



Cist, Tombstones and Syncretism: Megalithic Traditions Among the Hrusso of West Kameng District; Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Megaliths are those monuments which are used by the human society since prehistoric time either as a burial or memorial stone and still it is found as a living tradition in some parts of the world. It emerged in the Neolithic period before the discovery of metal in human society and through Bronze Age and Iron Age it continued up to the historic period in many societies of the world. Megaliths are mostly associated with the indigenous faith as well as animistic nature of human being, irrespective of religion even after conversion, a process known as syncretism, where two contradictory beliefs are combined together. In North East India, megaliths are still found as a living tradition among the tribes like Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, Karbi in Assam, Nagas in Nagaland, Nocte, Hrusso, Sherdukpen and Wancho in Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, megaliths are found among the Hrusso people of West Kameng district and here, this tribe used megaliths as a promise stone, gate stone and seating stone and the Nocte people use the cist. The origin of megaliths in Arunachal Pradesh is not clearly found like the other megalithic sites of North East India. With the help of oral story and Assam history we can summarize that the megaliths are formed in Arunachal Pradesh during the prehistoric period; i.e. in Neolithic period and through the Historic period it is still found as a living tradition among the Hrusso of West Kameng district; Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Megalith, stone, syncretism, cist, Nocte, tradition, tribe, Hrusso, Arunachal Pradesh, North East India.

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Introduction

Megalith is a worldwide common feature found in different parts of the world and generally related with the prehistoric time. The origin of the most megalithic monuments is found at many places of Mediterranean region belonging from Neolithic period and gradually this culture was spread through traders who went in search of metals to Western and Southern Europe. Later on it was spread as a criss- cross pattern by different human groups all over the world.

Megaliths are mostly associated with the indigenous faith, as well as animistic nature of human being. 'The term megalith is derived from two Greek words, *mega* meaning large and *lithos* meaning stone, and were originally introduced by antiquarians to describe a fairly easily definable class of monuments in Western and Northern Europe consisting of huge undressed stones and termed in Celtic as dolmen, cromlechs and menhir (Childe, 1948: 4-13)'. In Archeology, megaliths play an important role to study the past. Generally the term 'megalith' refers to a large stone structure or monument standing either alone or with other stones. Megalithic culture, by definition, therefore, it refers to a culture distinguished by the presence of monuments of large stone structure used for funeral or other ceremonies (Marak, 2012: 34).

In India megaliths emerged during Iron Age around 1500 BC onwards. The first work on Indian megaliths was done by Branfill (1818) in South India and his works reveal that the South Indian megaliths were used for burial purposes consisting with artifacts like terracotta objects, pottery and iron objects, shell and beads. Some silver and gold objects were also recovered from the South Indian megaliths.

In North East India, megalithic tradition is a living tradition. The practice of erecting stone or megalith is still continuing among many tribal societies of North East India like, Khasi, Garo, Karbi, Naga, Sherdukpen, Hrusso, Nocte and Wancho. This tradition of erecting megalith is still found as a living tradition among those tribes and they continue it from the time of their forefathers. There are many unwritten history, myth and oral stories behind these megaliths among those tribes and in this regard we can assume how megaliths play a very important role in their societies. Therefore North Eastern megalith occupies an important role in the map of world's archeology. Megaliths are mostly erected as a memorial stone in many tribal societies of North East India. Besides this, it is also used as a burial stone, resting stone, seating stone, watch towers, religious stone, witness stone, promise stone, boundary stone, village foundation stone, demarcation stone, and gate stones. For example, the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh erect megalith as a religious stone in front of their houses.

The Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh still erect megalith as a burial stone. Like that, megaliths are also found among the Hrusso and Sherdukpen people of West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Hrusso tribe still continuing the megalithic culture in their societies as a promise stone and seating stone and hence, megalith is a living tradition among the Hrusso tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

Materials and Methods

This paper is based on the field work conducted in Jamiri, West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh; and a comparison of fieldwork among the Nocte tribe of Tirap district in the form of syncretism, by using both the anthropological as well as archeological methods. In Anthropological method, researchers applied observation and interview method for collecting data. Researchers also applied exploration method to explore different megalithic sites in Jamiri, West Kameng and Wasathong village of Tirap district.

