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MEGALITHS AS FUNERARY STONES: A STUDY ON THE LIVING TRADITIONS AMONG THE KARBIS OF ASSAM

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Abstract: This paper studies the living tradition of megalithic construction and usage among the indigenous Karbi people of Assam, examining the significance of megaliths within an ethno-archaeological framework. Megalithic monuments, a global symbol of ancestral reverence and community unity, date back to the Neolithic period in Europe and the Iron Age in southern India. However, in Northeast India, particularly Assam (and Northeast India), a vibrant megalithic tradition persists. The Karbi community continues to erect stone memorials for the deceased, embedding this practice within cultural rituals, community gatherings, and ancestral worship. This research seeks to document and analyze this tradition, contributing to a broader understanding of how these monuments serve as social markers and expressions of cultural continuity and transformation. Through field surveys, observation, and interviews with local informants, the study aimed to study the construction, symbolism, and function of megaliths in contemporary Karbi culture, as well as changes over time in megalithic practices, and associated rituals.

Keywords: Ethnoarchaeology, Funerary stones**,** Karbi, Living megaliths, Worship

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Introduction

Examining megalithic tradition through an Ethnoarchaeological lens provides profound insights into the diverse symbolic meanings embodied in these monuments, shedding light upon the unity inherent within communities. Worldwide, megalithic monuments serve as enduring memorials for the departed, a practice that transcends geographical boundaries. From the

Neolithic era onward, various cultures globally embraced the tradition of erecting these monumental structures, a trend extending into the Bronze Age and early historic periods(Wheeler, 1948; Deo, 1985).While Europe predominantly associates megaliths with the Neolithic epoch, in India, particularly in the southern regions, it predominantly emerges during the Iron Age (Basa et al., 2015). However, in Northeast India, a vibrant living tradition of megalithism endures. This region serves as a significant focal point for understanding the practice of Living Megalithism within an archaeological framework (Marak, 2019). Notably, Assam (including Northeast India) stands out on the global stage for its abundant megalithic wealth, representing one of the rare locales where such monuments are still actively constructed.

Funerary stones symbolize an important category of megaliths in Northeast India, particularly among tribes like the Khasi, Jaintia, and Karbi in Meghalaya and Assam, where they serve as continuing memorials connected to post-cremation rituals and secondary burial practices. These monuments, often in the form of menhirs (upright pillars), dolmens (table-like structures), and cists (stone boxes), are erected to house remains, calcified bones, or fragmented remains collected after cremation, sometimes accompanied by feasts, animal sacrifices, or grave goods like pottery and iron implements. Among the Karbi people, memorials associated with secondary burials are erected without any biological remains such as bones or bodily relics of the deceased; these are purely symbolic stone monuments raised in honor of the departed to continue their memory.

In Northeast India, a living tradition of megaliths is seen in Assam (Karbi and Tiwa populated areas) (Bezbaruah, 2003; Choudhury, 2004; Hazarika, 2017), Meghalaya (Khasi-Jaintia areas) (Meitei, 2017; Mitri, 2019; Marak, 2019), Manipur (Mao, Maram,Poumai,Rongmei, Liangmai, Zemei,Koireng etc. areas) (Singh, 1985, 2001; Devi, 1993, 2011, 2019; Maringmei, 2017), Nagaland (Lothas, Angamis, Ao, Sema, Chakhesang and Rengmas) (Jamir, 1997;Jamir, 2014), Mizoram (Malsawmliana, 2014; Lalramnghaka, 2020) and Sikkim (Lepcha, 2019). These regions have a rich archaeological heritage with numerous megalithic sites scattered across the landscape. This tradition in the region is believed to have flourished from around possibly Neolithic to post Neolithic period, although there may have been earlier and later phases as well (Marak, 2019). To give meaning to different archaeological records, the approach of ethnoarchaeology is considered to be an apt one, especially in the context of a living tradition (Steward, 1955; Binford, 1978; Schiffer, 1995). Gould (1978)

and Stiles (1977) define ethnoarchaeology as the comparison of ethnographic and archaeological data, while Hodder (2012) define it as the collection of original ethnographic data in order to aid archaeological interpretation. In this proposed work, the approach of Hodder will be taken into consideration.

