

Exploring the Monumentality of Khasi-Jaintia Hills Megaliths

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Abstract

To the Khasi-Pnar community, who are considered to be the autochthons of the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya in northeastern India, the importance of their megalithic monuments is evident in their language itself, since the word “Kyn-maw” or “memory” derives from the word “Maw” or “stone.” The present paper deals with the general understanding of the megalithic monuments from these hills where the practice of erecting such monuments is a living tradition. The paper presents a summary of the functions and role of the megalithic monuments found in every nook and corner of the Khasi-Jaintia hills landscape and provides a close examination of the clan cists which are directly connected with the funerary practice of the people and their significance in the entire megalithic tradition.

Introduction

Megalithic monuments are indeed the most attractive archaeological remains visible on the landscape that carry links to the past. They dominated the landscape in many parts of the world stretching from Africa to Polynesia. Many interpretations were constructed about the functions of these monuments in the prehistoric context, linking them to the socioreligious and economic position of ancient societies. Their permanence adds new meaning to the landscape of the earlier generations so completely that they impose their consciousness today, appearing to possess a spiritual quality that conveys the feeling of eternity (Twombly 2003). Like all forms of architecture of the past, their value is derived from their age and surpasses their “practical usefulness;” they embody new meanings greater than their original functions (Forster 1982). Megalithism as a concept is not a unitary phenomenon and the terminology itself contains an assumption that cannot be supported in the material alone. What falls within this term has often been speculated upon and the purpose is often difficult to define. Besides the sepulchral megaliths which were obviously built in memory of the dead, there is another class, which again merges space and time more directly. At least some of these megaliths have long been suspected of being astronomical observatories. Megaliths for timekeeping are the earliest clocks that worked on the timescale of months and kept track of the movement of the sun and moon in order to follow the course of the seasons. They represent the first example of applied sciences since the architecture of stone observatories in astronomy. They are also the first scientific tools in the sense that they are not empirical constructs that are utilitarian, but are designed based on pre-existing observations and complex correlations which are then formalized into a utilitarian entity (Vahia et al. 2010).

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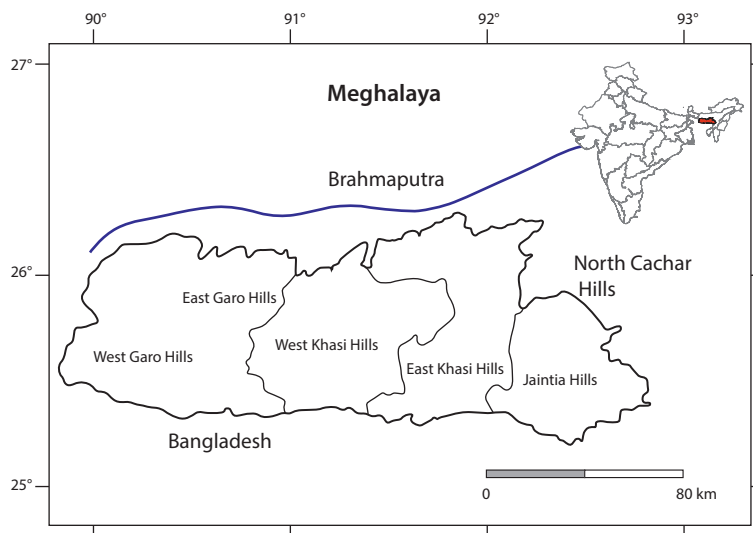


Fig. 1. Map of the Meghalaya State in India.

Dated to about 3000 BC, often in the form of stone circles, the oldest megaliths in India are found in the northwesternmost part of the country in present-day Afghanistan and the upper Indus Valley. But they are also found in almost all parts of the subcontinent including central, southern and eastern India. There is also a broad time evolution between the megaliths in the Vidarbha region of central India that are dated to between 1000 BC and 500 BC and those that are found in the eastern part of India dated to 900 AD. A large proportion of these monuments is assumed to be associated with burial or post-burial rituals including memorials to those whose remains may or may not be available. Some of these megalithic sites have been excavated and in most parts of South India they are associated with black and red ware and fall within the Iron Age.