Megalithic traditions among the Hrusso of West Kameng

The name West Kameng is derived from the Kameng River which is a tributary of Brahmaputra. This district of Arunachal Pradesh is mainly inhabited by the major ethnic groups like Miji, Hrusso and Sherdukpen. In this part of Arunachal Pradesh, researcher has found megalithic sites among the Hrusso tribe of Jamiri village. These megalithic sites are described below:

Jamiri Megaliths

Jamiri is one of the oldest village, comes under Jamiri circle of West Kameng. This village is inhabited by the Hrusso people who are formerly known as Aka. The Hrusso of Jamiri likes to call them as *Khusyon*; means people of Jamiri. In Jamiri, researcher found more than 100 megaliths which are scattered in the entire village. Most of them are not in preserving state and for lack of preservation they lost their former shape and identity. The Jamiri people also adopting Christianity but still in some points they carry out their own indigenous tradition simultaneously with Christianity. This process of continuation of their former indigenous religious traditions with Christianity is known as syncretism.

The people of Jamiri call their megaliths as *psegya*, which means erecting stone. According to them, these *psegya* are erected by their Chief Thage Raja after the settlement of Hrusso people at Jamiri. At present day scenario, most of the *psegya* or megaliths at Jamiri are not in proper condition and lying

scattered on the ground except a pair of megalith found in front of their Rani's (Queen) house. This is medium in size and preserved them as a gate stone or decorative stone.



Figure 1: megaliths in front of Rani's house in Jamiri

In the middle of the Jamiri village, there is a platform, where a village meeting is held twice in a year by the Chief and his council for village welfare. In the past, this place was occupied by the dolmens, which were used as a seating stone by their former chiefs and council members. Those were made on flat slab stone, resting on three stone pillars and around 3 or 4 feet in height from the ground level. According to the villagers, they believed those dolmens as a sacred one and their ancestors conducted number of meetings and took decisions on many important issues by seating on those stone seats or dolmens. They believed that, any displacement or misbehave on these dolmens would bring misfortune to them or to the village Jamiri.

After adopting Christianity as well as by the influence of modernity, the people of Jamiri show less interest and importance on those dolmens and as

a result those dolmens were misplaced at its place. In the year 2016, the local people with the help of their village chief (*nuggou*) and council members turn this meeting place into a concrete form and fixed the stone slabs of the dolmens with cement and stones. As a result, the dolmens lost its former shape and identity forever.

Rituals Related with Dolmens

These dolmens are considered as sacred by the locals of Jamiri and in every year in the month of January, they observed *knethido puja*, at this platform to drive away the bad omen from their village. During this ritual they sacrifice fowls, eggs and *chinch* (rice beer) in the name of their local deities for the protection of their village from evil spirits and enemies. This *knethido puja* is always performing in the presence of *Mugao* (village chief priest). A feast is also arranged by the Chief of Jamiri, where Chief and his council members enjoying the rituals by sitting on this modern dolmen platform and the commoners' seat on the ground in front of it.

Thrasra



Figure 2: Thrasra

In the middle of the village, there is another megalithic site, where four megaliths are present and out of these 4, 3 are medium in size and one is small. Locally this site is known as *Thrasra*, and the villagers of Jamiri used these megaliths as a promise stone. In case of any violence or intra community disputes of Jamiri, breaking customary law or any anti social activities within their societies, their chief ordered the role breakers and the victim members to come to this place to solve the matters. In the presence of village council and the villagers, culprits are forced to touch these stones and make promise to not to do such type of anti social work willingly or unwillingly in future. They believed that, breaking promises may harm the culprits by taking their souls or they may suffer some diseases, which will never be cured.

The people of Jamiri believe this *thrasra* as a sacred place and they also believe that those megaliths are erected by their ancestors to maintain the peace and harmony in their village. Every year, *mugao* (head priest) collected some objects like poisonous roots, specific type of river stone and some poisonous insects like scorpions from the nearby jungles and sacrifice them on *thrasra*. They have a strong faith that this ritual protects their village from negative energies.

In the west of Jamiri village, a large type of megalith is found, which is lying on the ground. A narrow non motorable road is also observed nearby this megalith. As per the primary data collected from Jamiri, this narrow road was used by the villagers to connect their neighboring Hrusso village Thrizino. They used this road to exchange their commodities with the villagers of Thrizino and others in past. Therefore in the past, their ancestors erected this megalith in front of this road as a gate stone. After Jamiri village, well connected with motorable road, the villagers gradually left this road forever and because of this, the gate stone or megalith also lost its important in Jamiri. The old road and the gate stone is now abandoned for all and due to negligence, lack of preservation and soil erosion this megalith has fallen down on ground.

