

**Manipur Megaliths: From Menhirs of Social Status to Commemoratives***Potshangbam Binodini Devi***Abstract**

Though Manipur is a small hilly state of North East India, it is populated by various ethnic groups. The major ethnic groups are the Meeteis/Meiteis, the Naga tribes/Naga groups and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups. Each ethnic group consists of a number of smaller groups and has very rich cultural elements of megalithic traditions, which are transmitted from one generation to the next. From the time of yore, various megalithic structures have been raised by various communities on different occasions. The most common type of megalithic structure is the menhir. Here, the author will discuss the megaliths of some tribes which belong to the so-called Naga group. In the past, all the communities were animists and followed their own traditional religions. They performed various rites and rituals along with feasting and raised megaliths, particularly monoliths, the menhirs of social status. Nowadays, most members of the Naga group are baptized Christians and have abandoned their age-old tradition. In this paper, the author tries to highlight the most significant changes that have taken place after the acceptance of the new religion, Christianity, as far as material allows.

**Introduction**

Megalithic tradition is a funerary cultural phenomenon in different parts of the world. It starts from the Neolithic and continues through the Bronze Age up to the historical period. It seems to be a living tradition among some tribes of Manipur. In India, extensive research has been carried out into megalithic traditions, exploring various avenues of growth. Compared with other regions of India, the prehistoric archaeology of North East India, particularly in the field of the functions of different megalithic structures, is still poorly known. This is because little exploration and excavation have been done so far in this area. The present paper deals with the different structural and functional types of megaliths of this state. And more emphasis is given to highlighting the functions of menhirs which were raised by different tribes in this state with elaborate rites and rituals in the past and their changing concepts in the present context.

**Objectives**

The objectives of this paper are to record the living prehistoric tradition before it dies out in the course of time and to describe the various processes involved in raising megaliths (particularly the menhirs of social status) by a certain tribe of Manipur in the past and also at present. The main objective is to document how far the different

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communities of this state have changed the concept of raising monoliths from menhirs of social status to commemoratives under the influence of Christianity.

### The land and people

Manipur is a small hilly state of India bordering Myanmar and at present has 37 recognized scheduled tribes distributed in various parts of the state (Fig. 1). This region is a cradle land of human civilization and creativity which have come under the influence of many cultures. Different ethnic groups, who came at various times, have contributed to the growth of civilization in this hilly state on India's northeastern frontier. The people are predominantly of South East Asia origins who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. The present-day ethnic mosaics of Manipur are the descendants of migrating people.



Fig.1. Map of Manipur showing its 16 districts.

### Previous Works

The discovery of megalithic sites in Manipur by T.C. Hodson in 1900 and J.H. Hutton in 1928–29 constitutes a new chapter for this region. The megalithic monuments of Willong (which the former mentioned as Uilong) and Maram area were first noticed in 1900 and reported by T.C. Hodson in his book "The Naga Tribes of Manipur" under the heading "Stones and stone Monuments" published in 1911 (Reprint 1989; Hodson 1989, 186–190). In 1929, J.H. Hutton reported about the confused group of stones at all angles found at Willong, which he recorded as Gwilong (Hutton 1929, 332). O. Kumar Singh works

on the Stone Age Archaeology of this state and published a paper entitled "On the discovery of Stone Age Relics of Manipur" in the *Journal of Assam Science Society* in 1969. He explored some megalithic sites in Mao areas and published a paper under the heading "A live Megalithic Culture in Manipur" in *Recent advances in Indo-pacific Prehistory, Proceedings of the International Symposium held in Poona, December 19–21, 1978*. He also re-explored the Tharon site in 1989 and published his findings in a paper entitled "Tharon: From History to Prehistory" in *People's Science Network, MAPS Quarterly Bulletin, Vol. 3, No. 2, April, pp. 2–8, Imphal, in 1997*. Similarly, L. Kunjeshwori Devi also carried out studies on the archaeology of Manipur, leading to her Ph.D. thesis (Kunjeshwori 1988, 42–44). She and her research scholar Shyam also published a paper entitled "Systematic Exploration Enhances Investigations of Megalithic and Rock Art in Manipur and Mizoram" in the *34<sup>th</sup> NEIHA Commemorative Volume*; but there has always been some reticence about including the functions of different megalithic structures and the changes in the concepts of varying megaliths in this state in general and the Anal, the Chekhesang, the Kabui/Rongmei, the Liangmai, the Mao, the Maram, the Poumais, the Tangkhul, and the Thangal areas in particular.

