

# A Study on Megalithic Burial Stones from Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya

AKOIJAM MILAN MEITEI<sup>1</sup> & Q. MARAK<sup>2</sup>

*Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong 793022, Meghalaya  
E-mail: milanakoijam93@gmail.com*

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**ABSTRACT:** The Jaintias are a matrilineal tribe living in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in the north-eastern region of India. They are well-known for their custom of a living megalithic tradition just like the Nagas and Karbis in the region. However, the Jaintia megaliths are of different types such as menhirs, cists, dolmen etc. and meant for different functions, such as commemorative, funerary and ceremonial. The funerary aspect of Jaintia megaliths stands out since they are one of the very few communities who have a continued tradition of the same. This practice of burial stones is found to be a living culture among them since the prehistoric past. In this paper, we propose to study this interesting aspect of Jaintia megaliths using the approach of ethnoarchaeology. These structures are of different kinds and dimensions, and having different connotations to the society at large. These stones are connected to different social groupings such as family and clan, and there are different accompanying rituals. In this paper the burial stones, their meaning, place and role in burial and funerary occasions will be discussed. Finally, their significance to the present day Jaintia matrilineal society and culture will be analyzed.

## INTRODUCTION

Megalith generally refers to a large stone structure or monument standing either alone or with other stones. It comes from the Greek word *megas* meaning great or large, and *lithos* meaning stone (Wheeler, '59). It refers to the construction of monuments made up of large stone blocks available in nature (Chowdhury, '78, Roy 2003). Megalithic structures were first noted in the Neolithic culture (Scarre, 2001, Roy 2003, Sjogren *et al el.*, 2009) distinguished by the presence of large stone structures or monuments used for funeral or burial, religious, memorial or commemorative, recreational and other purposes (Marak, 2012). The Neolithic stonehenges

of Britain is considered as the fixed point to calculate the age of the whole system of monuments (Roy, 2003). Megaliths are found all over the world, its main distribution being Europe along the Atlantic coast. It is agreed that the meaning of megalith is not always connected with large stones but sometimes smaller stones as well (Yondri, 2006). Interestingly, if suitable stones were not found, some living people are seen using wood as a substitute (Jamir, 2004; Yondri, 2006; Marak, 2012).

In India, megaliths are located all over except the plains of Punjab, the Indo-Ganga divide, the Ganga basin, the deserts of Rajasthan and parts of North Gujarat. Furer-Haimendorf ('45) distinguished two types of megalithic cultures in India – living tradition of eastern and central India and megalithic

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

remains belonging to the past in south India. Similarly Ramireddy ('91) opined that the distribution of Indian megaliths can be grouped into two main zones – the south Indian megaliths belonging to a past period and the east Indian megaliths comprising the states of northeast India, Orissa and West Bengal where mainly memorials to the dead are practiced by some living tribes.

As stated by the above authors (Furer-Haimendorf, '45, Ramireddy, '91), the use of this prehistoric structures are still found in some parts of the world today including northeast India. This appear to be the only living stone culture and tradition practiced today. In those communities where such a living tradition exists, such as among some communities in north-east India (Hutton, '29; Furer-Haimendorf, '45; Jamir, 2004; Mawlong, 2004), it is referred to as *living megalithism* (Marak and Jangkhomang, 2012).

In north-eastern India, the greatest concentration of megaliths are found in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya (Godwin-Austen, 1872; Gurdon, '75 [1907]), the Naga dominated districts of Manipur (Singh, '85, Devi 2011) Kohima and Phek districts of Nagaland (Jamir, '98), and North Cachar of Assam (Hutton, '29).

On the other hand, burial or funerary act is the post cremation ritual act of placing the remains of a deceased person into the ground (Rao, '91). Though disputed, evidence suggests that the Neanderthals and later the Neolithic farmers were the first human species to intentionally bury the dead, doing so in shallow graves along with stone tools and animal bones (Solecki, '71; Roy, 2003). Some scholars however argue that these bodies may have been disposed off for secular reasons (Scarre, 2005). The earliest undisputed human burial discovered so far, dates back 130,000 years to the Skhul cave at Qafzeh, Israel. A variety of grave goods were present at the site, including the mandible of a wild boar in the arms of one of the skeletons (Lieberman, '93). Prehistoric cemeteries are referred to by the more neutral term "grave field". They are one of the chief sources of information on prehistoric cultures, and numerous archaeological cultures are defined by their burial customs, such as the Urnfield culture of the European Bronze Age. The Urnfield culture (c.

