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A Typological Classification of Megaliths of Mizoram

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Abstract

The practice of raising megalithic monuments is a tradition of the Mizo in early society. Since the purpose and significance of the megalithic tradition in society differed from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture, the Mizo used wood or stone, or both, as memorials to the dead and to the living. Different types of megaliths were available throughout the state, some of which were upright stones, alignments, table stones, cairns, and the like. Therefore, there was a need to undertake a thorough study of megaliths in Mizoram. Thus the paper attempts to classify the megalithic monuments of Mizoram based on typology/megalithic structure.

Introduction

The practice of raising megalithic monuments is still a living tradition among some of the northeastern Indian tribes such as the Mizo, the Khasis, the Garos and the Nagas. The word "megalith" simply means a large standing stone but the features of megalithism include the raising of upright stones, alignments, table stones, cairns, and the like. The use of wood or stone, or both, as memorials to the dead and to the living, is also another feature of this tradition. The purpose and significance of the megalithic tradition in society differed from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture.

The word "megalith" is of Greek origin, meaning a large stone (*mega* – large, *litho* – stone, Encyclopaedia Britannica 1981). According to Gordon Childe, the term (megalith) was first introduced by antiquarians in the middle of the 19th century to define a class of monument in western and northern Europe, consisting of large undressed stones bearing Celtic names, such as dolmens, cromlechs, menhirs, and so on. These names were subsequently adopted to term complex stone structures widely distributed over Europe, the Mediterranean region, some parts of western Asia, Japan and South East Asia including India (Srivastava 1998, 156).

It may also be noted that Childe argues that the classification of megaliths is not based merely on the material or magnitude of the stones, but also on the function and purpose behind the erection (Childe 1948, 5). He further adds that "in practice the term is applied only to monuments the use of which is known imperfectly or not at all, but which we presume were erected for some superstitious, ritual or religious end" (Childe 1948, 5). Gordon Childe's observation has been widely accepted by scholars working on the megalithic problem.

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Megalithic structures are of many different kinds. Glyn Daniels, who has worked on the problem of European megalithic monuments, lists five types of prehistoric monuments (Daniel 1958, 15–17; Mawlong 1996, 28):

- menhir or single standing stone
- groups of standing stones set in rows called alignments
- circular setting of large stones such as those at Stonehenge and Avebury
- chambered tombs walled and roofed with megaliths
- apsidal temples of Malta

On the Indian subcontinent, different types of megaliths have been reported from almost all parts of India right from Kashmir to the Malabar Coast and from Assam to Baluchistan (Dikshit 1969). A number of efforts have been made to classify all the available groups of Indian megaliths by both foreign and Indian scholars. On the issue of classification, C.A. Mawlong states that early investigators into the megalithic problem of India, like James Fergusson, Meadows Taylor and others did not employ a uniform terminology, which resulted in a lot of confusion as they used terms with varying connotations. Therefore, the need for working out a proper classification of Indian megaliths was strongly felt in the mid 20th century. The first attempt to classify the different types of megalithic monuments in India was made by V.D. Krishnaswamy, who attempted to work out a precise and standardized nomenclature for South Indian megaliths in 1948. The Archaeological Survey of India had subsequently accepted and adopted his classification. Excavations carried out since have, however, indicated that the nomenclature worked out in 1948 needed modification in the light of new evidence (Mawlong 1996, 29).

Since then, leading Indian archaeologists such as K.N. Dikshit, K.M. Srivastava, S.B. Deo, H. Sarkar, N.R. Bannerjee, M.D.N. Sahi, K.S. Ramachandran, K.V. Soundara Rajan, S.P. Gupta, M.K. Dhavalikar and others have discussed and written a great deal on the problem of megaliths in India, particularly on the subject of classification and distribution pattern (Mawlong 1996, 29).

Even today, megalithism is still a living tradition among some tribal groups in some parts of the world, including India and particularly among some of the northeastern Indian tribes like Khasis, Nagas and the Mizos (Mawlong 1996, 29). North East India has rich megalithic remains and the greatest concentration is observed in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. Megalithic structures are also found in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

Some of the leading archaeologists from North East India also discussed the classification of megalithic types in some parts of North East India. For instance, Potshangbam Binodini Devi classified the megalithic remains in Manipur and listed seven types (Devi 2011, 39). Another archaeologist from Meghalaya, C.A. Mawlong (1990), also classified the megalithic structures of Meghalaya; Jonala Devi, Dhiraj Neog (2014, 345), T.C. Hodson (1974) and others undertook the classification of megaliths in Nagaland. So there is a fair amount of work on the classification of the megalithic structures in North East India.