### Present research

Taking clues from the above discoveries, the present author started exploration in eight different hill districts of Manipur. A variety of megaliths abounds in different villages which are occupied by the nine tribal communities already mentioned. In March 1988, the present author explored some megaliths in the form of menhirs, alignments, barrows, and stone seats at the Salangthel site, Churachandpur District. In 1989, the author also explored many megalithic fields in the Anal area in Chandel District and in the Kabui or Rongmei areas in Bishnupur, Noney, Tamenglong, Imphal East and Imphal West Districts. In March 1991, many megaliths erected at the villages of Maryram, Oklong, Makhan, Tamei, and Pui long in the Liangmai areas in Kangpokpi and Tamenglong Districts and at the villages of Wilong, Sangkunlung, Upper Sangkungmei, Maram Khullen, and Maram Kavanum, (Maram areas) in Senapati District of this state were explored. In December 1992, some megaliths were found in Jessami Khunjao (Chekhesang area) and Chingai, Poi, Huishu, Awang Kasom, and Shirui (Tangkhul villages) in Ukhrul District. In January 2009, some dressed menhirs were encountered at the villages Maizailung Tang and Humphun, Ukhrul District. In 2012, many megalithic structures were discovered in the Mao-, Maram-, and Thangal-occupied areas of Senapati District. Similarly, in 2015, another megalith along with some rock art was explored in the Tharon area, a Liangmai village in Tamenglong District. Thus from 1980 to date, various megalithic structures have been discovered in many Anal, Chekhesang, Kabui/Ruangmei, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Poumai, Tangkhul, and Thangal areas.

## Megalithic types in Manipur

### Structural types

Morphologically the megaliths of Manipur can be broadly divided into seven types (Potshangbam 2013, 606–612; 2016, 339–342):

1. Flat stones or capstones
2. Menhirs, alignments and avenues
3. Cairns (with or without stone circles)
4. Dolmens
5. Stone circles
6. Stone seats
7. Miscellaneous

### Functional types

Functionally, the megaliths of this state can be broadly divided into eight types (Potshangbam 2013, 613–616; 2016, 342–344). The same structural type functions differently, whereas different structures also serve the same function:

- Memorial stone, menhir of social status, and commemorative
- Grave stone
- Judiciary/witness stone
- Religious stone
- Stone seat/resting stone
- Village foundation stone
- Village gate and wall
- Watch tower.

## Menhirs of social status and commemoratives

### Menhirs of social status

Menhirs are raised by many tribes in Manipur on different occasions. They are variously known as *Tutang Kam* (Anals), *Jathoza/Zathoza* (Chekhesangs), *Taokhon* (Kabui/Rongmei), *Chenku Tusom* (Li-angmais), *Tiisum* (Marams), *Zhaosotu* (Maos), *Zhaosochu* (Poumais), *Maran Lung* (Tangkhuls) and *Na Donba dao Sonba* (Thangals). These menhirs of social status are raised after the performance of grand feasts or a series of Feasts of Merit. Each such megalithic structure is put up in the name of the donor or intending merit-seeker or his relative in whose name the feast is given. In this paper, the author has selected only nine tribes of Manipur.

### The Anal tribe

The Anal is one of the scheduled tribes of Manipur. The Anals occupy the southeastern part of the state (Potshangbam 1998, 119). The tribe has a tradition of raising megaliths (*Tutang Kam*) after the death of a person who has performed a series of seven Feasts of Merit (*Inthungnagju/Inthungju*, *Buphung*, *Sah-Pe-a*, *Laan*, *Akah-Pedam*, *Duthu*, and *Sontang Petang*), which are also collectively known as *Tutang Kam* or *Akam* sacrifices. Thus a wealthy Anal couple who have children and wish to raise a menhir in their name perform a series of seven grand feasts. If the husband can complete the whole series, he is allowed to select a sizeable stone of his desire to be erected in his

