Megaliths and Social Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills

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The practice of setting up megalithic monuments was a widespread phenomenon both in time and space. Such activity, which involved the modification of the natural environment, provides valuable insights into human behaviour, through the meanings inscribed into them. Megalithic monuments, which are essentially commemorative in nature, are found widely distributed in various parts of northeast India. The Khasi-Jaintias, the Garos, the Nagas and the Mizos, all display strong megalithic traits in the various types of stone and wooden memorials that are raised in honour of the dead, and as tallies in the so-called 'feasts of merit'. 'Megalithism' among these groups was part of a living tradition until very recent times.[1] The characteristic features of this practice include the raising of stone uprights (menhirs), table-stones (dolmens), bone repositories (cists, cairns, etc.), stone-seats, stone circles, as well as straight and forked wooden posts, as memorials to the dead, and to the living. No essential difference exists between the memorials of stone and wood, which appear to be based on similar conceptions and attitudes, which sought to emphasize the inter-connectedness between the living and the dead. The driving force behind the practice appears to be the belief that the spirits of the deceased — whether those of ancestors, as in

the Khasi-Jaintia case, or those of chiefs, wealthy tribesmen, or even enemy heads, as in the Naga or Garo case — are sources of fertility. Such spirits are thought to have a powerful influence on the prosperity and increase of human beings and crops, and ultimately on the continuity of the tribe as a whole.[2]

In Khasi-Jaintia society, although the megalithic monuments are certainly linked to concepts of the unity of matrilineal ancestry and social continuity, fertility and social merit, they are also associated with more complex events and processes involving the struggles among members of the society, over the exercise of social power. 'Elites'[3] commonly express dominant ideologies in a material culture that is grand and lasting. Megalithic constructions are one such strategy of domination. 'Megaliths', as the visible markers of culture, make firm a set of beliefs, values, etc., thus playing an active role in forming and giving meaning to social behaviour. In this paper, the ethno-archaeological approach is used, in an attempt to link megalithic monuments with the process of social formations in Khasi-Jaintia society.

From the outset, it should be emphasized that in the context of the hill areas of the northeast, the conventional chronological ordering of history into Ancient, Medieval and Modern, is not possible in the absence of written sources. However, concepts like Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial, have been found more useful.

The beginning of the megalithic tradition of the Khasi-Jaintia people, can certainly be assigned to the Pre-Colonial period, as amply testified by early British accounts.[4] These accounts contain copious references to the large numbers of megalithic monuments that were already in existence at the time of their first contact with these hill people. The question is, when did they first erect these monuments? Since excavation of these monuments has never been attempted in view of local sentiments, it is impossible to give absolute dates. However, through cross-cultural dating methods by linking the history of the Khasi-Jaintia people with those of the neighbouring groups in the region, we believe that the full-flowering of this tradition was achieved under the *Syiem*ships roughly assigned to the period beginning from the sixteenth and extending to the nineteenth centuries. Therefore the beginning of the

tradition, in the form of smaller monuments, particularly the bone-repositories such as the cairns and cists can probably be traced back a few centuries earlier, possibly even pre-dating the thirteenth century.

I

To the Khasi-Jaintias, the universe is full of spirits. There is the great spirit, *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*, who created all things. This 'High God' was however rather vague in nature, and played a much smaller role than did the many lesser deities who had a powerful influence, good and bad, over human beings.[5] But undoubtedly, the most revered of the spirits, who also have a more immediate bearing on the fortunes of men, are the spirits of the first ancestors of the clan — *U Suidnia*, the first maternal uncle of the clan, *Ka Iawbei*, the ancestress of the clan, and *U Thawlang*, husband of *Ka Iawbei*, and the first ancestor of the clan. Together they represent the progenitors of the clan or *Kur*, reflecting their matrilineal clan organization. That Khasi cosmology emphasizes the inter-connectedness between the world of the living and that of the spirits, is reflected in their concept of the afterworld, where ancestors live a life very similar to life on earth. This is implicit in funeral ceremonies where the dead are given food, drink, and other requirements to help them on their journey to the afterworld. The deceased are also often asked to convey messages to relatives who have passed on. Funeral rites, which constitute the most important religious ceremony that a Khasi performs, is closely tied up with the veneration of ancestors. Ancestors are believed to be constantly watching over their living relatives. They punish those who break the customs or fail in their kinship obligations. Such persons are cursed with illness, misfortune and barrenness. On the other hand, those who adhere to the prescribed norms of social conduct, are blessed with progeny, material prosperity, health and longevity.[6] Ceremonial words used at funerals, as well as megalithic rituals, which are invariably connected with the cult of the dead, express this strong sense of dependence on the ancestors. Nowhere is this idea more clearly reflected than in the setting up of stone memorials in honour of the ancestors.