1300 BC - 750 BC) was a late Bronze Age culture of central Europe. The name comes from the custom of cremating the dead and placing their ashes in urns which were then buried in fields (Gimbutas, '65).

The megalithic stones in many parts of the world are related with post funerary functions and graves. It may consist either of an underground chamber like a cist, or an upright stone or raised platform with or without a horizontal flat stone directly covering the pit burial, or horizontal flat stone resting on three or smaller stones like a dolmen (Marak, 2012). In the prehistoric context it is seen that even though burials occurred since the late Pleistocene times, it becomes much more organized and complex among the people of Neolithic period and later (Roy, 2003; Johansen, 2004).

This paper will try and discuss the burial stones among the Jaintias of Jaintia Hills, their meaning, place and role in their *rites de passage*, and how it affects them in the present times as well. While doing do, this paper uses the approach of studying the living group of people in order to interpret the prehistoric structures found in the studied village.

#### THE MEGALITHIC USERS OF JAINTIA HILLS

The Jaintias inhabit the eastern part of the state of Meghalaya in north-east India. They are a subgroup of the matrilineal Khasi inhabiting in the Jaintia Hills districts of the state. The Khasi-Jaintias are well known for their matrilineal system of descent and the practice of megaliths. Rao ('91) had stated that the dialect of the Khasi is Mon-Khmer which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Barih ('67) says that Khasi is a generic name given to the people of Khasi and Jaintia hills. The tribe is divided into four main sub-groups: (1) the Khyntiam Khasi or upland Khasi distributed in the Shillong Plateau of the Khasi Hills, (2) the Pnar or Syntengs Khasi (Jaintia) of the Jaintias Hills, (3) the War Khasi inhabiting in the west and south slopes of the Meghalaya, and (4) the Amwi Khasi (allied with War Synteng in south Jaintia hills), and 5) the Bhoi Khasi settled in the northern lowland of the state.

The studied population is the Pnar Khasis or more commonly known as the Jaintias. They traditionally believe in *Niamtre* which is a belief in ancestor and

spirit worship, and in a number of gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses have different names and roles. Female deities are conceived as agents of familial and social well being and collective economic endeavors whereas male deities are connected with state administration, activities and territorial defense (Sen 2004). The supreme god, *U Blai Nongtaw* is represented by goddess *Ka Blai Synshar*, thus reiterating that the supreme power is beyond gender.

The Jaintias have a rich megalithic culture. All ancient villages have the custom of megalithic erection. Gurdon ('75[1907]) classified the megaliths of Khasi-Jaintia into three groups – menhirs or vertical stones, dolmens or table stones, and cairns or stone cromlech. Since times immemorial, Jaintias practice the tradition of megalithic erection, and continues even today. In Jaintia Hills, many types of megalithic stones are found like menhirs, alignments, cists, dolmens, capstones, and others (Marakand Jangkhomang, 2012). Each of these stones has different functions and accompanied rituals vary from village to village.

The greatest concentrations of megaliths in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya come from Cherrapunjee, Mawphlang, Laitlynkot, Laitkor, Jowai and Nartiang (Godwin-Austen, 1872; Gurdon, '75 [1907]). One of the largest menhir in the region is seen in Nartiang, Jaintia Hills measuring 823 cm in height, 229 cm in breadth and 76 cm in thickness. It is said to have been set up in dedication to an unknown Jaintia ruler who is credited with the establishment of a market centre which is present even today. One of the largest dolmen in Laitlynkot in Khasi Hills, shows the following dimensions. The horizontal slab of the dolmen rests on 10 upright pillars of which stand at 168 cm measures 914.4 x 411 cm with an average thickness of 46 cm (Sharma, '80). Cists are also commonly found in ancient and founding villages unlike other places in north-east India (Marakand Jangkhomang, 2012).