Burial tombs in Jamiri

At the southern part of Jamiri where three tombs are found, made up with stone rubbles. The Hrusso people of Jamiri have not any relation with those tombs and they have not any idea on those. But they believed that, those were constructed by some unknown group of people before the settlement of Hrusso people in Jamiri. As per the primary data collected from Jamiri, the villagers informed that, out of their curiosity, they destroyed the front part of the tombs and found human skeletons inside. The findings of human bones in

those tombs directly indicate that those were used for burial purpose by some unknown community, whose existence is not known by anyone because of no written records or folklore.



Figure 3: A partially destroyed tomb

The Noctes also have megaliths. They are mostly now Christianized yet their previous indigenous concepts continue. The concept of life after death in Nocte society is noticed through the process of offerings of grave goods in different ways and beliefs. It is traditionally believed that, some requirements are needed for the soul after death. Grave goods are offered, which are some important personal belongings of deceased person as to accompany in next life after death. These items may be the traditional headgear, a *khakree*, a *dong*, a sphere, a shield or some ornaments. Some food items are also placed over or inside the grave. Grave goods are kept inside the grave and also over the grave. Clothes and ornaments are provided inside the grave along with the items which symbolize the genders of the deceased person are provided over the grave. It is to be noted that clan members may provide some cloth or other

goods but it is a mandatory rule that; maternal uncles of the deceased person must provide grave goods and those must be put inside or over the grave. There is also an indigenous faith related to providing those grave goods. It is related to physical condition of the goods provided and acceptance by the deceased person's soul. Special attention is kept in mind that, those grave goods should not be in usable or in fine condition; these should be broken or have some scars on it. It is believed that the departed soul always accept unusable goods or goods those have scars. Thus if somebody offers a well conditioned or even a new goods, it will be offered on grave only after a partial destruction.

There is also a tradition of symbolization of graves in Nocte society. Grave goods which are provided over the grave symbolize the gender of the deceased person. Items such as shield, traditional headgear, umbrella, gun and dao are provided over the grave of male and '*janmanthun*' decorative iron stick, '*Japi*' decorated bamboo hat, '*dingkhe/ding*' traditional bamboo sling basket are provided over female grave. The decorations made over and around the grave indicate social status of the deceased person and the allotment of the grave place at the grave yard also symbolizes the status of the deceased person. A number of bamboo sticks are erected near a grave only in case of Chief's clan member's grave. These sticks are called as '*jangwan*'. It symbolizes the grave of a Chief's clan member. Again the number of bamboo stick '*jangwan*' erected near the grave indicates the actual representation of clan members' position of Chief's clan. According customary law and tradition, the Lowang Dong's grave will possess 07 (seven) '*jangwan*' bamboo sticks and in case of Logang Dong's wife's grave 05 number of '*jangwan*' will be erected. On the other hand, Lowang Dong's younger brothers' clan members graves will possess 03(three) '*jangwan*' accordingly. Again these '*jangwan*' will be decorated with red, white and black strips made of cloth as a symbol of Chief's clan members grave. Noctes erect effigy made of wood over the grave of Chief. Although a common burial ground is used for all villagers; the Chiefs and his clan member's graves are placed at a particular place of the burial ground separately from the commoners. In Laho and Dadam area in earlier times, when the dead bodies were disposed by exposing over bamboo platform and they used to collect skulls after a year and kept in stone boxes or cist according to the gender and clan where they belongs.

During the field work, authors observed both the old deserted and present burial sites of Noctes in different Nocte villages of Tirap district. In Laho, it is observed that, the villagers used to offer grave goods since long past. As the stone boxes or cists (*Kholongs*) in the deserted grave shows the evidence



Figure 4: A recent grave at Namsang village belongs to a female clan member the chief. The decorations and grave goods over it symbolized it.

of offering grave good like decorated iron stick (*janmanthun*) and the present grave yard also shows the offering of grave goods like, headgear (*khophok*), shield (*Lakhhwan*), umbrella, coin, bead neck lace (*litphiang, licto*), iron stick (*janmanthun*) and traditional dresses. The researcher also found erected holy cross in their new burial site along with other traditional dress and ornaments offered as grave goods. A name plate of the deceased person are also found attached with the holy cross; here both traditional Nocte name and Christian name is used to indicate the grave of particular deceased person. In fact, the Christian Noctes are not abandoning their traditional indigenous faith's issues in Christian graves as well, presenting an excellent example of syncretism.