In case of the Mizos, the practice of erecting megaliths is one of the striking features of their culture (Fig. 1). The megaliths served as memorials to the dead as well as to the living. In Mizo society, megaliths are closely connected with the Feasts of Merit. Erection of menhirs or upright stones is a common practice followed by the erection of other types of monuments, such as stone seats, platforms and heaps of stone (cairns), and the like. Similar types of megalithic structures are also found in other northeastern states of India.

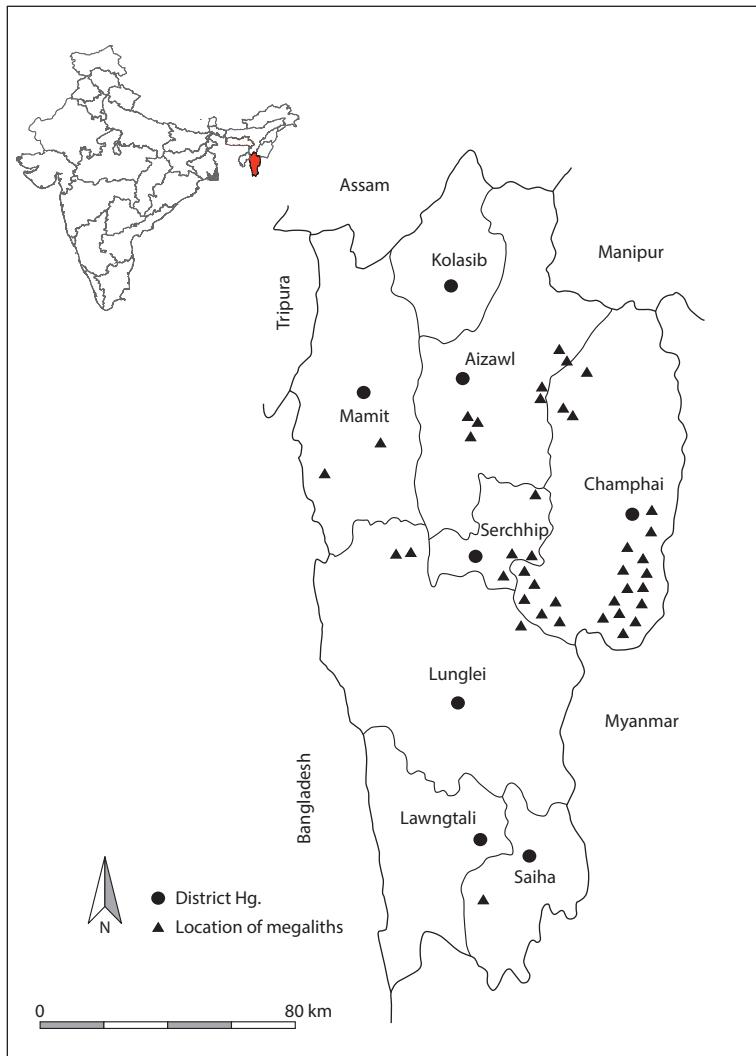


Fig. 1. Distribution of megaliths in Mizoram.

The Mizos erected megalithic monuments usually at the entrance of the village (*kawtchhuah*) and alongside roads and sometimes in the courtyard of the chief. Whenever a chief erected a stone monument at the entrance of the village, it was always accompanied by a stone platform (*lungdawh*). The stone platforms of the chief were termed *Lal Lungdawh* (stone platform of the chief). The megaliths usually faced the road and were erected alongside it at the entrance of the village, providing a comfortable resting place for the villagers with heavy loads coming from their *jhum* land, or passersby. Other than memorials to the dead, the erection of megaliths is also associated with Feasts of Merit of the chiefs and of the *thangchhuah pa*,¹ to commemorate individual prosperity and achievements and also on the occasion of the establishment of a village.