The affinity towards the megalithic tradition in Northeast India is rooted in the cultural practices and beliefs of the indigenous communities of the region. Megalithic structures are observed as symbols of ancestral worship, communal identity, and a connection to the past. The tradition reflects the social organization, religious beliefs, and funerary practices of the ethnic groups inhabiting the region. The Karbis of Assam (the focus of this paper) also have a tradition of megalithic construction and usage (Bora & Bezbaruah, 2023). The present work was undertaken with the aim of analysing funerary megaliths, and their functional and symbolic importance as a part of the living tradition of the Karbis of Assam.

Methodology

The approach of ethnoarchaeology was used for this paper. Ethnoarchaeology is a sub-discipline of archaeology that bridges the gap between ethnography and archaeology by studying contemporary living societies to gain insights into the archaeological record.

Fieldwork was conducted at Sukuripara (N26°08.511, E92°01.748), a village located in the district of Kamrup, near Sonapur (Assam), and Assam-Meghalaya border region (Marakdola, Nakuchi, Tegheria, Barkasrong, Silchang, Khamar) to know the patterns of megalithic structures erected by the Karbi people. The field visit took place on December 11th to 19th, 2024. Sukuripara and Assam-Meghalaya border region is situated in the transitional ecological zone between the Brahmaputra valley and the hill regions, and it shares a large population of Karbi tribe. The area is known for its preserved traditional practices, including vernacular architecture, folk rituals, and their ethnicity- all of which are of ethnoarchaeological interest.

The methods used in this research are field survey, observation and questionnaire. Field survey methods are essential for gathering data directly from the study area. This approach documents sites across different parts of the area, serving as a primary method for collecting accurate, site-specific information. Field surveys help researchers document site details, structural forms, and spatial arrangements. Methods like measurement and photography further enhance documentation by capturing precise details about the content

of each site. In this study, which includes numerous megaliths, measurement is crucial for determining the exact count and layout of these structures. Photographs taken with a measuring scale provide approximate measurements and visual records.

Types of Megaliths Found in the Study Area

The megaliths used by the Karbis can be classified are mainly memorial and/or commemorative in nature. These are post-funerary stones serving as enduring memorials, expressing the community's gratitude, reverence, significance, and adherence to social values towards the deceased individual. In terms of physical structure, they can be grouped into the following:

(a) **Menhirs**: They are undressed, monolithic stones standing upright. These standing stones serve as memorial stone and sometimes landmarks between villages (Fig. 1). Typically, they exhibit a rugged, unrefined appearance, lacking definite shape.

Figure 1: (A&B) Menhirs as memorial stones.

(b) **Dolmens**: These consist of a flat horizontal stone slab upheld by three or four upright stones. This arrangement creates a table-like structure (Fig. 2).

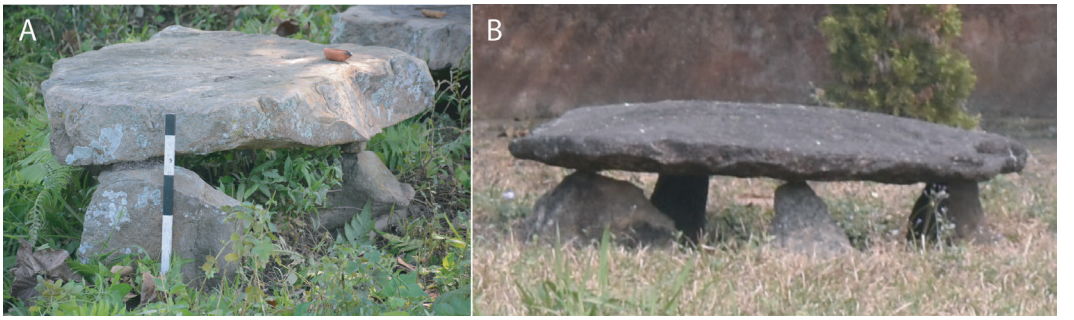

Figure 2: (A&B) Dolmen with four upright stones supporting a flat stone slab.