The most common type of memorials are those erected in honour of the matrilineal kin. Such a monument may consist of three menhirs and a dolmen or five menhirs and a dolmen, sometimes going up to seven, nine or more menhirs (invariably in odd numbers), with two dolmens. In all cases the central menhir is always higher than those flanking it on either side, and represents *U Suidnia* or the maternal uncle of a clan. This stone is also called *Mawkñi*, i.e., maternal uncle stone. The uprights flanking the *Mawkñi* called *Mawbud, Mawpyrsa*, represent the younger male members of a clan, such as brothers or nephews.[7] That the stone uprights always stood for male members, is reflected in the general term used — *Mawshynrang* (*Maw-* stone, *shynrang* — male). The dolmen or table-stone placed in front of the menhirs is called *Mawiawbei* or the ancestress stone. Such dolmens are also referred to by the general term *'Mawkynthei'* (*Maw* — stone, *kynthei* — female). If two dolmens are placed together side by side, the one to the left represents the root ancestress and the one to the right, the younger ancestress, i.e., ancestress of the sub-clan, or family respectively.[8] Therefore such monuments may be raised in honour of the first ancestors of the clan or *Kur*, or of the subsequent descendants, i.e., the younger ancestors, from whom originated the *Kpoh* or sub-clan, and the *ïng* or family. In Khasi-Jaintia society, although the clan system or *Kur*, is one of the most significant indices of their cultural unity, it is important only at the higher collectivity level, serving the purpose of enforcing the rule of exogamy and social order. In reality, effective kinship obligations tend to be observed at the lower level of descent groupings, such as the *Kpoh* or sub-clan, and *ïng* or extended family. We will return to this point later in the discussion. In keeping with the matrilineal clan organization of the Khasi-Jaintias, a greater percentage of such memorials to ancestors are dedicated to members of the matrilineal kin group. However, monuments in honour of ancestors of the non-matrilineal kin, the *Kha*, are not lacking either. Where the father has played a substantial role in the well-being and prosperity of the family he has married into, particularly in expanding the clan or siring a number of children, he and his matrilineal kin are honoured by memorials that are similar to the ones described above. However, in this case, the central stone is

called *U Mawthawlang* or ancestor-stone, while those flanking it on either side, and the dolmen in front, represent the male and female ancestors respectively, of the *Kha* group.[9] The terminology used to designate the various stones are very specific and categorical, and a range of social relationships can be invoked through them.

In Khasi-Jaintia society, megalithic rituals which were extremely elaborate were invariably connected with the cult of the dead.[10] Of the structures linked with such rituals, the most significant are the *Mawshyieng* or bone repositories. In 'traditional' Khasi-Jaintia society, the dead are cremated and their bones collected by the matrilineal kin, which are then deposited or interred into a small bone repository, or *Mawshyieng*. This is however, only a temporary repository, since the ideal according to Khasi religious belief, is the internment of bones of all clan members into their final resting place, the *Mawbah* or clan repository. The centrality of the megalithic rituals connected with the bone collection and internment ceremony into the *Mawbah*, in the religious life of the Khasi, is linked with the idea that it symbolizes their identity and continuity as a group. The *Mawbah* is the embodiment of their spiritual and social values; perceived as preserving patterns of activity and social relations, they are vital for maintaining social cohesion and order in society.

Closely linked with the *Mawbah* ceremonies, are the raising of megalithic monuments called *Mawkjat-Mawlynti*, literally the stone of the leg and stone of the path.[11] The terminology is derived from the location and function of these memorials. The *Mawkjat-Mawlynti*, are usually erected at the time when the bones of deceased kinsmen, are transferred into the *Mawbah*. These memorials are composed of three menhirs and a dolmen, and are dedicated to the ancestors of the *Kur* or *Kpoh*. The number of *Mawkjat-Mawlynti*, erected in the course of the rituals so performed depended on the number of *kpoh* participating in such an exercise.[12] Thus, if two *kpoh* are involved, two sets of *Mawkjat-Mawlynti* were erected, totalling six menhirs and two dolmens, raised side by side. The *Mawkjat-Mawlynti* raised in honour of ancestral spirits, are meant to provide a resting place for the spirits of deceased as well as showing the path for the spirits to follow their bones to the *Mawbah*, where, according

to Khasi belief, the spirits are once again re-united into their matrilineal fold. Occasionally, when the *Mawbah* is full, a new one may be constructed. In such an event, another set of triliths called *Mawniam* were raised close to the new *Mawbah*.[13] Some clans also raised monuments called *Mawksing*, *Mawkiat* or *Mawja*. Usually consisting of five menhirs, these memorials are raised at a suitable place near the road, a year or two after the *Mawbah* rituals and following the *aibam* ceremony or ritual feeding of the dead.[14]

It may be noted that the raising of *Mawbah*, *Mawkjat-Mawlynti*, *Mawniam* etc., call for the performance of elaborate and complicated rituals, entailing the sacrifice of animals ranging from fowls, goats, pigs, to cows and bulls as well.[15] Ritual dancing to the beating of drums and the playing of the flute were also part of the rites observed.[16] According to H. Lyngdoh, sometimes goats offered at such sacrifices had their horns dressed in silver and gold called *'lang rupa*, *'lang ksiar*.[17] Such ceremonies could stretch between three to six days. This lavish display of hospitality by the donors towards fellow members of the village community strongly recall the characteristic features of the 'feasts of merit' practised by the Nagas and other tribes, although among the Khasi they are ostensibly linked with the cult of the dead. In this context, Hooker's observation on the Khasi funeral ceremonies is worth mentioning. He states, "the funeral ceremonies are the only ones of any importance and are often conducted with barbaric pomp and expense."[18]

As discussed earlier, kinship ties and obligations among the Khasi are much stronger at the level of the *kpoh* and *ïng*. In fact, for the ordinary Khasi, the *ïng* constitutes the only religious and functional unit. This is clearly brought out by the large number of small bone-repositories or *Mawshyieng* found widely distributed throughout the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, both in the uplands and the lower slopes, while *Mawbahs* have a much smaller distribution, and are invariably linked with founding families and clans.[19] As Chie Nakane observed, "... neither clan solidarity nor co-operative activities are found among the Khasi, except in those clans which are considered of higher status, and maintain a functional position in the political or religious fields. Such are the Siem (*Syiem*) of the ruling clan and the Lingdoh (*Lyngdoh*) of the priest clan, etc. Among commoners like the

villagers of Sohkynduh and Kongton, the importance of a *Kur* is confined to recognizing a common ancestress, with a common Mauba (*Mawbah*) conception, which requires them to maintain a strict exogamous rule."[20]