Living megalithic tradition in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya

While the megalithic tradition which had dominated prehistoric Europe and Iron Age India had lost its popularity in the subsequent periods, among some of the tribes of Indonesia, North East India, Kerala and the Chotanagpur region, the practice of stone erection did not go out of use and continues to the present century. This practice is termed in archaeological and anthropological literature as "living megalithism" – a topic which has attracted the attention of ethnographers and anthropologists from the 19th century onwards. The study of living megalithism is crucial for archaeological research as it can provide a strong analogy to the study of megalithic cultures prevalent in the prehistoric world.

The central and eastern Meghalaya Plateau along the outlier formed by the Assam ranges in the northeastern part of India that was inhabited by the Khasi-Pnar community is one area in the region where the practice of stone monuments is a living tradition. The living megalithic practice of the Khasi-Pnar community attracted a lot of attention among the British colonial writers who curiously wrote about the preliterate Khasi society and its prehistoric practice. Their reports have become an important source of information on the subject as they recorded the practice at the time when the native people were yet to be influenced by foreign culture.

The Khasi-Jaintia Hills along with the Garo Hills fall within the state of Meghalaya in India, located between 25° 1' and 26° 5' N latitude

and between 90° 47' and 92° 52' E longitude (Fig. 1; the Khasi Hills are located between 25° 10' and 25° 25' N latitude and 91° 0' and 90° 30' E longitude and the Jaintia Hills lie between 20° 58' and 26° 3' N latitude and 91° 59' and 92° 51' E). The Meghalaya Plateau is the detached northeastern extension of Peninsular India; part of it lies buried under the alluvium deposited by the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system, which is commonly termed the Malda Gap.

The Khasi-Jaintia Hills which are covered in this paper derived their names from the word "Khasi" tribe (which includes the "Pnar" or "Jaintia" community), who are considered to be the original inhabitants of the area surrounded by other tribes such the Garos of Meghalaya, Bodos and Mikirs of Assam, Lushai of Mizoram, the Nagas of Nagaland, the tribes of Manipur state and so on. The earliest reference to the Khasi-Pnar tribe can be found in Renell's map as early as 1780, and various colonial writers have spelt the word Khasi as *Cossyah*, *Khassyah*, *Kasia*, and the like. The present name was adopted for the first time by the Christian missionaries at Cherrapunjee (Sohra) for use in their printed works.

Khasi-Pnar society

A notable feature of Khasi society is their matrilineal system, quite in contrast to all the other tribes surrounding them, who practice patrilineal systems. The Khasi matrilineal system is therefore a unique institution preserved from prehistoric times. The uniqueness of the Khasi community is also apparent in their linguistic affinity to Austro-Asiatic groups¹ in contrast to the rest of the groups around them, who speak the Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan group of languages. These two pieces of evidence clearly point to a very different (pre)historical course which the Khasis as a community have gone through.

The social structure of the Khasis is composed of the *Kurs* or the clans and all of them trace their origins to one primeval mother called *Ka lawbei Tynrai*, who is the ancestress of the respective clan. In the clan line, there follows the *Ka lawbei Tymmen* or the great-grandmother, who is the founder of the sub-clan; then finally comes the *Ka lawbei Khyinraw* or grandmother, who is the ancestress of the family or the *ling*. From the male line, *U Thawlang* is revered as the ancestral father of the clan and *U Suidnia* is the eldest maternal uncle of the clan. The Khasi marriage system is strictly exogamous, and it is considered a great taboo to marry within the clan or within the sister clans who trace their origins to the same ancestress. The people follow strict matrilineal practice whereby the youngest daughter, in theory,² inherits the ancestral house.

The origin of clans among the Khasis is attributed to the different traditions that each clan has managed to preserve in its oral history for generations. Some clans adopted their mothers' names, and there are clans which appear to have totemistic names tracing their origin to some species of animals, trees or plants such as *Shrieh* or monkey, *Tham* or crab, *Bee* or ngapi, *Diengdoh* or wooden trough, *Pathaw* or pumpkin, *Sohkhia* or cucumber, *Malngiang* or fish, and so on. There are stray traditions whereby some clans consider it a taboo to eat certain plants or animals. For example, the Malngiang clan consider pork a taboo; to the Ryntathiang clan, eating a sweet lime fruit or *Soh Nairiang* is considered a taboo; the Pathaw clan also consider eating pumpkin a taboo. It cannot be said with certainty whether totemistic practices prevailed among the Khasis. Some scholars, however, argue that totemism among the Khasis correlates with the practice of exogamy, in which the taboo of eating a particular