(c) **Alignments**- These menhirs are positioned in a straight line or organized in multiple rows (Fig.3).

Figure 3: (A&B) Megaliths erected in an aligned formation.

(d) **Menhirs and dolmens as a unit**- Here, a small dolmen is positioned in front of a standing stone, serving as a platform for offerings (Fig.4).

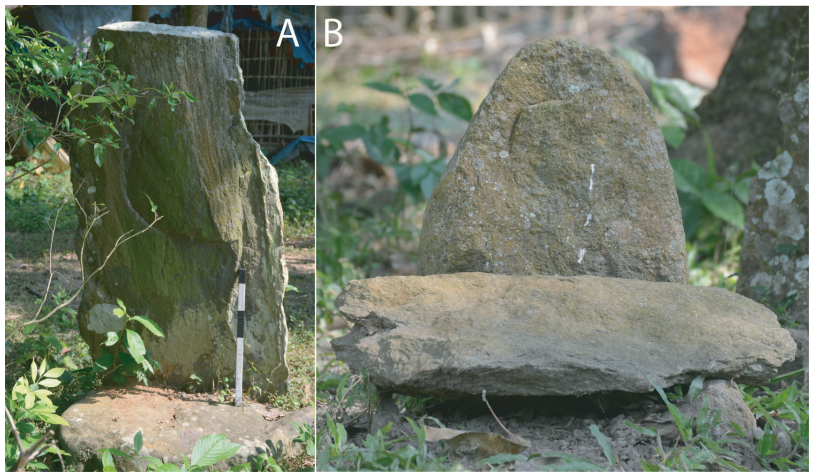

Figure 4: (A&B) Dolmen positioned in front of upright standing stone.

(e) **Sitting stone**: Within the category of sitting stones, structures are crafted using a flat stone slab upheld by three or four vertical stones (Fig.5). Occasionally, these formations are discovered with a single flat stone serving the same purpose.

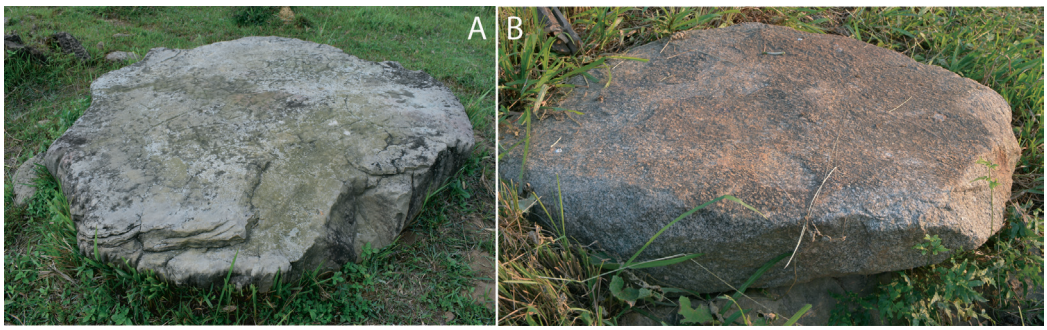

Figure 5: (A&B) Seating stone lying on the surface.

Process of Erecting Megaliths

Among the Karbis, the tradition of erecting megaliths to honor deceased family members is still in practice. The process of erecting one commences the day of the individual's demise and concludes one month later, following the final ritual for the departed. During this time, family members and villagers fulfill the deceased person's funeral rites, either through cremation or burial as per their wishes. While most attendees are engaged in the funeral proceedings, a select group of 5-6 individuals from the family is tasked with retrieving the stone.

Pre-Construction Rituals

1. Selection of Stone: When selecting a stone, the customary practice involves venturing to the nearest hill in search of a sturdy, enduring rock. A small group of villagers along with a family member (of the deceased) ascends the hill to select the rock (Fig.11 & Fig.12). Karbis specifically seek what they call a "living stone." To ascertain its strength, they strike the stone with a hammer. If it resists fracturing easily and emits sparks upon impact, it is deemed ideal. Nowadays, some search for a naturally broken rock. If a suitable stone is not found, it is traditionally cut into shape by heating it to a desired temperature and rapidly cooling it with water, causing fracture. This age-old technique, prevalent in the prehistoric times (Craddock, 1995) still persists among the Karbis.