name. The menhir thus erected is locally called *Tutang Kam* (named after the series of feasts). The actual erection is done after his (the merit-seeker's) death. On the other hand, if he cannot complete the whole series, but can complete up to the third series (*Sah-Pe-a*), then his wife is allowed to select a *Tutang Kam* to be put up in her name, also after her death. And another monolith is given to the performer of the *Akam* sacrifices if he can complete up to the sixth or even fifth stage in the series of feasts (Potshangbam 1998, 119–123). Nowadays, menhirs can be raised by those resourceful childless couples who can perform a grand feast. And such commemorative stones (*Lungpatha*, Fig. 2) are erected while they (the performers) are still alive.

### The Chekhesang tribe

The Chekhesangs form one of the small communities of Manipur and also consist of three smaller groups, that is to say, the Chetri, the Kheja, and the Sangtam groups. They occupy the extreme northern part of Ukhrul District. This tribe also performs stone raising ceremonies and puts up six different types of megaliths (Potshangbam 2014b, 398–400). Mention may be made of *Ariza*, *Enhu* (Fig. 3), and *Jathoja/Zathoja* (Fig. 4). The *Ariza* and *Enhu* are commemorative structures, while the *Jathoja/Zathoja* is a menhir of social status. *Ariza* is constructed by an outstanding head-hunter who has



Fig. 2. *Lungpatha*, Lamphou Charu site.



Fig. 3. *Enhu*, Jessami site



Fig. 4. *Jathoja/Zathoja*, Jessami site.

captured victims alive or taken a number of heads on raids. The *Jathoza/Zathoza* is raised by a wealthy Chekhesang after performing a series of at least four grand feasts. He is not entitled to receive any social status even though he has performed the first feast of the series called *Jatho/Zatho*. After he has performed the second feast in the following year, the village elders permit him to decorate his house with a house horn called *Sade-Kechi*. And after the third feast (third year), he is again permitted to decorate his house with another house horn called *Jatho-Kechi/Zatho-Kechi*. The second type of house horn is a compulsory item of house decoration signifying the status in the third Feast of Merit (third year). Besides, the performer is allowed to wear a special type of clothing, known as *Kelichira*. The fourth feast is held in the fourth consecutive year and at this stage the merit-seeker is allowed to raise a memorial stone (menhir) of social status in his name (Potshangbam 2002, 258–263; 2014 b, 39–407).

### The Kabui/Rongmei tribe

The Kabui/Rongmei is one of the indigenous and largest tribes of Manipur. The tribe is mostly concentrated in the western part of the state, particularly in Tamenglong District. Scattered pockets are also found in almost all districts, except in Chandel and Ukhrul districts (Potshangbam 2008). This tribe practiced another form of megalithism. They used to perform a series of Feasts of Merit and raised different megaliths. Of these, mention may be made of the *Bamdnon*, *Dungbang*, *Taobouh* and *Taokhon*. *Bamdnon* and *Taokhon* are memorial stones. Structurally, the *Bamdnon* is a cairn associated with a menhir and a dolmen whereas the *Taokhon* is a small cairn. Above it, a miniature upright stone is placed at each end (northern/southern) and a capstone at its center, covering a pit. *Dungbang* is a row of flat stones which serves as a resting place for travelers. *Taobouh* is a boundary stone raised by the villagers as a whole.

If a wealthy Kabui/Rongmei wishes to construct a *Taokhon* in loving memory of his deceased parent(s), he should be a member of the traditional village council (*Peimei/Pei*), no lower than a member of the *Changloi*. Besides, he should undertake a series of five feasts (*Bamzou*, *Mulengdai*, *Taokhon*, *Ban-ru*, and *Kaisumi*). After the second feast, the host is permitted to hold a *Taokhon* feast and allowed to construct a cairn called *Taokhon* (named after the feast). On the other hand, a *Bamdnon* can be constructed by any resourceful/brave Kabui/Rongmei in memory of himself, but the person should be one who could construct a *Taokhon*. The main function of a *Bamdnon* is to serve as a resting place for travelers (Potshangbam 2011, 76–88).