- 1 Linguistics studies indicate that Khasi belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of languages, which in turn belongs to the Austro-Asiatic type, a branch of the Austric family of languages - a theory developed by Father W. Schmidt. The Austro-Asiatic group of languages includes, besides Khasi, the Munda family, chiefly spoken by the Mundari, Nicobares, Mundas, Santal, Ho and Gadabas of Chotanagpur Plateau, the Mon of southern Myanmar and southwestern Thailand, the Khmer of Cambodia, Wa and Palaung of Myanmar, Sakai and Semang tribes of Malayasia and many other tribes.
- 2 She has no right whatsoever to dispose of the ancestral inheritance without the consent of her maternal uncles or her male kin. Practically, she is only the custodian of the lion's share of the family or clan's property.

animal or plant belonging to its totem connotes the danger of marrying someone within his own totem (Roy 1936, 34). But there are also clans which bear the names of their ancient settlements, while others trace their descent to the goddess from whom the ruling clan originated. A clan having a common descent may not necessarily bear the same name because over time the original clan would have branched out and assumed different names. But there is a tradition strongly preserved in the minds of the people that guides each clan to trace its affiliation (if there is any) with another clan through common descent. By this conventional method, the clans which are but overgrown families are formally knitted together through the practice of exogamous marriage and the institution of ancestor worship, which is vividly expressed in funerary practices. In the pre-Christian funerary practice, the clan would gather together and relocate their post-cremation bones from their individual family cists to a common clan sepulcher. The ancestral house of the clan or the *ling Seng ka kur* is held with sanctity. The house is a place for hosting generations of youngest daughters³ and offers refuge to other members of the family and the clan. The house would be the host for all religious ceremonies that involve the family or the clan.

Megalithic practice of the Khasis

The earliest detailed report on Khasi megaliths attracted the attention of the British colonial workers as early as the time when they came into contact with the people after the British colonists annexed the hills in the 1830s. The first documented report was provided by H. Walters, who described the three types of monument that represent Khasi megalithism. Then followed the report of Lt. H. Yule, who provided descriptions of the standing stones and stone cromlechs (*sic*). Yule claimed that the Khasis would erect standing stones in groups of odd numbers varying from three to thirteen. He was the first person who made an effort to understand the implication of the Khasi village names with reference to the stones and provided examples of villages such as *Mawsmmai* from the "Oath Stone," *Mawmluh* "Salt Stone," *Mawphlang* or "Grassy Stone." Another worker, J. D. Hooker, provided a brief and yet decisive description of the monuments. Although his interest in these hills was mainly to catalogue the diverse flora, he also reported on the spectacular megalithic monuments of Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills and remarked on the placement of the ashes of the dead on the stone monuments.

A treatise on the subject of megalithism was provided by H. H. Godwin-Austen, who also wrote his article before the major earthquake that rocked the Khasi Hills in 1897. In fact, many of the monuments described in his paper are no longer standing today. Writing during those early days, Major Austen had first-hand information about the megalithic tradition especially and its relationship with the funerary practices of the people which many scholars writing after him could no longer observe. The most important contribution of his work was his report on the use of spars of rounded logs to drag stones from the quarries. He made a clear demarcation between the stones which are memorial in nature and those which are related to funerary practices. He was also the first writer to have identified the male and female stones in the category of memorial stones. His report showed the diverse cultural significance of the monuments and stated that the Khasis erected stones for a variety of reasons, such as recovery from illness, acquisition of wealth, and the like.

The subject of Khasi megaliths received the attention of another worker, C. B. Clarke, who provides us with a detailed scientific treatise

3 The youngest daughters, in practice, inherited the lion's share of the inheritance of the family or clan, including the ancestral property.

on the megalithic monuments of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. His report mentions three types of rock, such as the Cherra sandstone, Shillong sandstone and granite, the three basic rock types used for building megalithic monuments. He also mentions the method of transportation of big stones with the help of poles and the method of erecting large monuments with the aid of a rudimentary form of pulley. He speculates that the monuments found at the village of Laitlyngkot in the Khasi Hills (which fell after the earthquake) are the oldest of the megalithic structures in the hills. He was also the first to identify that the ashes (post-cremation bones) of males and females are kept in separate cists.

