

**Ideology and Symbolism of Traditional Architecture: A Case of House Structures and Social Stratification of the Villages of Chozuba and Runguzu, Chakhesang Naga***Ditamulu Vasa***Abstract**

The social and cultural memories existing in the Naga oral histories relating to megalithic culture elucidates important information on the ideology of erecting megalithic monuments, social organization, rituals and their economic usages. The well-defined cultural values of erecting megalithic monuments also appear to have a relationship with craft specialization to the point of perpetuating the memory of a person who has gained a higher status. This paper discusses briefly the Feast of Merit that coincides with the stone dragging ceremony and the status men earn in terms of representations adorning their houses in the Chozuba and Runguzu villages of the Chakhesang tribe.

**Introduction**

The state of Nagaland, surrounded by hills and mountains, lies in the northeastern corner of India, bordering Myanmar in the east, Manipur in the south, Assam in the north and west and Arunachal in the north (Fig. 1). Nagaland comprises various tribes with variant cultures and living traditions with fleeting glimpses of the living megalithic tradition that continues to be practiced up to the present day. Megalithism is a prehistoric phenomenon but, in Naga society, part of it is still a "living tradition associated with their social, religious and economic activities, though with much lower pomp, magnitude and many changes" (Khongreiwo 2014, 292).

Since time immemorial, the megalithic culture of the Nagas was of crucial importance in elucidating the ideology of meritorious feats by erecting crude stone monuments. The social customs involving the selection of the stone, participation of the menfolk in dragging the stone (Figs. 2 and 3), economic order, and the religious beliefs that prevailed in erecting a monolith gained worldwide fame and the monoliths that stand today are considered to be "the most common object for transmitting social memory" (Blackburn 2008, 265). Furthermore, the social and cultural memories existing in the Naga oral history relating to megalithic culture and the associated Feast of Merit has been recognized as an informative agency of the domestic and social activities within the community in a series of rituals. Erecting a monolith to perpetuate the memory of a person incorporates feasting with the whole population of his village and "consists of a series of feasts, each costlier than the preceding one, and each higher in status" (Lotha 2008, 52). And this Feast of Merit is considered the most important social ceremony in Naga

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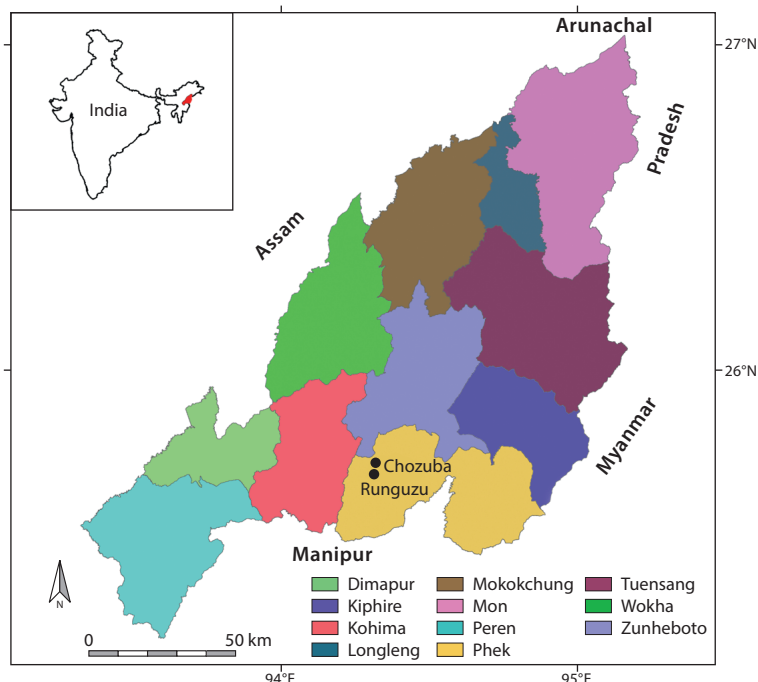


Fig. 1. Map of Nagaland indicating the study areas Chozuba and Runguzu.

society that is performed by a married man who has gathered sufficient wealth in terms of livestock and crops. The details of the feasts vary from one tribe to another but the basic pattern is consistent: animal sacrifices comprise the slaughter of mithun (*Bos frontalis*), pigs and chickens and the distribution of meat, which earns the sponsor not only increased rank or a higher status but also the privilege to wear certain clothes, particularly a shawl, and decorate his house in a special way (see Blackburn 2008; Mills 1926). Commenting on Angami houses, Hutton (2003, 51) writes “for these and for the further marks of social distinction the builder of the house must duly qualify.” It has been observed that the details of the decoration become more elaborate from one series of feasts to the next, symbolizing the status of the feast donor.

