

# Classification of Khasi Megaliths : A Critique

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“Megalithism” as a global phenomenon is amply testified to by the distribution of megaliths, the remnants of which are found the world over from Europe through Africa and Asia and extending to the Far Eastern Countries. Not surprisingly, North-eastern India occupies a prominent place in the archaeological map of the world because of its rich megalithic remains, the greatest concentration of which is observed in the Khasi Jaintia hills of Meghalaya.

Interest in the Khasi-Jaintia megaliths dates back to the early decades of the last century. Some of the earliest references were made by H. Walters (1832), J. B. Hooker (1854), T. Oldham (1854), H. K. Godwin Austin (1884) and C. B. Clark (1874). The important contributions of the present century are those of P.R.T. Gurdon (1904/1907), J. H. Hutton (1928) and J. P. Mills (1929/1941). Amongst the local scholars, noteworthy are the writings of B. Roy (1937 ; 1963), Dr. H. Lyngdoh (1937), H. Barch (1964), Fr. G. Costa (1971), K. Singh (1976), J. N. Choudhury (1978), N. C. Shadap Sen (1981), and a host of others. However, a thorough archaeological investigation of the subject, is yet to be carried out.

It would not be out of place to mention here, that we do not have a megalithic “culture” in the Khasi Jaintia hills but rather the practise of “megalithism” which has been observed as a historical continuity from somewhere in the past to the early decades of the present century.

Etymologically speaking, the term ‘megalith’ is derived from the combination of two Greek words viz. megathos meaning ‘huge’ and lithos meaning ‘stone’. According to K. P. Rao the term ‘megalith’ may be explained as a grave or memorial erected in stone whether dressed or in its natural form containing, enclosing or erected over the funerary assemblage<sup>1</sup>. According to Childe, in practise the term ‘megalith’ is applied only to monuments the use of which is known imperfectly or not at all, but which is presumed to have been erected for some superstitious ritual or religious end. He further adds that therefore the basis for classification is not merely material or magnitude, but also function, which is, in fact, the proper basis for classification. However, Childe also cautions that this

particular function can never be completely known in the case of which all or nearly all the monuments originally classed as megalithic were erected <sup>2</sup>. This fact is also true to a large extent with regards the Khasi-Jaintia megaliths, which although erected until the early decades of the present century, the practise has now completely died out and knowledge of the origin and history of the megaliths is vague at best and information when available is highly subjective and often biased.

There are three basic types of megalithic erections available in the Khasi KJaintia hills, viz. the menhirs or standing stones, dolmens or the flat table stones and the cists which are box-like structures, used for the internment of bones.

Although structurally these megalithic types are similar to those found in Europe, other parts of India and Southeast Asia, yet there are significant differences in the methods and rituals connected with the erection of these stones, particularly the dolmens. For eg. whereas the dolmens in S. India (having one of the richest varieties of megalithic structures) and Eastern Mediterranean countries are connected with burial practises, those of North-eastern India do not come under the category of burial structures, due to the absence of any mortal remains of the deceased in them <sup>3</sup>. However, in the Khasi-Jaintia hills, cists and a number of dolmens have been used as repositories for the charred bones of the deceased. Therefore if not directly, then indirectly they may be considered under the category of megalithic burials. As early as 1874 Clarke attempted a classification of the Khasi Megaliths into three groups viz. (a) the funeral pyres, (b) the cists containing the pots of ashes and (c) the monumental groups <sup>4</sup>. Gurdon too, divided the Khasi megaliths into three classes, viz. a) menhirs or vertical stones, b) table stones or dolmens and c) cromlechs or cairns, which serve the purpose of cimeraria <sup>5</sup>. However, the local people themselves have a set of indigenous terms and a basic classification of the various stone structures available in their land. According to the popular ethnic version, Khasi megaliths are broadly classified under two main headings, viz. 1) *Mawbyinna-Niam* or *Mawnam*, meaning sacred or religious stones and ii) *Mawbyinna-Nam* or *Mawnam*, meaning commemorative stones. There is now reason to believe that before the above classification came to be accepted, all categories of Khasi megaliths were grouped under the umbrella term '*Mawbyinna*' or '*Mawpybna*' which literally translated should mean 'stones of proclamation'. The question that now arises is at what point of time did the terms '*Mawbyinna-Nam*' and '*Mawbyinna Niam*' come

into use considering the fact that the words 'Nam' and 'Niam' appear to be loan words. Joseph Minathur in his article in 'Man-In-India' has written that the Khasi uses the word 'Niam' to denote religion. According to him, it is loan word from Assamese or Bengali, meaning 'rule of conduct' <sup>6</sup>. However, this must be thoroughly verified.