Since the *Mawkjat* and *Mawlynti, Mawniam* etc., are closely linked with the *Mawbah*, it also follows that these categories of memorials were only raised by the so called *Jaid bakhraw* i.e., dominant or founding clans, representing the 'local elite' in a village community. The labour, time and expense involved in such megalithic rituals lend support to this assumption. In the raising of these monuments, members of the village community were obliged to render voluntary help, receiving only some food and liquor in the evening at the donor's house. Where skilled labour was required for the cutting and shaping of stones, they were paid for their services. Apparently, while such work was in progress, the workers were entertained by musicians beating on small drums.[21]

From the preceding discussion, it appears that only members of a family from descent groups accorded a higher ritual status in a village community, observe the more elaborate funerary rituals culminating in the erection of *Mawbah, Mawkjat-Mawlynti, Mawniam* etc., as status and religious symbols. It is unlikely that persons other than the 'local elite', who commanded respect and authority by virtue of their ascribed status, as the original or founding clans, could mobilize the labour or resources required for such undertakings. A significant parallel that can be cited on the issue of labour organization for megalithic constructions, is provided by the Ho Mundas of Chota Nagpur. It appears that the number of tribesmen that offer their voluntary service on such occasions, depend partly on the estimation in which the deceased was held, and partly on the amount of refreshments — chiefly rice beer — that the family of the deceased, were prepared to stand.[22] This observation reiterates our stand that such memorials were raised by the more privileged groups in society.

II

Traditional accounts suggest that when the Khasi-Jaintias first came to occupy their present homeland they did so in groups

of clans, staking claim to the territory settled by them.[23] Families belonging to the same clan lived together in clusters. The eldest male from among the members of the founding clan or clans (sometimes more than one descent group occupied the same territory), combined in his person, both secular and sacerdotal powers.[24] In his role as the mediator between the community and the unseen forces, he was called *U Saidnia*, i.e., one who mediates. On the other hand, as the head of the clan administration, he was called *U Basan Shnong* or village head. Thus the political community was clan-based. As the original clans increased in numbers, and were also joined by new clans in a given territory, there would have come a stage when a settlement could not sustain all members of a population, since shifting cultivation is an extensive strategy, requiring the sequential fallowing of garden plots for regeneration. Therefore families or even whole branches of a *Kur* moved out to start new settlements in adjoining areas.[25] Gradually, more and more village settlements emerged in this way. Choice of leaders or village heads was confined to the representatives of the founding or original clans, called *Jaid Bakhraw*.[26] Usually numerically predominant, they constituted the local elite, receiving more respect and consideration than those of other clans, and exerted a greater influence in the assembly of elders, who regulated the affairs of the village. They tended to have more land which was usually the choicest as well.[27] That they had proprietary rights over them, is indicated by the term *ri kynti* or private land, as distinct from *ri raid* or community land.

David Roy[28] traces the origin of the concept of private property among the Khasi to the time when the *Jaid bakhraw* or founding families first came to occupy the Khasi-Jaintia hills, claiming proprietary rights over the land. "... won or obtained by them." Such lands came to be recognized as *ri kynti* lands i.e., "... land held as absolute possessions, that are heritable and transferable at will." He further states that such lands were demarcated by boundary stones called *Mawbri-Mawsam*. The *Mawbri* consists of a set of three stone uprights, rarely exceeding 1–1.5 feet in height. The central stone is called *Mawthylliej*, i.e., the pointer or index stone. According to Khasi belief, it is taboo or *sang* to touch or disturb such stones, for fear of being inflicted by disease or rheumatic pains.[29] On the other hand, land not

occupied as absolute possessions by clans, classed as *ri raid*, are never demarcated by any boundary stones. Roy also maintains that *ri kynti* and *ri raid*, under the control of the *jaid bakhraw* or leading families, together constitute *ka it ka hima*. This suggests that the concept of *'hima'* generally associated with the emergence of *Syiem*ships, is essentially a concept implying territoriality not necessarily linked with *Syiem*ship. Apparently, the Khasi-Jaintias had developed quite early a strong sense of territoriality, with the *mawbri-mawsam* functioning as title deeds to land.

Thus in traditional Khasi-Jaintia society, property ownership tended to become more closely identified with particular descent groups that were recognized as having more prestige and status than others. This encouraged the emergence of petty chieftainships made up of a village or a group of inter-related villages under the political authority of local elite, such as the *Basans, Lyngdohs, Dolois*, drawn from dominant clans. Therefore prior to the emergence of *Syiem*ship which is an extended version of the petty chieftainships, a power structure centering around the offices of *Basans, Lyngdohs and Dolois*, was well in place and had become hereditary.[30] Such groups had greater access to vital resources and labour. The legitimacy of their claims was buttressed and given concrete expression through elaborate megalithic rituals and the raising of memorials dedicated to ancestors, who sustain the tribe.[31]

So why did the institution of *Syiem*ship emerge? Folk tradition suggests that the institution of *Syiem*ship is linked to the emergence of new social and economic problems in society, requiring adjustments to the existing power structure to deal with them.[32] Some of the problems frequently cited include, (a) the settlement of property and wealth belonging to families that had become extinct; (b) the accumulation of wealth through wrongful means such as the propitiation of evil spirits; (c) crimes requiring the imposition of fines and imprisonment of offender.[33] Apparently the traditional elite felt that under such circumstances, they could no longer administer their territories efficiently, in accordance with the tenets of their religion and moral values. Therefore the *bakhraw* jointly took a decision to identify certain families from which leaders would be chosen to undertake the responsibility of dealing with these new

problems. The families so identified gave rise to a new descent group, *ka Jaid Syiem* or the *Syiem* clan.[34]