Many of the earlier records written by the British during the colonial and post-colonial periods have references to the megalithic tradition (Hutton 2003; Woodthorpe 1881), their remarkable records being mainly based on their observations when the tradition was still in full force. Recent similar works on megalithic culture by N. Venuh (1995), Z. Venuh (2000; 2003; 2005; 2008), W. Jamir (1997; 1998), T. Jamir (2002; 2004; 2005; 2019), J. Wouters (2015; 2019) brought to significance the various types of megalithic stone monuments and the funerary practices that prevailed in the past. But few or no detailed documents on the cultural memory that is visible in the decoration of the house of a feast giver have been addressed except by Hutton, who makes a brief general reference to the structure of houses in the Angami region as “often furnished in the case of men of wealth with heavy beams carved with heads of mithun or men” (2003, 50), and by Mills, who also pointed out the importance of giving a series of feasts by writing “it is important to remember that, no matter how rich a man may be, he can win the rights to these clothes and carvings only by giving feasts” (Mills 1935, 134). Thus far, a query I address in this paper is “What impact do the carvings and symbols on the house of a feast giver have on the community at large?”

The paper presents the results of an investigation conducted in Runguzu and Chozuba, Phek District, Nagaland, to understand the ideological nature of such representations and also to substantiate the simultaneous prestige a feast donor earns. Collection of the data





was made directly in the field and interviews were conducted with people who could constitute and structure their experiences ideologically. A general outline of the Feast of Merit is discussed to offer a new explication of the research questions raised.

Figures 2 and 3: Menfolk participating in stone dragging ceremony.



## Feasts of Merit

In Naga society, the social designation of a rich man or a noble family is not about accumulating wealth in terms of his surplus crop harvests or his huge resources of livestock but in the way he utilizes them. He ascends to his social status by dispensing his wealth lavishly in feasts for the community, “a social institution that came to be recognized as the Naga Feast of Merit” (Wouters 2019, 171). According to Jamir (2014, 336), “Among the Angami and the Chakhesang Nagas, Feasts of Merit were considered the highest social form of accomplishment in the life of a wealthy person to attain high social status.” Although this particular practice was seen in other Naga tribes as well, the oral narratives about performing Feasts of Merit differed from tribe to tribe. To the Lothas, the oral tradition says that “God sat on a beam in Mentsuru’s house and gave him instructions to perform the series of feasts saying if you do this all will be well for you” (Lotha 2008, 52). For the Aos, the feast is to establish not only one’s status and honor in this but also to gain the favor of the spirits and the prosperity of great men of the past. Thereby one wins the “coveted right of wearing certain clothes and ornaments and of decorating his house in a particular way, and the skulls of the sacrificed animals hanging in the outer room bring prosperity not only to him but also to his heirs who inherit them after him” (Mills 1926, 257). The various traditional Naga festivals are mostly ceremonies that follow a series of sacred rituals and procedures with a strong belief that “feasts or festivals are not rituals in themselves, but the rites performed at such events enhance and bless them, making them become even more meaningful and successful” (Nienu 2014, 157). Among the Chakhesang tribe, not more than one feast can be given in a year. During each feast, a megalithic ceremony is also performed, where stone monuments/megaliths are erected in honor of the feast giver and his wife. Earlier studies of the living megalithic cultural tradition emphasized the stone dragging/pulling ceremony and the erection of megaliths, while dealing with the numerous megalithic monuments scattered in the Angami and Chakhesang villages, most of them erected on the approach to the village and signifying a living and vital part of Naga culture.