### The Liangmai tribe

The Liangmais form one of the indigenous and larger tribes of Manipur. The tribe occupies the northwestern part of this state. Liangmais are distributed in 43 villages and concentrated in Tamenglong and Kangpokpi Districts. The tribe erected various types of megaliths on different occasions, and each megalith is associated with a Feast of Merit. The types are: *Atugra/Atukra*, *Chengku Tusom*, *Kaho Katanmei Saimingbao*, *Kareng Hang* and *Kareng Dree*, *Kapet Bam*, *Kasaibao/Tasaibao Tusom*, *Lungaibao Tusom*, *Maning Taoba Tusom*, *Pet Bam*, *Roukhang Toh*, *Tabao Long*, *Taideli Atu/Taikulana Runii*, *Tarao Toh*, and *Tazan Tatbo Tusom* (Potshangbam 2017 b, 492–493; 2017 a, 723). Of these 14 megalithic types, the most important is the so-called *Chengku Tusom* (named after the *Chenku* Feast of Merit).

## The Mao tribe

This is one of the major tribes of Manipur. The tribe occupies the northernmost part of Senapati District and is concentrated in the Mao-Maram subdivision. At present, they are distributed in 45 villages. This community had a tradition of performing a series of 14 Feasts of Merit (*Orakaso*, *Novu/Novii Kovii*, *Omo Koju/Oma Kozii*, *Yoso/Zhoso/Ozhokoso*, *Yoshu/Zhoshu*, *Yoso Tokhu/Otdo Kodu*, *Ochizo/Ochuzo Koso*, *Thoyo/Otho Kozhu*, *Tohu/Tuho*, *Ebvii Koho/Obvii Kopfo*, *Omoshiva*, *Pittoshiva*, *Shikhoshiva*, and *Oki Maki/Okiamaki*) and raised menhirs, constructed cairns and dolmens. Also, the merit-seeker was allowed to construct a house of status (decorated with a house horn called *Chukei*). Moreover, it was also his duty to make a pond to be donated to his villagers. The first stage *Orakaso* was the worshipping of gods for their blessings and the sacrifice of a blameless cow. All the heads of the clans of the village concerned assembled at the performer's house and they were served with rice beer. On this day, the intending merit-seeker declared his wishes to the clan elders, after performing the sacred ritual of *Orakaso*. The meat of the sacrificed animal was distributed to every household of the donor's village. The second stage (*Novu/Novii Kovii*) was the sacrificing of animals and the drinking of rice beer for the whole day, which sometimes continued for up to three days. In some villages, the killing of animals was not compulsory. The third stage of feasting (*Omo Koju/Oma Kozii*) was also another rice beer ceremony lasting four days. Sometimes very resourceful persons extended it for up to ten days and increased the compulsory number of animals to be killed. In the fourth stage (*Yoso/Zhoso/Ozhokoso*), the merit-seeker was allowed to raise a menhir known as *Zhosotu* in his name. After completing the fifth stage/fifth Feast of Merit (*Yoshu/Zhoshu*), the performer was again allowed to select another, second stone and have it dragged and raised in his name. Next to it, a sitting platform known as *Yoso Tokhu/Otdo Kodu* for the menfolk only was constructed with rituals and feasting in the sixth stage of the series. The *Ochizo/Ochuzo Koso* (construction of a house of status, decorated with a house horn called *Chukei*) ceremony was performed in the seventh stage. Unlike other Feasts of Merit, here every family of the village concerned extended help to the donor by providing some roofing materials (thatch grass) and also in construction work. The construction of the house was to be completed within two days. The eighth stage (*Thoyo/Otho Kozhu*) was a feast with the distribution of paddy to every family of the village concerned. It was followed by the ninth stage (*Tohu/Tuho*), which means the distribution of eight animals to the eight neighboring villages of the merit-seeker, and a ninth animal was added if the wife of the donor was from a different village. Moreover, the host distributed another eight cattle to his village. During the feast in the tenth stage (*Ebvii Koho/Obvii Kopfo*), a public pond of drinking water was constructed in a day in the name of the merit-seeker with the help of the villagers. The *Omoshiva* was the feast meant for the distribution of pumpkins instead of meat by the donor to all the families of his village and lasted three days. This feasting ceremony was followed in the next year by the twelfth stage called *Pittoshiva*. It was the feast for the distribution of cucumber and lasted three days in the month of *Onoo* (August–September). The 13<sup>th</sup> stage of the series was the *Shikhoshiva*. At this stage, the donor distributed to every family of his village and continued to do so for three consecutive days. The last or 14<sup>th</sup> stage was meant for drying a pig in the sun and storing it over the fireplace (*Oki Maki/Okiamaki*) and was the final and greatest feast of the whole series. At this stage, the merit-seeker cut the *Oki Maki/Okiamaki* into thin pieces and distributed them to the