Figure 6: (A) A piece of rock is selected for use in megalithic construction. (B) The stone is ritually purified using rice beer and water, tied with a vine, and *puja* offered as a form of worship to nature.

Once the stone is chosen, a ritual for the worship of the spirits of hills, forests, and nature is conducted, offering rice beer (*lou*), rice (*bhat*), nine numbers of betel nuts and betel vine leaves, and a nominal sum of money as symbolic payment for the stone, expressing gratitude through *mantra* recitations (Fig.6).

Transport of Stone: After the selected stone is given shape, it is ceremonially dragged three times before being transported by suspending it from a long bamboo supported by jungle creepers (*guria loti*), and carried by the required number of individuals (Fig.7).

Figure 7: Using local methods the stone is transported with the help of jungle creepers and bamboo, reflecting traditional ecological knowledge.

Prior to proceeding to the site where the stone would be erected, villagers gather at the home of the deceased, where the village headman (*rong-ki-the*), family patriarch (*sarpo*), priest (*hurja*), and elders convene. They conduct a *puja* to honor *Mudhakhuta* and *Devi Lakshmi*, symbolized by a pot of paddy. Following this, the bereaved family expresses gratitude to the community by offering rice, rice beer, and pork. During this assembly, the priest presents *pongho* to the deceased's elder son, younger son, or grandson. *Pongho* comprises a *lou*, *bhator-tupola*, 5 areca nuts, and 10 betel vine leaves, all wrapped in a white cloth (*gamusa*) (Fig. 8).

Figure 8: (A) *Pongho* is offered to the deceased's son wrapped in a white cloth (*gamusa*). (B) The priest and the deceased's son offering prayers and taking blessings from *Mudhakhuta* and *Devi Lakshmi*.

Construction Rituals

1. Erecting the Stone: Upon transporting the stone to the designated area (alongside other existing megaliths), the people select an appropriate spot and proceed to dig a pit. The priest conducts a *puja*, requiring 3 earthen lamps, incense sticks, purified water (purified using gold and silver), and a one-rupee coin, and *dubari-ban* (weeds) all of which are placed inside the pit (Fig.9A). With the collective effort of the villagers, the new stone is then erected in east-west direction at the location with the assistance of bamboo, serving as a memorial to the deceased individual (Fig.9B). After setting up the stone (menhir), they lay down a plate and cleanse it with water. Following this, two banana leaves are arranged, upon which the priest unveils the *pongho* (prepared for the occasion), accompanied by all the essential attire. For a deceased male, offerings include items such as a

gamusa, *genji*, shirt, and so forth. Likewise, for a deceased female, offerings comprise *mekhela*, *gamusa*, blouse, comb, mirror, sandals, hair oil, and all other essentials for a woman. After erecting the menhir, they place a plate, cleanse it with water, and place two banana leaves on which the priest places the *pongho* (Fig.10A). Once all necessary items are arranged, the priest sprays a paste made from rice powder using a *dubari-ban* for purification purposes. After purifying the stone, the priest performs a sacrifice of a pair of hens, sprinkling the blood three times over the menhir with the *dubari-ban* (Fig.10B). Following the sacrifice, the hens' intestines are examined to discern the cause of death (Fig.11A). Finally, the priest, along with family members and villagers, offers *lou* (rice beer) to the newly erected megalith, celebrating the gathering with joviality and libations of *lou* (Fig.11B).

Figure 9: (A) The priest uttering *matra* to purify the pit where the stone will be set up. (B) The stone is set up at the pit.

Figure 10: (A) Menhir is decorated by all the clothes and materials of the deceased. (B) Sacrifice of a fowl for the newly erected megalith.

Figure 11: (A) after sacrificing the fowl, the priest takes out the intestines of the fowl to read omens. (B) The last offering of rice beer from the villagers to the megalith.

Post-Construction Rituals

After erecting menhir, the priest, along with the villagers and the family members of the deceased, return to the house of the departed. Upon arrival, a significant ritual takes place- on the eastern side of the house premises, the priest, accompanied by a designated family member, performs a sacrificial offering of a fowl. This act is carried out in the belief that it would dispel any lingering negative energy and remove future obstacles for the family (Fig.12).