Unlike other patrilineal societies, the megaliths of the Jaintias show its relationship with its matrilineal system. These are monuments built in honour of the matrikin consisting of a set of three menhirs and a dolmen; five menhirs and a dolmen. Sometimes the number of menhirs and dolmens go up to fifteen and ten respectively. All the male stones (menhirs) are

called *mooshyrang* and all the female stones (dolmens) are called *mookynthai*. In all cases, the central menhir, *mookni* (uncle stone), is always taller than those flanking it on both sides, and represents the maternal uncle of the clan. The maternal uncle has a high status in Jaintia society since he wields powers in matters of the family, and the decision-maker in matters of the clan. The menhirs flanking the maternal “uncle stone” represent the younger male members of a clan such as brothers or nephews. These stones called *moobud* (accompanying stones) represent the lower status of these male members, by their shortness in height, in comparison to the maternal “uncle stone”. The dolmen placed in front of these menhirs is referred to as “ancestress stone”. If two dolmens are placed side by side, the left and the right dolmen represent the root ancestress and the younger ancestress respectively (Marakand Jangkhomang, 2012).

The present study is conducted in Shangpung village situated in the West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. It is 22 km away to the west from Jowai, the district capital of former Jaintia Hills district. In local dialect *shangpung* means “basket lake”, so named since the village was earlier surrounded by water bodies in all direction, and is still surrounded by lakes such as Moolishah, Umiuriam, Kaksang, Umrangnah, and Yillip. The village consists of nine small localities like Moolisang, Khliehmuchut, Moosyiem, Coira, Mission, Thohlakymah, Lummuchai, Lumrangnah, and Lumnengshnong. The village is inhabited by 12 clans (*kha-armor*) – the Sungoh, Dhar, Phyllei, Lamare, Swan, Langsteng, Langbang, Sutnga, Law, Passah, Lapasam and Kamar. It is said that Row Sungoh from the Sungoh clan first settled in the village thousands of years back. Agriculture is the main occupation of the village and wet paddy is a common practice. Some other agricultural products are vegetables like potato, mustard, cabbage, cauliflower, tomato, bean and turmeric as well as fruits like orange, plum, cassava, pear etc.

Christianity entered the Khasi-Jaintia hills in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and many of them were converted during British colonial and post-colonial period. During this short span of time, the number of Christian conversion was high in the region. However in the

studied village, the number of conversion was comparatively less. The approximate ratio of Jaintia Christians in this area so far is one fourth of the total population. Thus, in case of religion and its rituals, the two religious groups, traditional *Niamtre* followers and Christians, stand side by side.

In Shangpung megalithic stones like menhirs, alignments, cists, dolmens, capstones, and others are found, each of these stones having different functions and purposes. However in this paper only the megaliths connected to burial practices are discussed.

#### MEGALITHIC BURIAL STONES

In Shangpung different types of burial stones are profusely found in their sacred grove i.e. *kpep*, a sacred place for keeping and depositing the deceased's bones. Here they have three types of burial stones: (a) *chad phur* or stone circle, (b) *moowasa* or cairns and (c) *mookylliam* or cist.

- (a) *Chad phur or Stone circle*: This is a circle of standing stones (menhirs) i.e. it consists of small pillars arranged in a circular fashion to form a ceremonial ring. The *chad phur* consists of six or seven menhirs making a circle. The *chad phur* in the village is common for all the clans.

In the past it is said that the *chad phur* was important since it was the first place of performance of a ritual on the same day of the cremation before the bones were transferred to the *moowasa* i.e. cairns. As time passed the importance of *chad phuras* a part of funerary and the post funerary rituals was lost. Today among Christians of Sangpung, it is considered an out dated stone of the village but it is still seen in the sacred grove.