The work of Pvt. Gurdon provided a closer insight into the megalithic culture of the people – the subject of a separate chapter in his monograph about the Khasis. There are other later writers like J. P. Mills, J. H. Hutton, von Fürer-Haimendorf and local scholars such as David Roy who have contributed to the understanding of the subject through their first-hand information that is of great value to the present and future research into the megalithic culture of the Khasis. Their works can be considered seminal as they have recorded the practice and the cultural relevance of the monuments at a time when much of the traditional practice still survives in an undisturbed cultural atmosphere.

Types of megaliths in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

In order to understand the variations in the megalithic monuments distributed along the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, the following classes are typical of the monuments as far as their shapes, functions and meanings are concerned.

Menhirs

Here, menhir refers to an undressed upright monolith. These stones occur sometimes alone or in rows of 3, 5, 7, 9 and occasionally 11 to 30. Their height varies from 1 m to 4 m (Godwin-Austen 1872, 140). They are hewn from materials like sandstone, gneiss, and granite, depending on the availability of the raw materials. Most of the menhirs found in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills are in alignments of three or more and they always occur in association with one type of table stone. These standing stones are technically called the *Maw Shynrang* or the male stone. The tallest recorded monument measures 8 m in height from the ground, with a maximum breadth of 0.78 m, and it is found in the village of Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills. The largest cluster of



Fig. 2. Tallest Menhir from Nartiang.

monuments consisting of 11 upright stones and table stones is found in a place called Laitlyngkot in the Khasi Hills.⁴ The tallest stone measures 5.72 m from the ground, and the largest table stone weighs about 21.2 metric tons (Fig. 2) (Godwin-Austen 1872, 141).

Within this category of megalithic monuments is also another class of monument called trilithons, where two upright stones support the horizontal stone slab on top. This form of monument is rare and only stray evidence postulates that they are found in the Khasi Hills (Chowdhury 1996, 184). Clarke, writing in 1874, provided a sketch of the sort of monument that resembles a trilithon although he never mentioned its location (Clarke 1874). However, there is absolutely no information from any sources about its age or functional purpose.

Table stones

Table stones are loosely described here as types of dolmen, which refers here to all stones having a horizontal slab supported by two or more vertical slabs, forming a table-like structure. On the basis of their structural and functional variations, the Khasi dolmens can be grouped under the following types:

Type 1: These refer to table stones which are found mostly in association with standing stones. They are rough and simple with sometimes oval or irregular shapes (Fig. 3–5). Technically, they are always known as the *Maw Kynthei* or the “Female Stones.”



Fig. 3 and 4. Dolmen-type-1: Table Stones placed in front of the standing stones.



4 According to Godwin-Austen, these formed the largest collection of huge stone slabs recorded from the hills and, due to their unique arrangement, he speculated that they were erected for a different purpose, probably as a place for meetings of the chiefs or elders of the clan. He estimated that the weight of the largest stone was 20 tons.



Fig.5. Dolmen-type-1: Table Stones placed in front of the standing stones.

Standing stones with table stone type 1

Mawbyinna Niam: These are memorial stones erected to proclaim the completion of the funerary rites and rituals pertaining to the bone placement ceremony. They are primarily erected in memory of the deceased ancestors from the maternal side of the clan or the great maternal uncle. They are basically stones of purificatory rites. They are generally formed of three upright stones and one table stone. The middle upright stone is always ascribed to the *Kni Rangbah* or the eldest maternal uncle of the clan. The other upright stones on the sides are called *Maw Pyrsa* or stone of the nephew, who will eventually take up the role of maternal uncle in the future. The table stone is always placed in front of the middle upright stone, and this stone is ascribed to the *lawbei Tymmen* or the great ancestress of the clan or to the *lawbei Kpoh* or the great-grandmother of the family, or to the *lawbei Khyraw* or the grandmother of the family. They are called purificatory stones because they are associated with the performance of religious rites and sacrifice, particularly those related to funerary practices.