Dr. H. Lyngdoh a pioneering indigenous scholar, who had contributed largely to Khasi literature had discussed the classification of Khasi megaliths in some detail as early as 1937. Writers of his time like David Roy and all subsequent writers have maintained the same classification with almost no changes. Below we discuss the classification as given by H. Lyngdoh which has been widely accepted by most indigenous scholars and is in fact, the standard ethnic version. According to this classification, the megaliths of the Khasi-Jaintia hills are divided into two categories viz. '*Ki Maw Niam*' and '*Ki Maw Nam*' the religious and memorial stones, respectively.

#### 1. **Mawniam :**

All categories of stones that fall under this group, consists of a set of triliths or standing stones called *Mawshynrang* or male stones, and dolmen (table stone) or *mawkynthei* i.e. female stone. These stones are erected at the time when the last funeral rites of the deceased are performed. They stand as a token of respect to the dead and also serve the purpose of acting as witness to other members of the clan, that all customary obligations and religious rites, have been completed in full. Of the three uprights, the middle stone, which is also the tallest of the three, represents the first maternal uncle either of the clan or lineage, as the case may be, and is called '*Mawkni*' (Maternal uncle stone). The shorter accompanying stones on either side of the '*Mawkni*' represent the maternal nephews and are called '*Mawpyrsa*' (Nephew stones). The dolmen or table stone, placed in front of the triliths is called '*Maw-kiaw*' representing the ancestress of a clan or lineage. The '*Mawniam*' is further sub-divided into four categories viz. i) *Ki Mawkjat / Mawlynti*, ii) *Ki Maw Umkoi*, iii) *Ki Mawkhim* and iv) *Ki Maw Niam thymnai*.

i) *Ki Mawkjat/Mawlynti* literally translated means 'stone of the foot' and 'stone of the way' respectively. This category of stones consisted of a set of triliths and a dolmen. They were erected half-way between the home of the deceased member of a family and the cremation ground, or at a specifically selected site, at the time when the bones of the deceased are shifted from the temporary repository or cist, '*mawshyieng*,' to the permanent repository or clan ossuary,

'*Mawba*'. According to the Khasi tradition the spirits of the departed accompanied their kinsmen on their journey at the time of internment of bones, and would rest their weary limbs on the flat-topped table stones or dolmens while on their way to their final resting palace. Hence the stones were called '*Mawkjat*' or 'foot-stones, and '*Mawlynti*' or 'wayside stones'. An alternative explanation states that these menhirs pointed the way for the spirits to follow the bones. Yet another version, says that these stones are so-called, because the mourners were expected to set foot in the place where these stones are erected, before proceeding on their journey to the cremation ground or clan ossuary, as the case may be.

ii) **Ki Maw Umkoi** : In cases of unnatural deaths, the bones of the deceased must first be washed and cleansed in a pool or pond of water specially made for the purpose, before the bones are finally interned into the clan ossuary. Here a set of triliths and a dolmen were erected close to the pool of purification to bear witness to the fact that the cleansing rites had been performed.

iii) **Ki Mawkhim** literally translated means 'stones of adultery'. According to Khasi belief, marriage marks the eternal union between two people, which even death cannot unmake. Therefore, when a surviving partner remarries, the relatives of the dead partner undertake the performance of certain rituals, so as to remove or obliterate the sacrilege of adultery committed against their clan. All expenditure incurred in the undertaking are borne by the surviving partner, or/and her relatives and clansmen. To mark the occasion, three uprights and a tablestone are set up along the roadside to bear witness that all necessary cleansing rites had been performed.

iv) **Ki Mawniam Thymmai** are erected by members of a clan at the time when the clan ossuary is repaired, remodelled or rebuilt anew. The stones consisting of a set of triliths and a dolmen, is erected near the new sepulchre.