- (b) *Moowasa or cairns*: A cairn is a man-made pile of stones, often in a conical form. These are therefore heaped up mounds of stone rubble. Cairns may occur with or without a stone circle. They consist of a heap of stones or rubbles of smaller but somewhat regular slabs either enclosed within a circle of small or considerable sized boulders or freely raised on the ground by piling up the stones one above the other without any enclosure. The



Figure 1: *Chad phur* in Shangpung village, West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya

*moowasa* stones are placed in a conical shape leaving a small hollow space in the middle of the stone with an opening lid (*mootymoh*) on the top. It is used for keeping and depositing deceased bones in safety. It thus consists of two parts - (a) *mooshan* or cairns, and (b) *mootymoh* or capstone.

*Mooshan* are heaped up mounds of stone rubble. They consist of a heap of stones or rubbles of smaller but somewhat regular slabs enclosed within a circle of small or considerable sized boulders or freely raised on the ground by piling up the stones one above the other. *Mooshan* is the foundation or base or pillar of the *mootymoh* stone and it supports and helps to keep the *mootymoh* stone on top. On the same day of the cremation, the deceased's bones are deposited and then *mooshan* stones are placed to cover the bones. To protect the deceased's bones from animals and others, they cover it with *mootymoh* on top of the *mooshan*.

*Mootymoh* or capstone is almost a circular flat slab in shape. It is kept on top of the *mooshan* stone and is the topmost part of the *moowasa* stone. It is used to cover the small hollow space present in the *moowasa* stone which is used to keep the deceased's bones. Unlike *mooshan* stone, this *mootymoh* stone is selected and taken out from the sacred place of the village (*kpep*). The eldest man of the clan and family (*iing*) takes out and puts the *mootymoh* stone whenever it is required. Both



Figure 2: *Moowasa* in Shangpung village, West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya



Figure 3: View of another *moowasa* for those who made “bad remarks” during their lifetime

the deposition of *mooshan* and *mootymoh* take place only when someone dies.

*Moowasa* is thus the place of storing, keeping and depositing of the deceased’s bones, though only temporary. It is the first place of deposition of the bones. Every clan of the village has its own *moowasa* stone, and all the deceased members of a clan are kept in their specific *moowasa*. Some of the *moowasa* are kept against a tree to get support from it, others in open spaces, and still others against a brick wall. Its dimensions differ from clan to clan. After cremation of the body, bones are collected and deposited in the *moowasa* stone on the same day of the cremation. The small pieces of bones are carried by an elderly man of the same clan from the place of cremation and other elderly members of the family bring four or five pieces of stone (*mooshan* stones) to cover the bones. The women relatives and family members of the deceased offer *beedi*, rice, wine, areca nut and betel leaf, coin, flower and other eatable things, together with some other items which were likely used by the deceased during his or her lifetime. This is a kind of respect shown to the dead and a duty of the living family members. It is believed that it will keep the deceased’s soul in peace and make him/her happy in the after world. All friends, relatives and family members of the deceased pray to the Supreme God for the safe journey of the soul when offering *beedi*, rice, wine, areca nut and leaf, coin, flower, other eatable things etc. in the *moowasa* stone.

Interestingly, the bones of those persons who reportedly “made bad remark” (i.e., lived a life not in

conformity with clan regulations etc.) during their lifetime are not mixed together along with other deceased family members’ and clan members’ bones. Even if they are kept in the same *moowasa* stone, they are kept separately away or behind the main *moowasa* stone. This is actually a temporary place of bones but for those who made bad remarks during their lifetime, it is the only and permanent place.

- (c) *Mookylliam* or *cist*: A cist or kist, a Greek word, refers to a small stone-built coffin-like box or ossuary to hold the bodies of the dead or its bones. These are box-like stone chambers buried underneath the ground. Many times these chambers are opened periodically by removing one of the vertical stones for depositing ashes or bones of deceased ancestors. Many other times they stand alone or in association with menhirs or dolmens.

*Mookylliam* is circular in shape and completely surrounded on all sides by vertical erected stones with a big slab of stone at the top. Just like the *moowasa*, each clan has their own respective *mookylliam* stone and it has two parts as well: (i) *mooshan* stone, the vertically erected stone on the ground and (ii) *mootimoh* stone, the big slab on the *mooshan* stone. Here unlike *moowasa* stone, *mooshan* stones are permanently placed and the size of the *mootimoh* stone in *mookylliam* is much bigger than *mootimoh* of *moowasa* stone.