Although there is a fair amount of literature dealing with various aspects of Mizo history, society and culture, studies of the megalithic tradition of the Mizos is still inadequate. Some of the basic issues on the problem include classification of Mizo megaliths. In this regard, only B. Lalthangliana has attempted a classification based on the techniques of carving the figures depicted on the monuments. No attempt was made to classify the monuments on the basis of typological considerations, which we believe is the primary basis of classification. Accordingly, he divided the stone monuments into three categories based on the techniques of carvings depicted on the monuments, such as simple scratching, incisions or engravings,

1 There are two kinds of *Thangchhuah* (composed of two words: *thang*, fame, and *chhuah*, accomplished), that is, *Inlama Thangchhuah* and *Ram lama Thangchhuah*. For *inlama thangchhuah*, one must have enough wealth to perform a series of Feasts of Merit in one's lifetime and one must possess enough domestic animals to be killed for the feasts. The title *Ram lama Thangchhuah* could be attained by killing certain prescribed animals such as bears, sambar, barking deer, wild mithun (*Sele*), stags, wild boars, viper snakes (*rulgan*) and hawks (*mu-vanlai*). Therefore the term *thangchhuah* literally means one who has fulfilled his social obligations to attain a high status in society as well as the right of admission to paradise (*pialral*) after death. So many able-bodied men tried to earn this title in one way or another.

and embossed motifs, which included animal figures, objects such as gongs, weapons and the like and human figures (Lalthangliana 2001, 396).

There are some serious problems with the above classification since carvings are depicted only on some of the upright stones while completely absent on other types of Mizo megaliths. Therefore, the above classification provides only a limited view of the tradition. Categories of monuments such as stone seats, stone heaps (or cairns) and stone platforms with an upright stone on top have been left out of the discussion. Although carvings are indeed an important feature of Mizo megaliths, they are not an intrinsic feature of all megaliths. Therefore B. Lalthangliana's classification is inadequate as it excludes other types of megalithic structures. Consequently, there is a need to work out a comprehensive classification of the Mizo megaliths based on typological considerations.

On the basis of fieldwork, we found that there are four different types of megalithic structures in Mizoram:

- standing stones (*lungphun*) – either singly or in alignment (*hran-glungphun*)
- table stones or stone seats supported by three smaller stones (*Sik-pui lung*)
- stone platforms carrying a stone upright on top (*lungdawh*)
- cairns or heaps of stones (*pura*).



Fig.2. Single standing stone, Lungphunlian at Pukzing village.

Standing stones (Lungphun)

Standing stones are divided into two groups, those erected singly and those erected in rows:

- Single standing stones are the most common type of monument and are widely distributed throughout the length and breadth of Mizoram. Most of the Mizo megaliths are single upright stones varying in height from 1 to 6 m. For instance, the tallest monument in Mizoram is Lungvando, located at the village of East Lungdar in Serchhip District. It measures about 6 m high. The standing stones are erected for various purposes, for example as memorials to the dead, to commemorate social achievements, and the foundation of villages and so on (Fig. 2).
- Alignments include upright stones set up in rows, with the numbers varying from four to ten or more and the height varying from 2 to 3 m depending on the donors of the monuments. Alignments were erected to commemorate individuals or the foundation of villages. Among the Lusei, brave warriors are commemorated by the setting up of a single upright stone, accompanied by a group of small stones. Such alignments of stone were called *Hranglungphun*² and were usually located at the entrance of the village on one of the approach roads (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Stone alignment.

As discussed earlier, carvings are depicted on most of the standing stones. But on other types such as stone seats, cairns and stone platforms, there are no carvings at all. The figures carved on the upright stone include figures of humans, animals (specially the mithun), birds, spears, guns, smoking pipes and prestige goods such as gongs, necklaces and the like. The technique of carving differs from one stone to the next. Thus while some figures are deeply engraved, others are not. The standing stones are again divided into three groups based on the carving technique:

- Plain monuments include standing stones on which carvings are absent (Fig. 4).
- Engraving of figures on standing stones: Many of the Mizo upright stones bear the scratching of figures on the outer surface of the stone. With this method, the figures are only lightly incised, giving the appearance of mere scratchings on stone, while others bear

2 *Hranglungphun* – *Hrang* means a brave warrior who killed a number of wild animals; *Lungphun* means stone monuments. It is a stone alignment raised in honour of the deceased warrior along with a single standing stone. For details, see Hualngo Literature and Cultural Association (henceforth *HLCA*), *Zofate Chanchin*, Tahan 1995, 286.

figures shown in higher relief, achieved by deeper engravings on stone (Fig.5). With the second method, the figures are engraved by deep incising or deep cutting so that the figure stands out from the main frame. These types of carvings have a widespread distribution throughout Mizoram (Fig.6).