In the Khasi-Jaintia case, it appears that the development of trade and the co-ordination of trading activities, played a crucial role in the rise of *Syiem*ships. Both the Khasis and Jaintias were known to be great traders.[35] Thomas Fisher, Superintendent of Kachar, states that the 'Kasias' prefer to call themselves the '*Khyee*'.[36] This is an interesting observation, since the word '*khai*' means trade in Khasi and a trader is called *Nongkhaï*. The main items of export from the Khasi-Jaintia hills to the plains of Bengal and Assam were iron, lime, timber, betel nut, betel leaves, oranges, pineapple, tezpata or bay leaf, honey and bees-wax. These were exchanged for rice, dried fish, salt, cotton and silk.[37] The Khasi traders also acted as middlemen in the trade on Assam silk, in the plains of Sylhet.[38] It also appears that the trade of Jaintia and Kachar with Sylhet in the eighteenth century, was in the hands of Khasi traders.[39]

The earliest and most important item of trade from the Khasi-Jaintia hills to the Assam and Surma valleys was iron.[40] Agricultural implements, like hoes and ploughshares, and lumps of pig iron were in high demand in the plains of Assam and Bengal.[41] It appears that the craft of smithery was one of the earliest among the Khasi, who had specialized in the art of smelting iron (a process called *sainar* from the iron ore or *mawpyrsut*).[42] Large deposits of iron ore were available at the villages of Laitdom and Lynkhiew, 19.3 km south-west of Shillong, Nongkrem, 16 kms east of Shillong. Other important centres include the villages of Sohryngkham, Mawkdok, Laitlyngkot and Mylliem. The village of Laitdom was a pioneer in the craft in the Khasi-Jaintia hills.[43] Apparently the blacksmiths of Laitdom were the first to design the shouldered hoe (*mohkhiew*), which is why this tool is sometimes referred to as *Mohkhiew Laitdom*.[44] Other implements fashioned by the Khasi blacksmiths include the bill-hooked dao (*waitbnoh*), Khasi dao (*wait lyngkut*) and an axe (*sdie*) hafted on a wooden handle (*sping*) for felling trees.[45] The last closely resembles the polished Neolithic celt. Khasi iron is said to have been of superior quality.[46] But the crude method of extraction and smelting greatly reduced its commercial value. The introduction of cheap English iron in the plains appears to have dealt a severe blow to the native industry.[47]

Other traditional crafts include the cotton-spinning industries located at centres like Mynso, Sutnga and silk at Khyrwang and Nongsung in the Jaintia hills.[48] The Khasis mainly depended on Jaintia Hills and the plains of Assam for cotton and silk.[49] The craft of pot-making was mainly concentrated in and around the village of Larnai in the Jaintia hills. Larnai is located close to the Sung valley which is the only source of suitable clay.[50] Basketry was another important traditional craft. The village of Nongshken in the Khasi hills was an important centre of the craft, where '*Shken*', a special type of bamboo ideal for basket weaving is found in plenty. The conical bamboo baskets (*khoh*), with the accompanying head-strap (*U Star*), were in high demand, for the carrying and transportation of goods to and from markets.

A question that is often asked is whether the megalithic tradition of the Khasi-Jaintia hills can throw any light on the advent of iron technology in these hills or not. At present, there is no conclusive evidence on this. A limited but important study of select stones and megalithic clusters by Sambhu Chakrabarty[51] of the Geological Survey of India suggests that where stray boulders or stone slabs were used for megalithic erections, they showed no signs of iron working. On the other hand, stones that were quarried invariably show marks, indicating the use of iron tools. It appears that the megaliths used at the megalithic site in Laitlyngkot, were all obtained without the use of iron tools. This is significant since Laitlyngkot was not only an important source of iron, but was also a centre of the Khasi iron industry. This is perhaps explained by the fact that suitable stone slabs were readily available on the surface from neighbouring villages, for example, the village of Laitkyrhong, known for the large number of *Mawkyrhong*, a type of stone found there, making the quarrying of stone unnecessary. On the other hand, at the megalithic site in Nartiang, both hewn and unhewn megaliths are found. At Cherrapunji the majority of the megalithic monuments are finely chiselled and are the best dressed megaliths in the entire Khasi-Jaintia hills. Some may have been the work of the skilful Bengali masons from Sylhet, employed by the *Syiems* and other wealthy families of the Sohra (Cherra) *Syiem*ship.[52] Linguistic evidence would suggest that the Khasi-Jaintias knew the use of iron when they arrived in these hills. The word '*nar*,' which

means iron, shows no relationship to any word for metal in any other language, whether of the Mon-Khmer family or of a different one.[53] Other metals signified by indigenous terms include *ksiar* for gold and *rynnong* for brass.

Was there any connection between the megalith-builders and the authors of the Neolithic tools in the Khasi-Jaintia hills? According to Heine Geldern,[54] the megalithic tradition was introduced into eastern India by the 'Austro Asiatics' who entered India in waves, some time between 2500–1200 B.C. According to him, it was this migration that was also responsible for the diffusion of the Neolithic shouldered adze culture into the north-eastern region of India. A.H. Dani[55] is however highly critical of this hypothesis, pointing out that the archaeological evidence available in India does not support the theory linking the shouldered tool with the Austro Asiatics, or its introduction into eastern India before 1500 B.C. Dani is of the opinion that the available evidence suggests that the Neolithic tools of the southeast Asian type, particularly the faceted tools and the shouldered tools, were in use at very late periods both in India and South east Asia. He believes that the 'Neolithic' characterized by these tool types represents a later phase of the Neolithic culture. Furthermore, he is also skeptical of the Neolithic association of the megalithic culture of both regions, which he maintains, remains to be proved. Dani's main argument is that the square cut or rectilinear forms such as the faceted and shouldered tools which are an important component of the Neolithic of Assam (present northeastern region), are not natural to stone. He argues that they represent stone copies of metal prototypes. It is also significant that compared to Garo hills and Naga hills, the number of Neolithic tools recovered from the Khasi-Jaintia hills, is paltry.[56] It must be readily admitted that till date no serious or sustained investigation of this cultural horizon in the Khasi-Jaintia hills has been undertaken. Nonetheless, the percentage of Neolithic tools found or reported as surface finds from these hills during the colonial period or even in more recent times, is surprisingly small, when compared with the large number of tools that have been recovered from the Garo hills and the Naga hills. It is possible that these hills were considered unsuitable for early human settlement or were very sparsely populated in the Neolithic times. Further it is not