Figure 12: A fowl is sacrificed to dispel negative energy and prevent future obstacles for the family

Simultaneously, the village head, along with senior members and other dignitaries, gather in a designated area. As per tradition, female members of the household offered *lou* (rice beer) in a wooden jar to the assembled elders. During this gathering, the village head addresses the bereaved family about the future leadership of the household. It is customary to appoint a successor, typically the eldest son of the deceased, to assume the role of the family head. After discussions and confirmation, the new head is officially acknowledged in the presence of the village elders.

Following this formal proceeding, the family members and all the villagers once again proceed to the megalithic field for the final offering to the deceased. The first offering is made by the spouse of the deceased- if they are still alive (Fig. 13A). In the absence of the spouse, the duty is carried out by the eldest son, or in some cases, the youngest son. Thereafter, all the villagers, one by one, stand in a line and make their offerings (Fig.13B). The standard offerings consisted of a piece of betel vine leaf, an arecanut, and a small quantity of rice, symbolizing their respect and final farewell to the departed soul.

Fig. 13: (A) As per custom, the spouse of the deceased made the first ritual offering. (B) The villagers, one by one, stood in a line and made their offerings.

Once the ritual offerings were completed, a group of men stayed back at the megalithic field to partake in the consumption of the cooked sacrificial fowl, marking the conclusion of the ceremonial rites at the site. The rest of the villagers, along with the deceased's family members and invited guests, return to the household. After returning to the house, the priest, accompanied by the eldest son of the deceased, perform the concluding rituals by placing the *pongho*, a sacred object associated with *mudhakhuta* and the family's deity,

Devi Lakshmi (Fig.14). This ritual marked the final spiritual act of the mourning period, ensuring peace and prosperity for the family.

A special *puja* is conducted as part of the ceremony, using specific ritual offerings. The essential materials include a bottle of *lou*, a full pot of rice- symbolizing the blessings and abundance of *Devi Lakshmi*- along with *bhator-tupola* (steamed rice wrapped in leaves), rice powder, five arecanuts, and ten betel vine leaves. Throughout the *puja*, the priest continuously chant sacred mantras, invoking divine blessings and protection for the household (Fig. 14A&B).

Fig. 14: (A) last *puja* offering to *Devi Lakshmi*. (B) The ritual concludes with the sacrificial offering of a pair of fowls in the *Devi Lakshmi puja*, symbolizing devotion and fulfillment of tradition

As the final act of the ritual, a pair of fowls is sacrificed, signifying the completion of the rites and the appeasement of the deities. This symbolic offering is believed to remove any remaining impurities and misfortunes, paving the way for harmony and prosperity within the family.

Meanwhile, the rest of the villagers, along with the deceased's family and invited guests, return to the household for a grand feast arranged by the bereaved family. This communal meal serve as a gesture of gratitude and togetherness, reinforcing social bonds and honoring the memory of the departed.

Discussion

The continuing tradition of megalith (menhir) construction among Karbis is seen to be intrinsically connected to their religion. Among them, menhir

construction is not only a funerary act but also a socially significant ceremony that marks commemoration, kinship continuity, and collective participation in the death ritual. The series of stone selection, transport, erection, sacrifice, and post-construction offerings shows that megalith building remains an active part of Karbi religious life and social organization.

In the neighboring state of Meghalaya, among the Khasi and Jaintias a vibrant megalithic tradition is also seen. The construction and maintenance of this tradition is seen to be connected to their traditional religion, Seng Khasi and Niamtre. However, unlike the latter, the Karbi megaliths are limited to menhirs, dolmens and capstones.