Analysis

The Hrusso of West Kameng district has no written records about their past origin and migration. The story of their origin and migration is based on some oral stories which are followed by them generation after generation. We found

many megaliths in Jamiri village; inhabited by the Hrusso tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and through the information collected from the locals of Jamiri village, it is clear that the Hrusso of Jamiri had no written records about the megaliths present in their village. As per their oral story, those megaliths are erected by one of their Chiefs Thage Raja, after the settlement of Hrusso in Jamiri. They believed those megaliths as a sacred stone and they have some faith and rituals related with those megaliths. The Stone platform found in front of Rani's house was considered as a meeting place by their ancestors and still they used this stone platform for meeting purpose, but in concrete form. In this meeting place, many table stones or dolmens were present, which were used by the Chief and his council members for sitting purpose in past. 'The seat of stone too are regarded sacred and any attempt to unearth or to displace them would naturally hurt the sentiment of the people since it would mean a definite bad omen to them' (R. Sinha, 1998:102).

The information collected from the elder persons in Jamiri, it is found that, they migrated somewhere from the plains of Assam and settled in Jamiri under the Chieftainship of Thage Raja and megaliths were erected by him as a memorial and ritual stone. The Hrusso are the believers of both malevolent and benevolent deities. So, after the settlement of Hrusso people in Jamiri, they started to believe those megaliths as a sacred stones and offering rituals to some particular megaliths to protect them from any harmful matter and still it is found as a continuing process among them. From that point of view, the megalithic culture of Jamiri is found as a living tradition among the Hrusso tribe of West Kameng district; Arunachal Pradesh.

The Hrusso of Jamiri has no relation with the tombs present in their locality and out of curiosity they fully or partially destroyed them. The human skeletons which were recovered by the villagers of Jamiri under these tombs indicate that, those tombs were used as burial chambers by some unknown group of people, before the settlement of Hrusso people in Jamiri. At present, no bone fragments are recovered under these tombs, as all of them are partially and fully destroyed by the local people of Jamiri.

The discovery of tomb in Jamiri among the Hrusso of West Kameng district, and cist in Tirap district among the Noctes open a new chapter of North East Indian megalithic culture. These tombs are square in size and made up with stone chips or rubbles with a narrow passage. Structurally it is completely different from the South Indian tombs. These tombs in Jamiri have no written records and hence, it is very difficult to trace out the origin and chronology of them. As per the Ahom chronicles or Assam history, Thage Raja ruled over the

Aka (Hrusso) people during the 1st half of 19th century at Bhalukpung area, near Assam- Arunachal border and thus we can assumed that before the settlement of Hrusso people at Jamiri (19th century), Jamiri was occupied by a unknown society and they had the tradition of tomb burials.

Morphologically, so far, the North East Indian megaliths are divided into three divisions: menhir, dolmen and cist. Thus the finding of tombs in the hilly area of Arunachal Pradesh is opening a new archeological research in North East India leading to new four divisions: menhir, dolmen, cist and tomb.

The Hrusso tribe of Arunachal Pradesh played an important role in the history of Assam. There is no other written record found about the Hrusso tribe, except the Ahom chronicles or Asom Buranji. They were known as Aka by their neighboring Assamese people for their tattoo marks on face and body. 'The word 'Aka' denotes painted and it may have been used for them by the people of Assam largely because of their 'custom of painting their faces profusely' which might have served as a distinctive mark' (R. Sinha, 1988:14). In the book ' History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam' by Robert Raid in 1942, Akas (Hrusso) arranged a raid under the leadership of their Chief Tagi Raja, and wiped out a British out post at Balipara in 1835 (R. Sinha, 1988:09).

Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis that, the Hrusso of Jamiri migrated there under the Chieftainship of their Chief Thage (Tagi) Raja about first half of 19th century and permanently settled over there. As per the primary data, megaliths were first erected in Jamiri by Thage Raja. As the Hrusso has no written history about their past life, so from the other written sources it can be assumed that, the megaliths of Jamiri were erected by the Hrusso after their settlement in Jamiri around the 1st half of the 19th century, except those burial tombs, which exist there before them. They may be erected by some other group either in the historic period or before it.

From the historic period to till present, the Hrusso people of Jamiri believed megaliths as a sacred stone and used them as a sitting stone, gate stone, ritual stone and promise stone. Megaliths are remaining as a part of their new social system and performing rituals to them with the past traditional way. Thus, it can be concluded that, continuing from the historic period megaliths are still exist among the Hrusso people of Arunachal Pradesh and it is a living tradition.

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