Fig.5. *Zhosotu* (menhir), Punanamei village site..

headmen of the surrounding villages which were alien to him. After necessary rites and rituals, a group of brave men proceeded in different directions to proclaim that they were to cease headhunting for seven years. Generally, the pork was accepted by all. After performing this final stage, the merit-seeker was allowed to raise a dolmen known as *Okimakitu/Okitu*. Hence many megalithic structures are distributed here and there in every Mao village (Potshangbam 2011, 131–142). They are known locally as *Zhosotu* (menhir, Fig.5), *Zhoso Tukhubvu* (alignment), *Kathi Mara Tukhu* (cairn), *Yoso Tokhu* (cairn/raised enclosure), and *Oki Makitu/Okitu* (dolmen).

### The Maram tribe

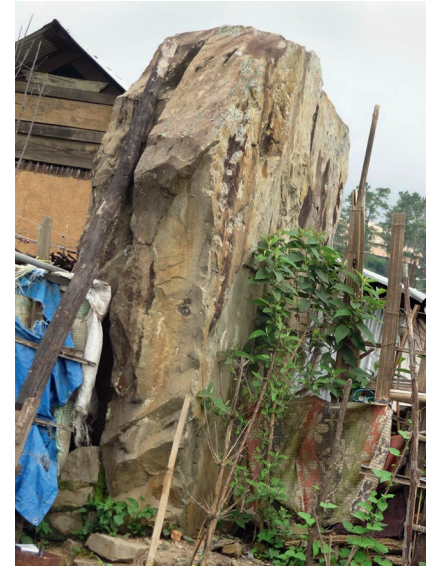
The Maram is a primitive tribe of Manipur. It is also one of the largest tribes in the state, occupying the northern and northwestern parts of Senapati District and is concentrated in the Mao-Maram subdivision (Tadubi block). Scattered pockets are also found in Kangpokpi District. The total number of Maram villages at present is 32. These villages come under three circles: (i) the Maram Khullen Circle, (ii) the Willong Circle, and (iii) the Senapati Circle.

The erection of a memorial stone over the grave is very common among the Marams. The preservation of such a stone is associated with the luck of the family. The timely care of the stone by the family concerned is associated with the worship of ancestors. In all Maram villages, there are many such gravestones, *Arou Atu* (dolmen with/without a raised structure), constructed by children for their deceased parents. Each son/daughter treats such stones as their parents' eternity.

In the Maram area, various types of megaliths abound in every Maram village. They can be divided broadly into eight types (Potshangbam 2017 c, 269–277): *Beitung* (menhir associated with a low dolmen), *Ranii Atu* (cairn), *Tiisum* (menhir, Figs.6 and 7), *Arou Atu* (dolmen with/without a raised structure, Fig.8), *Tiiosum* (low dolmens, Fig.9), *Amailui* (a small avenue), *Atu chaga kamatei* (monolith), *Atu amei ogija phuigung khei karanijangba atuwai khei bamle* (capstone).

Before a resourceful Maram individual raises a menhir in his name, he is supposed to perform certain rites and rituals. Who is considered to be the resourceful person in Maram society? In ancient times, the person who possesses material and monetary wealth is considered





to be the most resourceful person. He is also the person who passes the three stages of prosperity in his lifetime and performs three feasts with rituals, sacrifice of animals and house purification: *Azoubai/Haibai*, *Ara katii* and *Heijou/Heijou tou*.

The first stage (*Azoubai/Haibai*) is very simple. It is the offering of rice beer to the aged persons of his *khel* (clan) if he has had a good harvest that year (not less than the transporting capacity of 100 men at a time, say  $60 \text{ kg} \times 100 = 6,000 \text{ kg}$  at least), called *Ato hai*.