While the output of earlier research focused on the tradition of erecting monoliths and the background of the feast donor, the discussions on the social and cultural attributes are also worthy of consideration. One such attribute that remained insignificant is the dwelling house of the feast donor, the focus actually being on the architecture that depicts his ideology, prosperity and status as well. Among the Nagas, the ornamentation in terms of carved house horns not only showcases material culture but is also symbolic and determines the social status of the occupant.

## House forms and social significance

The common indigenous dwellings are square/rectangular and are constructed using resources that are locally available and employing simple construction methods. The houses are mostly permanent structures built to provide not only shelter but also protection. The traditional knowledge of the use of bamboo, thatch and timber is one common feature that is combined with the economic resources of land, forests and water, which are controlled at village, clan, lineage, and individual levels (Fig. 4). The houses are varied, built with simple, pliant structures made of wood and bamboo, sometimes raised on stilts when built on slopes (Fig. 5).



Fig.4. Houses built with timber and bamboo.



Fig.5. Houses raised on stilts.



Figs.6 and 7. Space for storage in the entrance and interior of the house.





It has been noticed that houses raised on stilts have certain advantages: for example, they provide not only a panoramic view into the distance but also provide security from wild animals during the night. The houses vary in width but most of the houses are divided into two or three compartments according to the needs of the owner. The entrance has space where all agricultural implements are stored, and firewood and many other household items including paddy storage baskets and food grain are stacked (Figs. 6 and 7). All the houses have wooden walls at the front; the side walls are generally made of interlocked bamboo and plastered with mud, but people having enough wealth use wood. The roofs are provided with thatch. The interiors of the houses have mud flooring and contain wooden benches and low stools to sit on. All the houses have fireplaces, which are used for cooking and for warmth during the winter months. The houses are located close to each other, dotted all along the slopes of hills. A kitchen garden is not a very common sight though people have started maintaining small manageable kitchen gardens in their backyards.

Greater differences are noticed in the houses of the rich or families or people with higher social status who have accomplished the appropriate feasts in a series of Feasts of Merit. The selection of the method and style of construction varies in terms of the number of feasts that a person has hosted, as they define their individuality and identity. A person or a family can perform such feasts several times. Consequently, he becomes qualified to wear a special type of shawl and ornaments, besides adorning his house with house horns and elaborate carvings. In order to attain the full decoration of the house, there are different levels or stages. According to the informant from the village of Chozuba, "a person who has performed a feast once is entitled to decorate the ridge of his roof with criss-cross bamboo splints without house horns; at the next feast, he is entitled to the grandeur of horn-like projections at the front of the roof. Only the person who has hosted this kind of feast several times becomes entitled to decorate his house with such projections, called *ceka* locally (Fig. 8). The front gable is often decorated with various woodcarvings and the roofs slope off towards the sides. This type of roofing is designed as a precaution against high winds. Traditionally, the roofs are made of thick thatch intermingled and bound on with a neat ridge at the top to ensure protection against both torrential rain and the scorching heat of the sun. Distinct from the other common type of house, the house of the donor is indicated by a grand horn-like projection signifying his achievement and his special status. However, differences are also noticed on the decoration of the house of the feast giver who has extended his feast to a neighboring village. Such instances occur particularly if the spouse hails from a different village, in which case all the fellow villagers of the spouse are invited to partake in the feast. After the performance of such feasts, the feast giver is entitled to decorate his house with horn-like projections at the front as well as the back of the house. The only difference is that the projections at the back are slightly smaller (Fig. 9). Nevertheless, any feast giver is entitled to carve animal heads on the front wall of his house. The house posts at the front too can be carved only after he has performed the second feast. The motif of the carvings resembles the banana stalk (Fig. 10), which is purely aesthetic, whereas the carvings of animal heads and the female breast-like images are symbolic and associated with fertility and prosperity (Fig. 11).

Figs. 8–11. Various carvings indicating house of a rich man.