Functionally, these classes of monument, derived from local nomenclature in terms of their meaning, are categorized under the following types:

Maw Lynti or *Maw Kjat:* Literally translated as “Foot Stones or Path Stone.” These stones are erected at the time when the family of the deceased is on the way to deposit the cremated bones or ashes in the cist.

Maw Umkoi: Literally refers to the “Purificatory Stone.” It is erected at the time when the bones of a person having suffered an unnatural death are washed in a small artificial tank before being placed on the stone cist.

Maw Klim: Literally translated as “Stone of Adultery.” Such stones are erected only at the time when the family of the deceased performs a rite and a sacrifice to remove the bond of marriage.

Mawbyinna Nam: Literally “Memorial Stone,” a general name for all types of memorial stone, which may or may not be associated with the performance of rites and rituals. These types of stones are erected on certain occasions or even at any given time. The number of upright stones also varied, for example 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 11 and even up to 30 of them, sometimes with one or two table stones, sometimes

without. The erection of these types of stone is also ascribed to both the maternal and the paternal sides of the family or clan. The tallest stone in the alignment is always ascribed to *U Thawlang* or the father of the clan, and the table stone in front is always ascribed to the *Ki-awkha* or the paternal grandmother.

Maw Ksing: Literally referred to as “Drum Stone(s).” Stones of this type are erected during the performance of *Ka Phur Ka Siang* or the ceremonial dance. They are always erected alongside the *Maw Thawlang* or the father stone and the *Maw Kiawkha* or the paternal grandmother stone. The number of these stones depends on the number of families from the paternal side who participate in the dance ceremony.

Maw Kait: “Stones of banana offering” are erected at the time when the relatives of the paternal family visit the house of their in-laws and offer a banana to a newly born child.

Within the class of monuments mentioned above are arrays of other memorial stones that are erected for other occasions. These include stones erected to commemorate a newly founded village and those erected in places where regular religious activities are conducted. Another spectacular stone alignment formed from 30 upright stones without any table stones is also found at the village of Sutnga in the Jaintia Hills: it is connected with the memory of a woman who had 30 husbands. Although the story has no reliable source, it still provides important which suggests that certain peculiar achievements in the society are also commemorated by stones. In fact, many of the places or villages in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills are prefixed by the name *Maw* (stone), directly connecting them with the megalithic monuments. Thus Lt. Yule attempts to explain that the name *Maw-mluh* (salt) was derived from the lapping of salt from a sword (being a Khasi form of taking an oath) and the village name *Maw-smai* (oath) came from an oath between two parties. There are numerous other examples where villages derived their names from megalithic practice. Godwin-Austen therefore states in his first-hand account that these monuments are also erected, for example, when someone who has recovered from illness puts up a set of stones in honor of one of his ancestors, who, it is presumed, on knowing of the intention, will have done his best to save him.

Table stones type 2

These are known in the local dialect as *Maw Shongthait*, literally translated as “resting stones.” Although these monuments have altogether no relation with the dead, it is important to note them here since their manner of occurrence and their identical forms might lead to confusion with other similar structural monuments having altogether different implications. They are usually square, oval and even circular in section. Most of them are made from rough and undressed stone slabs and there are four supporting vertical slabs (Fig. 6). They generally serve as a resting place for travelers as in many cases they are found on the sides of footpaths leading to farms or marketplaces.

Cists

These are the most important megalithic structures as they are directly connected with the funerary practices of the people. In the local dialect, they are called *Maw-shyieng* or bone repository and *Maw-bah* or clan stone cist. These are very common throughout the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and are mainly associated with the placement of cremated bones. The monuments vary in shape and form



Fig. 6. Dolmen-type-2: Resting stones along the path.

and they are always found erected above the surface of the ground (Figs. 7–11). Some of them are finely dressed stones while others are made from rough stone slabs. Their basic structure is usually an overlying top slab supported by four or more vertical stone slabs equally dressed into fine pillars (Figs. 12 and 13).