The second stage is performed when the same person is able to collect a good harvest in the following year too. He performs a ritual and sacrifices three/five/seven cattle and distributes the meat to every household of his *khel*. He also offers a feast to the people of his hamlet and purifies his house. The food and drinks arranged for the feast are consumed on the day of *Ara katii*. They are not allowed to be consumed on the following day and are supposed to be discarded.

*Heijou/Heijou tou* is the third stage. It is the feast of prosperity. At this stage, the prosperous person offers another feast to his co-villagers along with the people of neighboring villages. It is a must for every person who receives an invitation. Otherwise, he/she will be considered a sinner. After performing this feast, the donor attains a high

Figs.6 and 7. *Tiisum* (avenue and menhirs), Maram Khullen and Maram centre sites.



Fig.8. *Arou Atu* (dolmens on a raised structure), Willong Khullen site.



Fig.9. *Tiiosum* (low dolmens), Maram Khullen site.

social status *Kani kahii Achiilung kito samakado jakasu*, which means the richest person in the village, possessing material and monetary wealth. Thereafter, he is allowed to wear special clothes and decorate his house with carvings (Potshangbam 2017 c, 269–277).

The person who completes these three stages is allowed to raise a memorial stone in his/her name. And after performing the stone raising ceremony, the merit-seeker is again allowed to wear another type of special clothes called *Tuchiipai*. The donor is also allowed to decorate his house with a house horn and carved front wall. Thus he decorates his house with carved heads of animals and also human heads if he is a headhunter. Otherwise, villagers are not allowed to do the same.

### The Poumai tribe

The Poumai is one of the indigenous and largest tribes of Manipur. This tribe occupies the northeastern part of Senapati District and is concentrated mostly in the Paomata subdivision. Scattered pockets are also found in the Senapati subdivision of the same district. There are 78 Poumai villages. These villages come under three circles: (i) the Paomata Circle, (ii) the Chillevai Circle and (iii) the Lepaona Circle.

The Poumai area is bordered by Nagaland on the north; by Tadubi, Mao, and Maram areas on the west; by the Chekhesang and Tangkhul areas of Ukhrul District on the east; and by the Saikhul subdivision of Kangpokoi District on the south.

Entering a Poumai village and passing through several tracts lined by houses, one finds oneself in a large open space, where a number of megaliths are scattered here and there. They are of different shapes and sizes known locally as *Zaosochu/Zhaosochu/Zhusochu* (menhirs of social status), *Chukho* (a cairn, the village foundation stone and also a public resting place), *Paohon Chukho* (clan's stone seats associated with dolmens), *Raikhubu* (dolmen of highest social status), *Seibecheu* (cattle's stone), *Chadeichu* (cat killing stone), *Neisha Chukho* (religious stones), *Chuchukho* (stone circle, related to headhunting), *Khophochu* (capstone for the grave), *Loupfo* (a cluster/alignment of small stones, each stone representing a girl/woman whose hand a brave man has won), *Tapu* (monolith for placing decapitated heads), and *Aro Adu* (village gate and wall; Potshangbam 2019, 20–21). The dolmens are found in groups sometimes



associated with either cairns or raised platforms or stone circles which serve as seats.

Most of the megaliths of the Poumais have been put up within living memory and it is therefore possible to establish the circumstances of their erection. The information regarding the megalithic rituals found among this tribe has been collected from the villages where the Poumais have continuously occupied the area since time immemorial.

Before a wealthy Poumai raises a megalith *Zaosochu/Zhaosochu/Zhusochu* (Figs. 10a and b) in his name for the first time, he must pray to the gods and goddesses for blessings and also organize a series of five feasts: a) *Rasou*, b) *Vaove*, c) *Moujii*, d) *Zhusou*, and e) *Chiveisu*. This series of feasts is performed after his request to his clan elders (*Tsiiko*) and village councillors (*Chikumai*), and only if his request is granted. The *Chiveisu* is performed after raising the *Zaosochu/Zhaosochu/Zhusochu* in his name (Potshangbam 2019, 21).