impossible that the Khasi-Jaintias with their tradition of megalith building and probably a knowledge of iron, arrived in their present habitat much later, perhaps shortly before the Ahoms came to occupy the Assam valley.[57]

III

Traditional sources indicate that the emergence of *Syiem*ship, is closely linked with the struggle for power among the 'traditional elite' or leading families over the control of vital resources and trade.[58] According to H. Lyngdoh, initially the attitude of the *bakhraw* towards the office of the *Syiem*, was one of disdain, contempt even, since its incumbent was expected to adjudicate over matters that involved the violation of taboos. Such acts include the appropriation of property and wealth of families that had become extinct; claiming the wealth of persons and families who had accumulated it through wrongful means, such as propitiation and worship of the *thlen* spirit; imposition of fines, etc.[59] That tension and social conflict had emerged in society as trade developed, is brought out in the enduring Khasi folktale of *U Thlen*.[60] It is held that worship of this evil spirit is often the reason for murders carried out by men called *nongshohnoh* (one who beats to death), with no apparent motive. The *thlen* is said to take many forms, but seems to be especially partial to the snake form. The *thlen* which attaches itself to wealth and property, must be propitiated with human blood by its keepers, in return for material wealth. Persons and families suspected of keeping the spirit, were socially ostracized. Fear of this spirit is so strong that it survives to this day in many parts of the Khasi hills. The only way its keepers can redeem themselves in society, is by discarding all wealth and property accumulated by them. Wealth so discarded could be appropriated only by the *Syiem*, on whom there were no taboo restrictions for such an action, as he had the sanction of custom.[61] It is significant that the *thlen* was considered such a vital threat to society that it required the joint cooperation of the plains people (*ki Dkhar*) and the Khasis to devise means of ridding this spirit, that had devoured so many lives. Finally, it was *U Suidnoh*, a courageous Khasi man, who, through cunning, induced the *thlen* to swallow a red hot ball of iron and

was thus killed. Among the Jaintias, a similar belief exists in the form of the *taroh* superstition.[62]

The significance of the *'thlen'* and *'taroh'* superstitions, lies in the fact that they are a clear index of social tensions that had emerged in society, in response to the demands of new social relations, as distribution of economic power changed. This is inferred from the fact that persons and families accused of harbouring such spirits, were more often than not, traders and business folk. The *thlen* superstition is also a reflection of how dominant groups in Khasi society, sought to manipulate ideology to safeguard their interests. These interests were probably linked with the control of profits from trade, particularly Khasi iron, which, going by British reports and accounts appears to have been substantial.[63]

Thus, political and economic compulsions led to the emergence of the institution of *Syiem*ship. The role of the *bakhraw* in such a development is highlighted in folktales connected with the origin of some of the earliest and powerful *Syiem*ships. Take, for instance, the history of the Shillong *Syiem*ship (which later split up into the Nongkrem and Mylliem *Syiem*ships), which was formed by the amalgamation of several confederating units such as the *Raid Nongkseh, Raid Nongumlong, Raid Swer, Raid Synrem*, etc., under one political entity, the *Hima Shillong*.[64] The office of *Syiem* was legitimized through mythological justifications, alluding to the mysterious and divine origin of *ka Pah Syntiew*, ancestress of the *Syiems* of Shillong. Similar antecedents were projected for other early chiefdoms or *Syiem*ships, such as those of Sutnga, which later developed into the Jaintia state; the *Syiems* of Nongkhlaw, the *Syiems* of Sohra, etc. That the *bakhraw* or leading families continued to wield their authority, was reflected in the composition of the *Syiem's* council, the highest governing authority over a chiefdom, dominated by members of the *jaid bakhraw*. The *Syiem* was really only the steward of the land, in contrast to the *basans, lyngdohs, dolois*, etc., who not only had title to the land, but effectively controlled the labour within it.

Thus *Syiems* arose to deal with crimes against authority particularly the violation of customs and tradition. *Syiem*ship enabled political leaders to act as third party judges above the interests of specific kin groupings, and to make definitive

decisions without fear of vengeance. As Raymond Scupen observed, "Chiefs had the power to sanction certain behaviour by imposing economic fines or damages, by withholding goods and services, and by publicly reprimanding or ridiculing the offending parties. Chiefs could use their economic and political power to induce compliance."[65]

How are these developments reflected in megalithic activity? As we have tried to demonstrate, the earliest megalithic structures were probably the *Mawshyieng* or bone repository. The *Mawbah* or clan repository was particularly significant as it was linked with the basic institutions in Khasi-Jaintia society, viz., the rule of exogamy and the unity of the matrilineal ancestry. As mentioned earlier, *Mawbahs* are associated with leading or founding families, the *Jaid bakhraw*, who were also numerically predominant. Such structures legitimized the rank and status of these dominant groups in society over others. For families that were new comers to land already occupied by the dominant clans, or, in fact, for the ordinary Khasi, the small bone repository simply referred to as *Mawshyieng*, is the only real link to their funerary and religious life.