## II. *Mawbyrna-Nam* (Commemorative stones)

This category of stones, as the name suggests, are commemorative in nature and are erected to perpetuate the memories of loved ones ; to mark feats of strength and valorur, to commemorate the occurrence of plague, natural calamities and other noteworthy incidents. According to H. Lyngdoh these stones may be distinguished from the other variety, i.e. *Mawniam*, on the basis of three factors viz i) *Mawnams* are generally of bigger dimensions and are therefore more impressive, ii) *Maw-nams* are always erected at

public places viz. markets, roadsides or hill tops, where they are easily seen, unlike Mawniams which are erected only in lonely places at some distance from the habitaion areas; iii) unlike *Maw-nams*, which can consist of 3,5,7,9,11 or more, memhir, mawniams always consists of three uprights only, probably relating to the concept of the three progenitors of the Khasi race, viz. *U Thawlang* or first father, *U Suidnia* or maternal uncle and *Ka Thawbei Tynrai* or root ancestress. It is also worth mentioning that monoliths in the Khasi and Jaintia hills are always erected in uneven numbers, with the central stone invariably the tallest and in most cases representative of the maternal uncle with the accompanying stones on either side of it becoming progressively shorter, although not necessarily so in all cases.

The categories listed under this group are given below :

i) **Mawbyinna-Nam ba buhphan** : when translated meant stonies erected for the patronage of dead ancestors. These stones were erected when the living members of a family wish to ask special favours from their dead ancestors for material prosperity. They may be erected in honour of a common clan ancestor/ancestress or a particular individual/individuals.

ii) **Mawlum**, meaning stone of the hill, were the memhirs and dolmens erected on hill tops to commemorate and perpetuate the memories of dead ancestors.

iii) **Mawkait/Mawksing** or 'banana stones and drum stones, are memorial stones erected to commemorate the name and fame of the *paternal grand parents*. In this case the central menhir represents the paternal ancestor and is called *U Mawthawlan*. The dolmen erected in front of the monoliths represents *ka kiawkha* or paternal grandmother. The uprights on either side of the central stone are called *Ki Mawksing* (drum stones) a name derived from the practise of drum-beating, while proceeding towards the home of the paternal grand parents and 'Mawkait' (banana stones) is a term derived from the customary practise of feeding babies with plantain during the occasion.

iv) **Mawshongthait/ki Palong/Ki Kor** are all flat table stones or dolmens erected as resting places for weary travellers. These stones are generally located along road-sides and in market-places. They are usually erected by the 'rich' or by members of a clan, for the purpose of commemorating or perpetuating the memories of dead members of the family/lineage/clan or to mark a noteworthy in-

cident. Apparently these stones served the dual purpose of commemoration and public utility.

One of the most impressive monoliths of the Khasi-Jaintia hills is the one located at the megalithic complex in Nartiang, Jaintia hills. This monolith stands  $27\frac{1}{2}$  feet high, approximately  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet wide and 1 foot thick. According to local tradition, this stone was erected by a giant named *Mar-Phalangki*, in bygone days. The legends say that this gigantic monolith was difficult to fix into the ground, despite religious incantations. As a last resort, *Mar Phalangki* dropped a small lime container into a pit, made in the ground, and asked a young boy to go down into it and fetch it out and while the boy was still inside, *Mar Phalangki*, planted the huge stone into the pit crushing the boy inside and as the legend goes, the stone finally stood firmly erect.

Reference is also made to a similar method of erection, of another monolith at *Sderkariah* (a place just before reaching Cherrapunji), which came to be known as '*Mawphonsyiem*' so named to mark the treachery of a ruler or syiem. According to a local legend one of the syiems of Cherrapunji while undertaking the erection of a particular monolith, discovered to his dismay, that it could not be firmly fixed to the ground. As in the case of *Mar Phalangki*, the Syiem dropped a small silver case into the pit and ordered one of his people to go down into the hole and fetch out the container and while the man was still within the confines of the pit, the monolith was fixed into it crushing the man inside and as the legend goes, the monolith stood firmly erect.

In both the cases mentioned above, there appears to be a strong possibility of the concept of human sacrifice being involved, particularly in view of the fact that both places are situated close enough to the border to imbibe outside influences, and in any case it is an established fact that Nartiang bears strong Hindu influences. In fact, *Gurdon* mentions that in the olden days in Jaintia hills it used to be a custom for the clansmen to place offerings of food on the flat table stones or dolmens for the departed ancestors, and further adds that it is difficult to resist the impression that they were originally sacrificial stones i.e. that animals or even human beings were actually sacrificed upon them. To strengthen his theory he refers to a folk tale about the *Kopili* river, which relates that in the past human victims were sacrificed to the *Kopili* goddess in the flat table stones or *Mawk ynthei* at a place called *Iew Ksih*, close to the *Kopili* river. Apparently a search for the stone revealed a flat table stone located near the above village, where goats were still

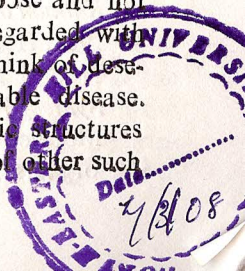
annually sacrificed to the Kopili. According to Gurdon, the then dolo, confirmed the practise of this ancient custom.<sup>7</sup> We know for a fact that human sacrifices used to take place in Jaintiapur, which was one of the headquarters of the Jaintia kings, the other being Nartiang. In both places, a large number of huge table stones are still found. However, basing on this single evidence, it cannot be firmly concluded that humans were sacrificed on these table stones in the remote past, although possibilities of the practise being in vogue in the districts bordering present Bangladesh, cannot be totally ruled out either.