#### a) *Rasou*

The intending merit-seeker along with his family members worships *Kirako* (household deity). He offers rice beer to *Kirako* under the guidance of the village priest (*Khaohro*) to secure protection from any sort of suffering during the coming series of feasts.

#### b) *Vaove*

Once the public announcement has been made by the *Chikomai/Tsiiko* and the *Rasou* feasting ritual is over, the next step is the performance of the *Vaove* feast with rituals. On this occasion, the intending merit-seeker worships the supreme god and goddess called *Khalihiira* and *Teipfii Khamiru* by offering a blameless (having no sign of injury or deformity locally) cow or bull or buffalo (called *Haveijii*).

Figs. 10a and b. *Zaosochu/Zhaosochu/Zhusochu*, (menhir of high social status), Ngamju site.

### c) *Moujii*

The *Vaove* is followed by an elaborate feast called *Moujii*. For an intending merit-seeker Poumai, *Moujii* is an important feast, because he is not allowed to perform *Zhusou* (feast for stone raising) until and unless he performs the *Moujii* feast.

### d) *Zhusou*

It is also another ritual for the stone dragging and raising ceremony. For this ceremony, the intending performer needs to do a lot of work. At every stage, all his villagers, friends and relatives help him in every way they can. It starts with the cultivation work. Also, they help the host in the preparation of the sledge (*Chukhe*) and wooden containers (*Teis*) to keep the rice beer in, collection of stone dragging creepers (*churai/rurai*) and also in husking paddy, pounding rice flour, and brewing rice beer.

After performing all these four stages in the series of feasts with necessary rites and rituals, the host is permitted to select a stone and raise a menhir of social status in his name. If the merit-seeker can repeat the series of feasts more than three times, he is again allowed to construct dolmen(s). According to the Poumai megalithic tradition, the dolmen locally known as *Raikhubu* is considered the megalith of highest social status (Potshangbam 2019, 19–36).

## The Tangkhul tribe

The Tangkhul is one of the earliest tribes of Manipur. The tribe is distributed all over the divisions of Kamjong and Ukhrol Districts. Once they were known as Wungs (Potshangbam 2008). They are broadly divided into five groups based on their locations: the *Raphei* (north), the *Kameo* (south), the *Remyang* (east), the *Kharao* (west), and *Kathar* (central). Each Tangkhul group performs a Feast of Merit called locally *Maran Kasa* and raises menhirs or forked wooden posts or both. They also raise different structures on different occasions. The various megaliths are *Rihailung* (cairn associated with miniature menhirs, Fig. 11), *Maran Lung* (menhir), *Maran Tarungs* (forked wooden or Y-posts, Figs. 12a and b), *Lungchan Lung* (small cairn with two wooden posts), *Onra/Wonra* (raised platform made of earth and stone), *Tarong/Lamphui* (stone/wooden seats on raised platforms), and *Akhen* (painted wooden planks) (Potshangbam 2014 a, 73–77).

## The Thangal tribe

The Thangals form one of the scheduled tribes of this state. The tribe is distributed over the eastern part of Kangpokpi District and southern part of Senapati District. This community raises two types of megaliths: *Na Donba Dao-Sonba* (memorial stone) and *Kasi-Tharo Unkhang* (capstone). These megaliths are raised after the performance of a series of *genna*/observances and worshipping of gods with grand feasts. The process runs from the selection and quarrying of the stone to the erection at the selected spot (Potshangbam 2011, 194–196).



Fig. 11. Village foundation stone known as *Rihailung* (a small cairn associated with miniature menhirs) Phungreitang site.



### Commemoratives

In the olden days, each tribe had its own religious beliefs and practices. According to their own tradition, they raised different types of megaliths (having different names from their own tongue) with necessary rites and rituals, which were accompanied by grand feasts. For them, life was meaningless without the performance of Feasts of Merit and the raising of a megalithic structure in his/her name (Potshangbam 2011). The most common structural type of megalith is the menhir. Then come cairn and dolmen. This tradition continues to date with slight modification. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries entered this area and some people in the hilly region were baptized Christians under their influence. Most of the tribal communities in this state have converted to Christianity. For instance, all the individuals of the Liangmai tribe had fully embraced Christianity by 2011. A new trend came in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At present, each tribe erects a monolith (menhir) to commemorate a function. Here, the megaliths are raised by the village as a whole. Feasts are accomplished by each household contributing to the costs. Also, there is an organization or society or family that normally organizes a function and raises a menhir in commemoration. They use one menhir to inscribe something about the occasion (Figs. 13–21). For instance, the Thangal Naga Union inscribed “To Commemorate the Thangal Naga Modification by the Ministry of Law and Justice, Legislative Department through the Gazette of India on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2012. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order, Amendment Act 2011, No.2 of 2012 modifies the list of Scheduled Tribes in the State of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh” on the commemorative stone they raised.