There is reason to believe that formerly the *Mawbah* probably took the form of a large 'cairn'.[66] Hooker observed many such constructions on his trips to Mairang in West Khasi Hills. He states, "We repeatedly remarked cones of earth, clay and pebbles, about twelve feet high, upon the hills, which appeared to be artificial, but of which the natives could give no explanation."[67] Godwin-Austen also refers to several such mounds along the route from Mairang to Nongstoin, which he observed were invariably located in places where visibility and monumentality were important factors.[68] His description of a cairn at Nongkseh also follows similar lines — a hemispherical mound of earth about eight feet high and faced all around the bottom half by slabs of stones about four feet high. Godwin-Austen mentions that he had not seen any such cairns in other parts of the Assam hills, except at North Manipur, where at the head of the Imphal river were, "... four fine cairns all faced with large boulders of the same type." He was informed by local Nagas, that they had been made by another clan of Nagas, who long ago had gone further north.[69] Megalithic structures of the Khasi type were also observed by Godwin-Austen in the North

Kachar hills, on the road from Nenglo to Hangrung, an area which was formerly occupied by the Kacharis and at the time of writing (1872) was inhabited by the Nagas. According to him, these monuments bore no resemblance to the megaliths of the Nagas or any other nearby peoples. He suggested that they may be the remains of an early Khasi settlement, occupied by them briefly during their westward migration to their present homeland.[70] If his inferences are correct, it suggests that in former times, the Khasis were settled in territories east of their present homeland, and that they already had a tradition of megalith building before they arrived in the Khasi-Jaintia hills.

Monuments like the *Mawkjat-Mawlynti, Mawniam, Mawkiat, Mawaibam* etc., which were part of a more elaborate megalithic ritual, appear to be a later development and ramification of what must have been at the beginning a fairly simple bone internment ceremony, signifying kinship solidarity. The mortuary feasts implicit in these megalithic rituals were the paths to power and leadership. Thus those claiming a higher ritual status such as the *jaid bakhraw*, were also expected to be generous and share part of their success through ritual feasting. We believe that the above categories of megalithic monuments were the status and religious symbols of the political authority of the petty chieftainships under the traditional elite such as the *basans, lyngdohs, dolois*, etc.

The emergence and establishment of *Syiem*ships is linked with megalithic activity on a much larger scale. This was possible through the surplus generated from trade, particularly in iron, lime, and other products from the southern slopes in the Khasi hills; while in the Jaintia hills, through surplus generated from the control over plough agriculture of the Sylhet plains. Megalith-building of this phase is associated with the establishment of markets located at important tribal centres such as Nongkseh, Laitlyngkot, Nongkrem, Mylliem, Cherrapunji, Sutnga, Raliang, Nongbah, Shangpung, Nartiang, Jowai etc.; at intra-tribal boundaries such as Shillong and Jowai; and at ecological boundaries such as Mawsmai, Cherrapunji, Jaintiapur etc. The most impressive of the megalithic complexes which has survived to this day, is undoubtedly the Nartiang complex. It has the largest and tallest menhir in the entire Khasi-Jaintia hills, standing at 27½ feet above ground, 2½ feet wide

and about a foot thick. The stones at this site are locally called *Mo ki Syiem* or the *Syiem's* stones. According to folk tradition, two persons, U Lah Laskor and U Marphalangki are closely linked with the establishment of this market and the setting up of these stones.[71] Their authority in the hill areas of the Jaintia state is beyond doubt, to have mobilized the kind of labour required to set up the complex. These monuments certainly evoke the power and status of the Jaintia *Rajahs*, firmly establishing their control over the region. Other significant clusters in the Jaintia hills, are those at Sutnga, Shangpung, Jowai and Nongbah. At the megalithic site of Nongbah, the annual *pomblang* or goat sacrifice is still performed regularly.

In the Khasi hills, the megalithic site at Laitlyngkot, just twenty five kms south of Shillong, was once a very impressive site which was damaged by the great earthquake of 1897. Today there are still many megaliths, but a large number of them now lie on the ground. Clarke[72] and Austen[73] who visited the site before the earthquake both noted the unusual arrangement of the stones suggesting that the site was used as an assembly place for the chiefs and elders of the clan. Local tradition also alludes to the site being an important market and administrative centre of the *Hima* Shillong.[74] The site has the largest horizontal slab in the entire Khasi-Jaintia hills, measuring roughly 30 x 14 x 1½ feet. It appears that this slab was not a table-stone but a roof-stone which was formerly supported on tall stone pillars where functionaries of the *hima* were seated.[75] Nongkseh, the earliest administrative centre of the *Syiems* of Shillong, was once a dominant and populous village that had a number of large megaliths at its market centre. Some of the more impressive megaliths include two menhirs measuring 24½ and 23 feet above ground.[76] The earthquake of 1897 destroyed most of the stones and today, it seems hard to imagine that Nongkseh once boasted one of the more impressive megalithic sites in the Khasi hills. Such megalithic complexes, apart from being centres of exchange, performed equally important functions as social or administrative centres. It is in the market place that very often social and kinship ties are maintained, and that political or administrative announcements are made.

Megalithic monuments raised at public places such as markets, frequently used trade routes, roads connecting large

villages, etc., also served the public at large. They provided resting places as well as functioning as milestones and road signs, since the Khasi-Jaintias are not known to have used any form of wheeled transport.[77] Furthermore, they did not use domesticated animals as beasts of burden either. All travelling and transportation of goods was done on foot.