The mithun (*Bos frontalis*) head is the most important symbol since this animal is ritually held in the highest esteem among the rest of any animals (Fig. 12) (personal communication with Mrs. Khwüpo-prülü, 2015). The arrangement of the female breast-like motif signifies the enormity of the owner's reserves of food grain. These carvings are made with a belief that the house will protect the villagers from any untoward incidences such as famine and natural disasters. "The number of stones erected commemorating the feasts are in the series 2, 2, 4, 4, 8, 8 to complete one full cycle. If the individual still wishes to host another feast after erecting 28 stones, he is given a symbolic rebirth by being dressed up like a small boy and carried in a basket to begin the whole series again. In Chozuba, only one person by the name Mr. Dupa could earn the highest status of erecting 28 stones" (personal communication with Mr. Khrinyio Lerüo, 2019).



Fig. 12. A mithun (*Bos frontalis*) from the wild being brought to the village using rope of cane.

The arrangement of the feasts differed from village to village but essentially the series of feasts is performed with rituals where both the host and his wife have to regale the whole village. The informant from Runguzu also shared his memories of how every Feast of Merit was more elaborate and costly than the previous one but the attributes are different from what is experienced in Chozuba. With the completion of the first feast, the feast giver is entitled to wear a prestigious shawl and certain ornaments. After he has completed the second feast, he rises to the next, higher level to elaborate and adorn his house with a single house horn (meaning, of the two bargeboards meeting at the point of the gable, one of the bargeboard projections being higher than the other) and carvings of animal heads and birds on one wooden plank on the front wall of his house. After the achievement of the third feast, the roof is adorned with two bargeboards running up from the eaves and forming massive wooden horns known as *ceka*. Only after the fourth feast is the feast donor qualified to drag stones and erect them in his name. The number of stones erected for the host and his wife thereafter is incomplete without dragging stones and erecting them in a suitable area where the number of stones gets doubled in the subsequent feast or feasts in a series of 2, 4, 8, 16, and 32. With the completion of the dragging of 32 stones, a person is considered to have completed one full cycle of a Feast of Merit. He is then given a symbolic rebirth by being dressed up like a small boy and carried in a basket. Eventually, status differentiation in terms of wealth is visible from the number of stones that represents the feast donor. From the



information gathered in Runguzu, “the number of individuals who could complete the Feast of Merit series-wise are recorded as follows: 1<sup>st</sup> feast - 15 people, 2<sup>nd</sup> feast - 9 people, 3<sup>rd</sup> feast - 9 people, 4<sup>th</sup> feast - 22 people. Out of this, three persons, namely Krolhu, Muzayi, Verhiyi, stand out as hosting the feast with the neighboring village, that is to say, the house horns were also erected at the back, and they were attributed with the highest prestigious title ‘Veti-Vekrami,’ (literally meaning people with good food and good drink)” (personal communication with Mr. Murahi Vasa, 2019). From the various stages of achievement discussed above, one can conclude that the number of monuments that stands today as a cultural memory may not necessarily tally with the number of feasts experienced and concomitantly the number of houses with carvings and house horns.

## Discussion

Symbols constitute one of the most important parts of Naga material, as well as non-material, culture. The meanings established from the monoliths scattered outside the village are commemorative of a feast given by a rich man and recently a trend of looking at the Naga monuments, memories of the perspectives of monumentality and the idea of landscape has developed. Jamir’s (2005; 2019) recent work is a demonstration of deriving the idea of landscapes and social memories from stone monuments and how the conception of monumentality and landscape among the Nagas is connected with social memories. Also, a study by Wouters among the Phugwumi of the Chakhesang tribe (Wouters 2015; 2019) also deliberates over the social role of stone monuments and their potential for understanding a village ethnohistory. He further adds that megaliths both produce and communicate the form and substance of social life. What concerns us here is the parallel development confined to the elaborate carvings on the house where the rich man dwells. Apparently, the ideological meaning of a monolith erected in his name outside the village and his house equally signals the wealth of the feast donor and also creates a memory of his lifetime achievements. The manifestations of the carvings are symbolic and the dynamics fall entirely on the wealth of the village, self-sufficiency, prosperity, and fertility. According to village elders, “these symbols are carved to show that the people of the village are prosperous and their land is fertile. It is also believed that the house is blessed with benevolence and that the villagers will not suffer to live in hunger. As a newly born baby gets their first food from their mother’s milk, likewise this house will protect its people from famine and disasters. Some houses have carvings of human heads (see fig. xi *on the door frame overhead*), which signify or are related to headhunting” (personal communication with Mr. Shwupu, 2016). Meanings established from the house ornamentation conclude that the different animal head motifs denote the varieties of animal the feast donor has sacrificed for the feast and also during the rituals and ceremonies for the construction of the house. The carvings of mithun (*Bos frontalis*) heads symbolize “power, masculinity, prestige, nobility, peace and economic value” (Nienu 2014, 254) besides their ritual significance. According to the Naga belief system, the human head possesses special magical powers of enhancing “the fertility of the human population, the cattle and the crops” (Hutton 1930, 207).