For the Karbi menhirs, which are connected to death rituals as a post-cremation ritual, there are in reality no biological remains of the dead buried under or near the menhir. This is an interesting feature since Khasi and Jaintia megaliths (in the form of cists) incorporate the burial of select bones and ashes of the cremated person (Meitei & Marak, 2013). Additionally, amongst them it is seen that at the heart of their mortuary practices is the symbolic journey of the soul from the cremation ground to its final resting place among ancestral spirits (connected to the maternal clan). This journey involves stages of temporary deposition followed by permanent enshrinement, reflecting the belief that the soul continues to reside within the collective space of the clan even after death. The clan specific sacred site for final bone deposition is both physical and metaphysical space, symbolising the unity of the living and the dead and embodying the Khasi-Jaintia worldview of perpetual kinship ties across generations. For the Karbis, on the other hand, such a belief system is lacking.

The Karbis observe a prolonged and multifaceted ritual sequence for erecting menhirs honoring ancestors or communal memorial stones divided into pre-construction rites like the stone selection, rituals offered to the hill; construction rituals involving its communal transport, purification of the stone, and upright planting and post-construction rituals like offering *puja* to their ancestral *mudhakhuta* and the family's deity, *Devi Lakshmi*, sacrifices of fowls, blood smearing, further offerings of rice beer, concluding in a village feast.

One of the earliest account of megalith-building in Northeast India was provided by O. K. Singh (1981) in a study among the Poumai Nagas, which meticulously outlined stage-by-stage ceremonial practices that prove more elaborate and ritualised than those in prior records. Notably, some similarities

to the processes observed in Poumai Nagas of Sanaramei village and among the Karbis in the study area, including: stone selection or search (*taphodo*), marked by abstinence and prayers using sacred leaves (*chandu*); stone pulling or transport (*tasedotankhe*), accompanied by chants; stone erection (*kosodo-ta-thaodo*), typically oriented east-west (similar Karbi alignments); offerings of rice beer (*chabangzu*), offering coins (*sana*), and rice beer distribution to participants. These parallel elements absent or less emphasized in earlier studies highlight communal ritual across diverse communities, revealing deep cultural interconnections with neighboring groups and indicating at historical diffusion, inter-ethnic exchanges in the region's megalithic traditions.

Conclusion

The Karbi mortuary tradition is both a living heritage and a system in transition. It reveals how indigenous societies maintain ancestral connections through funerary rituals while adapting to changing economic conditions, shifting religious interpretations, and the pressures of modernization. The study of megalithic forms and present-day practices shows that these monuments are not only material markers of death but also significant expressions of memory, identity, and social value. The final rites of passage pertain to the rituals performed upon a person's death. This transition is marked by a sequence of rites, rituals, and emotions, all integral to mortuary behaviour across cultures. This societal conduct is intricately linked with religion and belief, where the conviction in the ongoing presence and blessings of ancestors shapes these practices. Through the study of megalithic types and contemporary living traditions, insights into society emerge, revealing the social significance attributed to individuals. Presently, in some village, stones or menhirs are utilized to engrave details about the deceased. Villagers undertake this process, inscribing the individual's name, birth and death dates, and any notable positions held within the village organization.

Systematically documenting field data is a crucial aspect of ethnoarchaeological analysis and interpretation during an anthropological investigation. The primary goal of such documentation is to facilitate the recognition of specific research questions and to serve as a comprehensive database for further research, enabling the examination of site changes over time. In the study area, numerous menhirs are discovered, indicating a longstanding funeral tradition passed down through generations, intertwined

with cultural significance. These stones primarily serve as memorials (a post funerary stone) and often demarcate village boundaries. Predominant structures in the study area include menhirs and dolmens, shedding light on societal values and traditions. The megaliths of the valley share similarities with neighbouring regions, suggesting interconnected cultural practice. Systematic documentation, site mapping, and GPS location analysis reveal distribution patterns across the landscape. The diverse sizes and shapes of the megaliths imply active community participation in their construction. However, without scientific dating methods, establishing precise chronologies for these megaliths remains challenging.

Across various locations inhabited by the Karbi community, a diverse array of megalithic structures is encountered. While the region preserves a living practice of megalithic tradition, there is a noticeable trend towards its gradual disappearance due to changing preferences or conversions. This paper presents an overview of the present state of the tradition and the observed alterations within the sites. By conducting this research, we aim to delve into new territories and revisit familiar sites, recognizing that further exploration holds promise for a comprehensive understanding of the tradition's expansion and distribution from all angles.

Competing Interests Statement

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