Although the history of many of the megalithic monuments in these hills are quite lost, the few that have been preserved are extremely illuminating. Godwin-Austen's account on the history of a group of monuments located along the road leading to the large and important village of Cherrapunji, is certainly interesting. He was told that the monument was erected by the Nongtariang clan, in memory of an old lady of the clan. Although the old lady was not famous for anything in particular during her lifetime, her virtues appeared to have grown after her death. It appears that the Nongtariang clan from being a poor one, rose to considerable wealth, and her descendants attributed their rise in fortunes to her intervention as the guardian spirit of the clan.[78] What is significant is that this clan later emerged as one of the 'aristocratic' clans of the *hima* of Cherra replacing the original Marboh clan which had become extinct. Traditional accounts[79] on the history of the *Syiems* of Sohra (Cherra), also refer to the elevation of the status of the Nongtariang clan to a *jaid bakhraw* or dominant/aristocratic clan, but do not mention clearly the circumstances leading to the event. In any cases, going by Godwin-Austen's account, it indicates how a family or clan that has been able to generate surplus can turn it into social credit through a form of redistribution implicit in the megalithic ritual with its obligatory feasting and lavish hospitality. Generosity on the part of the donor benefits the community as well as enhances the donor's personal prestige, and that of his family and clan.

Of some interest also is a large monument located at Nongtalang village on the southern slopes of the Jaintia hills. The monument follows an unusual arrangement represented by a large number of menhirs (only ten are still standing) in front of which are placed a row of stone seats. Facing the row of stone seats is another parallel line of similar stone seats. Local tradition[80] attributes the monument to a rich and successful trader (*Nongkhaï*) of the village. This monument is, not

surprisingly, situated along an old trade route leading to the Sylhet plains. The old site of Jaintiapur is not far from this site.

IV

In the preceding sections we had attempted to demonstrate megaliths as a strategy of domination. They are reflective of a society in which the dominant clans, *ki Jaid bakhraw*, had greater access to and control of vital resources and labour. This is demonstrated in the megalithic ritual and the raising of funerary monuments, legitimizing their claim to a higher ritual status and access to the best lands. If the *Mawbah, Mawkjat-Mawlynti, Mawniam*, etc., were the earliest symbols of domination by the founding or original clans, the power and authority of chiefdoms signified by *Syiemships* is reflected in megalithic constructions that were truly monumental. Most of such megaliths are invariably linked with the establishment of markets and tribal centres. The sheer size of some of these monuments, such as the Laitlyngkot monument, weighing approximately eighty tonnes,[81] gives an idea of the scale of planning and organization, calling for an extensive region — wide labour mobilization that could have been possible only under a more centralized authority. In the Khasi hills it was mainly the control of iron-ore deposits and the trade in iron as well as trade in lime that generated sufficient surplus to enable the emergence of *Syiem*ships. On the other hand, the gradual emergence of a more evolved political entity, the early state, in Jaintia hills was determined by the appropriation of a substantially higher surplus, through the control of wet-rice cultivation in the Sylhet plains.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See D. Roy, "The Megalithic Culture of the Khasis", *Anthropos*, Freiburg (Switzerland), LVIII, 1963, pp. 548–550, wherein he mentions a monument erected in 1890 at Laitkor. The author was informed by the late Donbok T. Laloo of the erection of a monument called *Mawjawla* as late as 1942, at the road leading to Pahamsken, in Ri Bhoi.
2. See C.V. Furer Haimendorf, "Megalithic Ritual Among the Godabas and Bondos of Orissa", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. IX, 1943, pp. 170–177. See also H. Geldern, "The Meaning of the Megaliths", Stephen Fuch *et al.* (eds.), *Essays In Ethnology*, (Bombay, 1969), pp. 294–324.

3. The term 'elite' is used to denote privileged members/groups in a society; persons with access to political authority, social power, etc.
4. See H. Walters, "Journey Across the Pandua Hills, near Sylhet in Bengal", *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XVII (Calcutta, 1932), pp. 499–572. H. Yule, "Notes on the Kasia Hills and People", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (hereafter JASB), 1844, pp. 612–631.
5. See S.C. Roy Jait Dkhar, *Ka Niam Ki Khasi – Ka Niam Tip Blei – Tip Briew* (Shillong, 1919). See also H. Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* (Shillong, 1937), pp. 1–20; H.O. Mawrie, *The Khasi Milieu* (New Delhi, 1981), pp. 29–30.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–39.
7. H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 245–246.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 245. See also P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (Reprint, Delhi, 1990), p. 151.
9. H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 250–251.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 243–256. See also P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–150; N.C. Shadap Sen, *The Origin And Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 227–239.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 28; H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 246–247; P.R.T. Gurdon, *op.cit.*, p. 149–150; Sr. P. Kharakor, *Ka Kolshor Khasi Katkum Ba Ka Paw Ha Ka Lietereshor Khasi*, pp. 162–166; G. Costa, *Ka Riti Jong Ka Ri Laiphew Syiem, Bynta II*, (Shillong, 1987), p. 64.
12. H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 247–248.
14. N. C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 238–239; H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 225–242.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–239; H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 246–247; Sr. P. Kharakor, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–163.
16. H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 225–242.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 247; Sr. P. Kharakor, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
18. J.D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals*, Vol. I, (2nd Indian Reprint, Faridabad, 1974), p. 277.
19. See C.A. Mawlong, "Megalithic Monuments of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills: An Ethno-Archaeological Study" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NEHU, Shillong, 1996), pp. 144–45, 156; See also S.C. Roy Dkhar, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
20. Chie Nakane, *Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems* (Paris, 1967), p. 106.
21. H.H. Godwin-Austen, "On the Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes, and on Some of the Peculiar Rites and Customs of the People", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* (henceforth *JAI*), I, 1872, pp. 127–28.
22. V. Ball, "Stone Monuments in the District of Singbhum — Chota Nagpur", *Indian Antiquary*, I, 1872, pp. 291–92.
23. See H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 257–270, *Idem, Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng* (Shillong, 1938), Introductory Chapter; See also, D. Roy, "Principles of Khasi Culture", *Folklore*, Vol. 47 (London, 1936), p. 378.
24. L.S. Gassah, "Traditional Khasi Polity", *Lest We Forget* (Khasi National Celebration Committee For the Indigenous People's Year, Shillong, 1993), p. 11.
25. See Chie Nakane, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–106, where she has tried to bring out the process of fissioning of the *Kur* or clan among the Khasi.
26. See L.S. Gassah, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12. See also H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, (Introductory Chapter); D. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