Interesting views that one can derive and further research one can pursue from the above oral narrations are the significance and importance of wealth and fertility for the population. The expression of being self-sufficient connoting the rich man (the feast donor),

his clan and the whole village population relays a strong signal of wealth as the bastion of the village population. Perhaps it played an important role in the past in portraying the power and might of a village and also building relationships between different clan members. It is quite probable that there was competition between villages and even between clan members of the same village in performing Feasts of Merit, which not only created a memory of a member's lifetime achievement but also enabled him to ascend to a higher status and exercise power by bringing together the village members to work collectively for "megalithic construction, organization of feasts, labor and resources" (Jamir 2019, 139). Consequently, the more elaborate the woodcarvings earned by a feast donor in the series of the feasts, the higher the status. Another assessment derived from the number of houses identified as a rich man's relates to his pride that stems from his house being considered one imbued with benevolence. In other words, with one or more feast donors in the village, the community is confirmed as being economically secure in all spheres. Although the Nagas point to equality in social structure, in practice there is a complex system representing status and relations. As has been said by my informant, "the rich and the less privileged reciprocate one another in times of need: one needing the help of the less privileged to till the land and work in various other capacities and the other feeling secure in times of need particularly arising during shortage of food supplies" (personal communication with Mr. Khrinyio Leruo, 2019). This leads us further to examine how the rich man is able to acquire wealth although the land division was shared equally by the clan leaders who first settled and occupied the land. Besides the inherited property that comes from the family line, one instance of acquisition of land through a barter system is worth discussing. "At the time of death occurring within a family, it was a tradition and a ritual to sacrifice an item of livestock, preferably a mithun, as a sign to commemorate his life on earth, and a portion of meat known as '*thüpre*' is distributed to each and every household in the village. In the event of a death in a family which does not own livestock, he bequeaths a portion of his paddy field in exchange for a mithun from a wealthy or the rich man" (personal communication with Razukhrü Vasa, 2019). Individuals acquiring plots of paddy fields in this way probably enabled a person to harvest surplus crops, leading to accumulated wealth and thus enabling him to host the Feast of Merit.

The status one earns as a feast donor is more so in terms of his recognition as a wealthy man who, instead of accumulating wealth and crop surpluses, generously distributes to and shares with the entire population. On the other hand, the social stratification and recognition become visible in the house he occupies, decorated with massive house horns, and in his clothing and ornaments during festivals or similar feasts hosted by another individual and also in the share or portion of meat offered to him.

## Conclusion

The house designs with carvings are symbolic, whether of power or wealth, but they depict cultural ideas gathered through social and cultural memories. They also reflect the inflow of traditional skills passed down through generations, glorifying indigenous cultural life and harmonious community living. The interpretation of the symbols, alone or in combination, remained difficult because the elements of rituals and ceremonies became non-functional with the advent of Christianity, so that they were not practiced for



generations and the customs and practices were ultimately forgotten altogether. As such, "oral texts are the only source from which we can glean information on past lives" (Aier 2014, 231) and also give us information about the past by interpreting oral traditions and folklores in the "form of historical narratives and traditions interspersed with mystical and ritual symbolism held sacred by the community" (Aier 2014, 232). It is also evident that to document such practices that existed in the past "folklore is another aspect which may lead us to many unknown facts of these communities" (Sarma/Hazarika 2014, 53). The present data merely discusses the information gathered from Chozuba and Runguzu respectively, which is to say that particular types of designs may have been favored by particular cultures and that the same may not be seen in other Naga cultures.

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