Yet another interesting group of monoliths, are the thirty odd, found near Sutnga. Apparently these stones were erected to the memory of a woman, *ka Rampatwat*, who in generations past, is alleged to have had no less than thirty husbands. Gurdon further adds that the lady was not supposed to have been polyandrous, or nine-lived, but to have divorced one husband after another<sup>8</sup>. As she probably established a record for divorce, her descendants afterwards commemorated her personal feat in a befitting manner by erecting thirty stones.

Besides the megalithic erections mentioned above, there are many more categories of megalithic structures that cannot be strictly classified either under '*Maw Niam*' or '*Maw Num*'. A large number of monoliths are in fact raised to mark the setting up of market places, and settlements, for e.g. the megalithic complexes at Nartiang, Myllem and Laitlyngkot. Mention may also be made of the stones erected for defensive purposes, however, symbolic that may be viz the four monoliths marking the four corners of old Jowai town; *U Mooralang*, *U Mookhai*, *U Moolong* and *U Moosniang*. Today, these stones are regarded with great reverence.

Yet another category of stones are those raised for administrative reasons, viz '*Mawpud*' or '*Pud Hima*' to demarcate the boundary line between two contiguous states or Himas and '*Mawpud Mawbri*' used to mark the boundary lines between adjoining properties or agricultural holdings. The *Mawbris* are in fact quite small in dimension but of no less import and as has been discussed in the beginning of the paper, the function and purpose and not the size is relevant in this case. These stones are regarded with great reverence by the local people who would not think of desecrating them for fear of being afflicted by an incurable disease.

Attention may also be drawn to other megalithic structures like bridges made of a single slab of stone, and host of other such



stone structures that are yet to be classified.

Therefore, the main aim of the present paper is to focus the attention of scholars and all interested in the problem under discussion to the fact that the existing broad classification of Khasi Megaliths into Mawniam and Mawnam is inadequate and over simplified considering the complex nature of the subject matter. Several megalithic structures are neither strictly commemorative nor religious in nature; for example, 'Mawpud' or Pud Hima i.e. boundary stones which do not fall under either of the categories mentioned above. Perhaps a broad classification of Funerary and Non-funerary stones would be more useful. Therefore, all categories of megalithic structures that are directly or indirectly connected with the internment of bones would fall under the first category and all other types would come under the second category, which could be further subdivided into as many categories as necessary to cover the different types of megalithic structures available in the Khasi-Jaintia hills, the main criteria for classification being the function and purpose behind the erection.

#### Notes and References

1. K. P. Rao, *Deccan Megaliths*, Delhi, 1988, pp. 1-2.
2. G. C. Childe, 'Megaliths' In *Ancient India*, No. 4. pp. 5-13.
3. T. C. Sharma, "Prehistoric Times" In *The Tribes of North East India*, Edited by S. Karotemprel Shillong, 1984 pp. 1-19.
4. C. B. Clark, 'The stone Monuments of the Khasi Hills' in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute (JAI)*, VOL. III, 1874, pp. 481-493.
5. P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, Delhi, 1975 (reprint) p. 145.
6. J. Minathur, 'Miscellaneous Notes' MAN IN INDIA, VOL. 35, 1955, p. p. 233-235.. 7. P.R. T. Gurdon, . p. cit. 8. Ibid.
9. We have been immensely benefitted by a number of works; H. N.G. Austen, 'On the Stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes, and on some of the Peculiar Rites and Customs of the People', *JAI*, VOL. I, 1871, pp. 122-140; 'Further notes on the Rude stone Monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes' VOL, V, 1876, pp. 87-141; P. Kharakor, *Ka Kolshor Khasi Katkum baka paw ha Ka Litereshor Khasi* 1930-1940) Shillong, 1988; H Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* Shillong 1970 2nd Edition; N C Shadaph-Sen, *The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People*, Calcutta, 1981; and the presentation of Mr. Mourice G. Lyngdoh at the seminar on the Khasi Monoliths organised by Department of History, NEHU, on 12.6.90.