27. See B. Pakem, "The Changing Power Structure of the Political Institution of Jaintia Chieftainship", *Journal of the Indian Council of Social Science Research*, Vol. I (Shillong, 1977), pp. 1-4
28. D. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
29. See I.M. Simon, *Khasi and Jaintia Tales and Beliefs* (Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research, Gauhati University, 1966), p. 121. This information is also based on personal knowledge.
30. H. Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi*, pp. 257–270.
31. Such monuments include the *Mawbah, Mawkjat-Mawlynti, Mawniam, Mawaibam* etc.
32. See H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, pp. 257–261.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 265–266.
35. See N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 244–255.
36. Thomas Fisher, "Memoir of Sylhet, Kachar and the Adjacent Districts", *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. IX, 1840, p. 833.
37. N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. See P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–58. Also see, Thomas Oldham, *Geology, Metrology and Ethnology of Meghalaya*, (Reprint, Delhi, 1984), pp. 70–76. See also, N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 72; P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
42. See B.K. Das Gupta, "A Short Note on Khasi Smithery", *Man In India*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 1963, pp. 353–54.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
44. *Ibid.*
45. See N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 60, 252. This information is also based on personal knowledge.
46. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 58. Also see Thomas Oldham, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–76.
47. P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–59; N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 251–252.
48. *Ibid.*; Also see P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
49. N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 252–253
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61; See also C. Mawlong, "Some Aspects of the Indigenous Earthen Ware of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills", *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, 19th Session, (Shillong, 1999), pp. 62–68.
51. Information given by Sambhu Chakravarty, Geologist, working with the Geological Survey of India, Northeastern Region.
52. Local tradition attributes a group of megalithic monuments located at Pamsohmen, belonging to the Synrem family of Cherrapunji, as the work of Bengalee masons. Also see similar reference with regard to Jaintia megaliths in N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.
53. See N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–60.
54. Reference sourced from *Ibid.*, p. 48. See also, A.H. Dani, *Prehistory And Protohistory of Eastern India*, (Calcutta, 1960), pp. 101–102, 225.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 51, 75–77, 222–226.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–77. See especially, p. 70.
57. See N.C. Shadap Sen, pp. 22–23, 46–50.
58. This is inferred from traditional accounts as given by H. Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi*, pp. 257–270.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
60. See P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–102, 173–176. Also see G. Costa, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–155; N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–217.
61. H. Lyngdoh, *op. cit.*, p. 261. See also P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–102.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108, 123; N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
63. See *Ibid.*, pp. 246–47, 250.
64. See P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–167; H. Lyngdoh, *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng*, pp. 81–102.
65. Raymond Scupin, *Cultural Anthropology: A Global Perspective*, (2nd Ed., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1995), p. 209.
66. A cairn is defined as a mound or barrow of heaped up stone rubble. Survivals of this type of bone-repository is now mainly found in the Jaintia Hills.
67. G.D. Hooker, *op. cit.*, p. 291.
68. H.H. Godwin-Austen, "Further Notes on the Rude Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes", *JAI*, v., 1876, p. 39.
69. *Idem*, "On the Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes, and on some of the Peculiar Rites and Customs of the People", *JAI*, I, 1872, pp. 128–129.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 129. Some folk traditions of the Khasi also allude to this westward movement of the Khasi, via Nowgong, Lumding, and Haflong, into their present homeland. See H. Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* (Introductory Chapter).
71. *Ibid.*, p. 253. Also see I.M. Simon, *op. cit.*, pp. 55–59.
72. C.B. Clarke, "The Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hills", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. III, 1874, pp. 491–92; 73.
73. H.H. Godwin-Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
74. This tradition is still current among the older and more knowledgeable persons of Laitlyngkot village.
75. H.H. Godwin-Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
76. *Ibid.*
77. The Khasi word for 'wheel' is *shalyntem* and appears to be an indigenous word. For details, see N.C. Shadap Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
78. See H.H. Godwin-Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 126. Also see P.R.T. Gurdon, *op. cit.*, Appendix A, p. 217.
79. H. Lyngdoh (in his *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng*, p. 139) maintains that the Nongtariang clan was elevated to the status of *Jaid Bakhraw*, replacing the 'Sohkhia' clan, not the 'Marboh' clan as indicated by Gurdon, *supra* 75.
80. This information was sourced from a knowledgeable old man, U Woh Ryndi of the village of Nongtalang, in the course of a field trip to the village in January 1993.
81. The approximate weight of the Laitlyngkot monument was provided by Godwin-Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 129. According to H. Walters (*op. cit.*, p. 364), in the transportation and erection of megalithic monuments in the Khasi Hills, large gangs of tribesmen, sometimes as many as five hundred at a time, were involved. Community labour on the scale alluded by Walters, presupposes the existence of a centralized authority to organize and supervise such a large project, which would be beyond the scope of a village community.