Figs. 12a and b. Forked or Y-posts of social status called *Maran Tarung(s)* Chingai village and Shirui village sites.



Fig. 13. Jubilee stones (Kabui/Rongmei tribe), Thenjang village site.

Fig. 14. Commemorative stone relating to the Mao origin, Makhel Khullen site.

Fig. 15. Another commemorative stone raised by his family members on the occasion of Mr. K. Taruba Mathias' golden jubilee of embracing Christianity, Maram Center village site.

Fig. 16. Commemorative stone for the 22nd Conference of the Naga Students' Federation, held in Asufii playground, Punanamei village site.

Fig. 17. A part of the menhir raised by the Lai villagers in commemoration of the deer which led the Chillivai group of the Poumai tribe to this village, Lai village site.



Fig. 18. A monolith raised by the villagers to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tungjoy Evangelist church, Tungjoy village site.

Fig. 19. Another menhir erected by the pagan Poumais of the same village depicting the history of origin and migration of the Onaeme group and its craft specialization, Oinam village site.

Fig. 20. Menhir with engraving works and inscriptions, erected to commemorate the visits of the then kings of Manipur to their village on various occasions, Hundung village site.

Fig. 21. Commemorative stones for religious functions, Yaigongpao village site.



## Discussion

In the olden days, different tribal communities residing in this state raised or constructed different megaliths after performing a series of Feasts of Merit. They raised megaliths, particularly menhirs, to attain a high position on their respective social ladders. To them, a Feast of Merit was considered the highest form of competition and challenge in their societies, affecting the life and social status of individuals. Nowadays, to every Christian convert and educated person, it sounds simply foolish to perform all these Feasts of Merit associated with many rites and rituals and the sacrifice of various animals, involving huge expenditure. Most of the commemorative stones are usually raised at religious functions, while others were constructed at social or political functions, and others were constructed by groups on special occasions too. For instance, some Christian converts raise such monoliths to commemorate various functions like silver jubilees, golden jubilees, platinum jubilees, and also centenaries. Furthermore, the youth of many communities also raises megaliths (menhirs) to commemorate such functions as sporting events, conferences, student meetings and the like.

Nowadays, the concept of the menhir of social status has changed to the commemorative stone. The menhir of social status is usually raised or constructed according to the wish of an individual who can afford the cost. Also, the merit-seeker is supposed to possess good moral character. Incestuous persons are not allowed to hold any Feast of Merit and raise megaliths in their name. Even if someone is qualified and permitted to hold a feast, he must be used to worshiping his supreme god for blessings. If he does not receive any good omens while worshiping and performing rites and rituals, the intending merit-seeker is not allowed to continue to the next processes and is prevented from doing so for the rest of his life. On the other hand, commemorative stones are raised on various occasions, but by a social or religious group or by the villagers collectively or by the community as a whole.

## Conclusion

Megalithism is a living tradition, with some modified forms, in this state. There is a fast changing and emerging trend towards the concept of raising megaliths. In the past, menhirs were raised by an intending merit-seeker after performing a series of Feasts of Merit. Each such feast is associated with many rites and rituals. The host needs to collect a huge amount of wealth to defray the cost of performing the whole process.

In the present context, the concept of raising menhirs of social status has changed, particularly among the Christian converts, to commemorative megaliths. Nowadays, such structures are raised by a religious group/society/union. Such megaliths are raised with or without rituals, but feasting is compulsory. The expenditure is borne by the organizer (with contributions from the members/individuals of the group/village/community/union and the like to fund the expenditure). The main cause of this changing pattern is the introduction of modern education and the embracement of Christianity.



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