There are two categories of cist from the area of study and although similar in shape if not in size their meanings are quite different. The first type includes cists belonging to an individual or *Maw-Shyieng* (temporary bone repository); such cists are smaller and connected with the funerary ritual immediately after the body is cremated. The second type belongs to the clan or *Maw-Bah* big bone repository, which houses the bones of all the clan members. The clan cist ceremony is usually conducted after an interval of a few years when bones of all the clan members are collected from the small individual cists and placed in the clan cist as the permanent repository for the bones. These clan cists are usually larger than the ones for individuals, ranging between 1 and 2 m² in area and 0.5 and 1.5 m in height. In most parts of the Khasi Hills, the clan cist is usually encircled with stone boulders roughly 3–4 m in diameter and, on the eastern part of the circular structure, a narrow opening is made through



Fig. 7 and 8. Different types of clan cists from Khasi-Jaintia Hills.





Fig.9–11. Different types of clan cists from Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

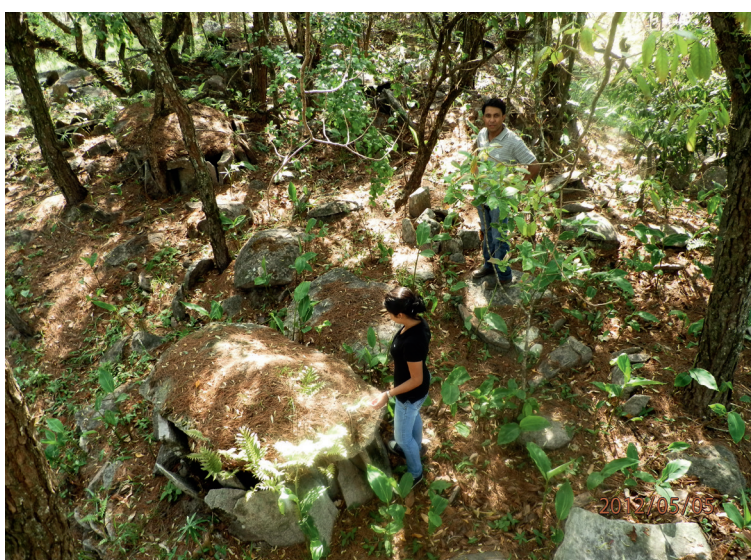


Fig. 12 and 13. Megalithic grave sites with multiple cists.

a passageway leading to the chamber of the cist. In the Jaintia Hills, clan cists are found to be simpler in construction, without any stone circle or passageway, but the chamber is generally larger and sturdier.

Stone enclosure

Besides the commonly occurring megalithic monuments mentioned above, there are the cenotaphs or the resting places, which are locally known as the *Kors*. They are dry masonry structures built with well-dressed squarish stone blocks to provide (a seating) resting facility. They are considered to be megalithic monuments because, apart from their primary function as resting places, they are also forms of memorials to the dead and are therefore erected by the family or relatives or even the village, in memory of a dead person.

Cairn

The cairn is another form of megalithic monument that appears in published literature. It is a heap of stones created after a primary burial is completed (Fig. 14). This form is mostly confined to the northern side of the Khasi Hills plateau and in some areas of the Jaintia Hills. Godwin Austen, in his writing before 1872, claimed he saw this type of structure south of Jowai in Jaintia Hills District. He even recorded artifacts of bangles and brass wristlets along with calcine bone pieces from the spot. He speculated that they were very old, pointing to the fact that no information was derived from the local inhabitants regarding their age.

Fig. 14. Cairn from Khasi Hills.



Stone jars

Found widely scattered in Laos, these are another class of megalithic monuments found scattered in various areas of the North Cachar Hills of Assam and along the Saipung Reserve of the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. They are built in the shape of hollow jars and hewn from locally available rocks and are sometimes pear-shaped or taper towards the tip (Fig. 15). They are buried below the ground and only the flared mouth is left exposed to the surface. These monuments are considered megalithic because earlier scholars who studied them in the North Cachar Hills claimed to have found remains of human bones inside these hollow monoliths and hence they can be classed as funerary monuments.



Fig. 15. Stone Jars from Eastern Jaintia Hills.

Megalithic cluster sites

These are standing stones with table stones found in concentrated clusters erected by different families or clans or by the entire village community at a particular spot. At such cluster sites, there are numbers of standing stones with table stones belonging to different family or clans who stake claims to ownership of a particular village (Figs. 16–18). They are mostly associated with market sites where exchanges take place and where village assemblies are conducted.

