to Christianity, erecting of such posts was a common practice among the Lushai-Kuki-Chin tribes and some Naga tribes also used to erect such posts mainly during the celebration of the feast of merit and other ceremonies. The heads of the sacrificed animals, mainly *mithun* or buffalo or pig are held on the pointed tip of the two frocks of the Y shaped post. Y shaped posts were erected in front of the houses of those who performed the feast of merit. But these posts to this locality are erected not in front of houses of an individual. They are found erected on the same spot where memorial stones are erected. So they were probably erected during the ceremonies of whole community and at the same spot be a sacred place for the whole community who settle to this village.

The orientations of the above anthropic holes are irregular and swallow. So there is no possibility of erecting posts for construction of houses in olden times. These post holes might be used for erecting of sacrifice posts or other sacrificial ceremonies. Such ceremonies might have been done either for successful agriculture or hunting or increasing fertility. At the individual level it is done by digging one such hole keeping three pebble stones inside for ceremonial procedures at the *jhum* field at the time of construction of *jhum* houses (Shakespeare: 1912:188). In the other cultures of the world cup-marks are often created for ceremony of the success of agriculture. A pair of three small holes is a game board played with small stones. Ritual sacrifices and ceremonies were widely done in the Mizo society before conversion to Christianity.

The existence of the old pathways is very interesting to note that many of the ethnic groups who inhabited in Mizoram practiced *jhum* or slash and burn shifting cultivation. These pathways mostly lead towards the river Tiau. So they might cultivate on the alluvium soil deposited on the dried courses of this river. They also exploit marine resources from this river and widely hunt the animals jungles located in and around this river. Evidences of fishing find its place by carvings of the images of fish and tortoise on the memorial stones of this village. In short these pathways must be used for agricultural, fishing and hunting activities on the bank of river Tiau and a link to other villages. It might have used as migratory route at time of coming of Mizos from the Chin Hills to present Mizoram and beyond it.

The earliest probable date for these archaeological remains might be assigned to early 18th century when Palian chief Lianpuia and his people settled in this area after crossing the Tiau River from the Chin Hills in present Myanmar. It is the belief of the present inhabitants of the area that their chief Lianpuia erected the memorial stones in this village. However one of these memorial stones bears the date -20. 2. 1920. So the practice of erecting memorial stones might have been done

from the early decades of the eighteenth century to early part of twentieth century CE. Till date, there is no concrete scientific evidence for dating of the archaeological remains in this village. The memorial stones and other archaeological remains in this village have no dates. The advent of the Christianity brought radical changes in the religious beliefs and practices of the Mizos. This new belief increasingly gained ground and by the time the British left India, there were 90 per cent Christians among the Mizos. It had almost totally replaced the old belief and practices and brought remarkable changes within the Mizo society. The history of the movement of Mizos and other tribes who settle in present Mizoram was mainly done from east to west and other directions in the past. In other words they started to move from the Chin Hills, Myanmar to Mizoram. Lianpui is one of the easternmost villages of Mizoram. The Tiau River which is the natural boundary between India and Myanmar is flowing very near to village. Lianpui should have been en route at the time coming from Myanmar to Mizoram. So the study of archaeological remains in this village is significant for reconstruction of cultural history of Mizoram before the introduction of Christianity in Mizoram. However, fast pace of developmental activities and the extension of village settlement posed a threat to the existence

of the valuable cultural relics of the past. They should be saved and protected for future posterity.

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