- Engraving of figures in high relief or embossing: With this method, the figures are first engraved in high relief and then the rest of the outer layer of stone is chiseled off so that the figure appears to bulge out of the main frame, which gives the impression of embossing. The engravings are smooth and plain and are of higher quality than those using the previous method. Such kinds of carvings can be seen in Kawtchhuah Ropui, Mangkhaia Lung and Lungphunlian (fig.7).



Fig.4. Single standing stone, Lungphunlian at Lungphunlian village.



Fig.5. Engraving of figures/scratching, Ridawpi Lung at South Sabual village.



Fig.6. Incised /Deep-cutting, Chhura Farep at Lenchim village.



Fig.7. Figures in high relief or embossing, Kawtchhuah Ropui at Vangchhia.

Stone seats (*Sikpui Lung*)

These are flat table stones raised above the ground and supported by three small stones. The size and shape of the flat stone depend on the availability of stone. The stone seats are erected in the course of the *Sikpui Roui*³ festival celebrated by the Hmar clans. Only the drummer and the chanter are allowed to sit on the stone seat so erected. The height of a stone seat ranges from 60 to 90 cm. This kind of stone structure is concentrated only in Hmar settlements, that is, in the northeastern parts of Mizoram and Churachandpur, District of Manipur, as it is connected with the *Sikpui Roui* festival of the Hmar clans (Fig.8).

Stone platform with an upright stone on top (*Lungdawh*)

The Mizo also constructed a stone platform (*lungdawh*) usually at the entrance of the village. The stone platform is usually accompanied by an upright stone, a monument that was raised only in honor of chiefs and those who had earned the title of *thangchhuah*. It had no connection with burials. The stone platform of the chief is called *Lal lungdawh* (*lal* means chiefs, *lungdawh* means stone platform). The main purpose of stone platforms was to commemorate dead chiefs and also to show the greatness of the chiefs, as well as providing a resting place for the villagers and travelers, and may have also functioned as a place where children gathered together

3 *Sikpui Roui* is a feast festival which was observed by the Hmar clan, when a village enjoyed good health and harvests for at least three consecutive years. The forefathers of the Hmar clan did not celebrate *Sikpui* in those years when bad befell them. It used to be celebrated only when the time and conditions were at their best; when the community as a whole had a successful and abundant harvest and the years in which there were no deaths and disease in the village or among the communities or there were no wars and invasions. It was a thanksgiving festival and observed mostly in winter. The word *Sikpui* means "winter" and *Roui* means "feast" and it is probably due to this that the feast festival is called *Sikpui Roui*. This festival was not much associated with religion, but was more of a social gathering.



Fig. 8. Sikpui Lung at Zote and Senvon village.

to await their parents return from their *jhum* fields. Among the Mara clans who occupy southern Mizoram, the stone platform (*Longdoh/ lodawh* in Mara dialect) is regarded as a memorial restricted to the chiefs and wealthy persons in the society. The *longdoh*, which measures about 2 m in length, 2 m in width and 1 m in height, is usually located at the entrance of the village. Each platform (*longdoh*) is made up of a number of stones each of which measures 60 cm in length and 30 cm in breadth. Thus the *longdoh* takes the form of a square enclosed by four stone walls about 90 cm high, and the void between is then filled up with soil and a flat stone placed on it (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Stone platform with upright stone.

Stone heaps or cairns (Phura)

Another type of megalithic structure found in Mizoram is heaped stone rubble (or cairn). It is pyramidal in shape. Such monuments are only raised by the Mara clans, as memorials to dead chiefs and wealthy persons in society. The heights of these monuments are usually about 2 to 3 m. It may be noted, that cairns are raised as memorials only for male members in society. The Mara call such types of stone monuments *Phura* and they are usually erected at the entrance of villages on one of the approach roads. Such kinds of stone monuments are found only in the Mara-inhabited area, that is, the southern part of Mizoram and some parts of the present Chin Hills of Burma, where some of the Mara clans are settled (Fig. 10).

Thus we see different types of megalithic structures in Mizoram which we see in other parts of the world. As mentioned earlier, the purpose and significance of the megalithic tradition in society differed from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture. Unlike others, the significant features of Mizo megaliths are the components of its engravings, and interestingly most of the Mizo megaliths are full of carvings of different pictures.



Fig. 10. Cairn, Phura.

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