The above-mentioned clusters are recorded from different localities throughout the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. There could be a concentration of as many as more than 100 standing stones and more than 50 table stones on a single cluster site.

An overview of these cluster sites connects them directly as centers of socio-economic and political importance. Some of these cluster sites are located close to areas of large agricultural tracts and fertile valleys. There are clusters close to the plains of Bangladesh, indicating commercial centers at these sites. There are also clusters which were known to be centers of iron smelting and the traditional iron industry, which thrived till the last century. Finally, there are megalithic clusters located in areas where early tribal state formations in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills are said to have made their first appearance. These areas also represent centers of nascent political activities where the ruling elites first appeared in the area.

The presence of these clustered monuments in a certain selected landscape of the hills indicates the significance of these areas and the activities that thrived at the time. The monuments and their clusters also strongly affirm the presence of a regulatory mechanism that operated within the sociopolitical system, indicating a dynamic cultural process taking place in the formation of tribal identity.

The concentration of monuments in the Khasi and Jaintia hills is always found at the highest point of the landscape, visible from a great distance when the area is devoid of vegetation cover. Such points are mostly the ridge of a hill overlooking either two sides or one side of a valley. This location pattern is clearly discernable in many of the cluster sites, especially in the Khasi Hills. The selection of the ridges for erecting megaliths and other funerary monuments indicates that the areas are marked as territorial boundaries of a



Fig. 16–18: Some of the Megalithic cluster sites of Khasi-Jaintia Hills.



village or settlement. It may therefore be said with a great degree of accuracy that the Khasi megaliths are primarily territorial markers in the physical landscape that in a way exhibited clan solidarity and clan-based settlements.

Monumentality of the clan cist

The clan cists are the most important constructions in the entire megalithic culture of the Khasi-Pnar people. The practice of placing cremated bones of the clan members could be directly connected with the migration of the community into these hills, which may date back to the occupation by Neolithic people in the area (Mitri 2016). But since no datings are available for the clan cists, it is still a conjecture to directly associate the megalithic practice with the Neolithic occupation of the hills.

Current ethnographic research into the practice in the Khasi Hills clearly reveals that most of the megalithic monuments in the landscape, except for those found in cluster areas, are in some way or other connected with the funerary rites performed during the bone placement ceremony at the time of the erection of the clan cist.

The clan cist reflects clan solidarity as it involves the participation of every outgrown family of the clan during the relocation of the bones of the family members from the temporary individual cist to the permanent clan cist. Although clans, over the years, break up into different sub-clans, each bearing a different clan name, the clan tie is still always accepted with reverence. The clan cist ceremony is usually conducted at the *ling Seng* or the ancestral house where the clan is said to have originated. Dispersed families of the clan would congregate at the ancestral house for the occasion and along their route they would erect various standing stones with table stones in honor of their ancestors (*tress*).

In the archaeological context, the clan cists are crucial as they can be strong indicators of the occupation of the land and the right of ownership of a particular landscape by a specific family that eventually grows into a clan. The practice of building clan cists is directly connected with the development of an organized settlement or a clan-based control settlement. It may be inferred that the megalithic practice of the Khasi-Pnar community in general is therefore closely linked with the resource mobilization from the land.

Looking at the practice from an ethnographic perspective, the clan cists on the other hand are the living symbols of clan bonding and an important social mechanism that helps to knit together the dispersed living clan relatives. The clan cist ceremony is also an important pointer to the traditional belief system of the Khasi-Pnar community narrowing down the Khasi religious beliefs and practices as a family-based and clan-based worship of ancestors. Thus the very purpose of relocating the bones from the individual cists to the clan cist is attached to a strong belief that the clan will reunite again in the next life. Consequently, until the clan cist ceremony is completed, the reunion of the dead clan members cannot take place. It may be concluded that from the array of megalithic constructions found in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the clan cists carry with them the most eclectic cultural symbol of the people, as they are installed with wide-ranging meaning that encompasses the totality of the people's lives and culture. Although the tradition of erecting clan cists is still prevalent in some remote parts of the hills, their practical use in the lives of the community has already faded and is slowly transforming into a new and far bigger meaning.

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