The *mookylliam* stone is fixed and it is a permanent resting place for storing and depositing all the ancestral bones of each clan. Every year in the month of June, bones from *moowasa* are collected and transferred in *mookylliam*. It is practised by every clan of the village and conducted with or without the *kadaw* (priest), by elderly male members. Unlike *moowasa* stone, no one deposits *mooshan* stones and offers *beedi*, wine, betel nut and leave, coin, flower and other eatable things etc. In each of the *mookylliam* stones, there is an entrance which is covered by another smaller removable stone; alternatively, a small hole is present for putting in the bones.

It is believed that the transfer of bones from *moowasa* to *mookylliam* will lead to rebirth of the soul. The Jaintias also consider human flesh as soil and that it will turn into soil of the earth after death. Thus as a duty they transfer and keep the bones in a permanent place.

#### SACRED SPACES AND RITUALS

In the study area, the place where the burial stones lie is considered sacred and it is the place where the deceased ancestors stay together afterlife. It is called *kpep* or *khlooblai* meaning a place for keeping sacred clan burial stones or the place where God resides. Here burial stones are associated with post funerary rituals of the deceased and it is performed in this sacred place.

Each of the twelve clans of the village has their own respective clan burial stones like *moowasa* and



Figure 4: A *mookylliam* stone in Shangpung village, West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya

*mookylliam* and the common *chadphur* for all clans. Periodical post funerary rituals are also conducted here in this sacred grove. Many such sacred groves in India were destroyed by commercial forestry operations (Chandrakanth *et al.*, 2004) and population growth and increasing immigration (Kalam, '96). Sacred groves including burial grounds (Mgumia and Oba, 2003, Wadley and Colfer, 2004) and sites of ancestral or deity worship occur in various forms (Ramakrishnan *et al.*, '98). In Jaintia Hills too, the area of the sacred groves have decreased due to different reasons such as population increase, new education system, coming of Christianity etc. (Mawlong, 2009, Marak and Ghimire, 2012). Recently some initiations like tree plantations and conservation of these sacred areas have taken place by *Niamtresin* a nearby jaintia village called Nangbah (Marak and Ghimire, 2012). These spaces are not protected by the forest department of the state but by the society itself. In their concept the word sacred itself protects the place. As a social belief it is part of their life and influences their life by this sacredness. Outsiders are restricted from entry but along with local guidance there is some relaxation to this norm.

The *Niamtres* practice the deposition and storing of ancestral bones since time immemorial. All the bones of the deceased are kept in their clan burial stones which are present in the sacred grove of the village. Any of the villagers can enter the area any time, and there is no restriction for them. Traditionally, the Jaintias cremate the dead. The village priest (*kadaw*) is appointed by the village and he performs the cremation of the dead. At the cremation ground, he meditates for a while and states the reason of death such as disease or accident or due to supernatural reasons such as an evil spirit. Most of the possessions of the dead person (shoes, clothes, ornaments, knives, umbrella, etc.) are brought to the cremation ground and burned along with the dead body. Items such as areca nut and betel leaf, wine, *beedi* etc. are thrown into the lighted pyre. They have a common belief that the departed soul will be able to free himself or herself from the living family members if these items are burned along with the body. The offered items will belong to the departed soul and it will be with that soul forever. This is considered as the duty of the family otherwise the deceased soul would get angry

and may bring harm to the family through accidents and sickness. Once the cremation is over, the *kadaw* takes out the bones and small pieces and hands over to an elderly man belonging to the clan or family of the deceased, who receives it with a betel leaf in his hand and then wraps it with a white cloth. The *kadaw* then cleans up the ashes in the cremation spot and washes it away. For the *kadaw*'s service the family of the deceased pays him in cash or kind.

After the collection of bones, it is brought to the sacred place where burial stones are present. It is first kept in the *moowasa* as a temporary shelter. An elderly man (or men) of the family brings stones to cover the bones of their deceased member and an elderly woman brings rice, *beedi*, fruit, flower, coin, areca nut, betel leaf etc. The importance of areca nut and betel leaf in the Jaintia tradition is rather unique. It is believed in Shanpung that if these two items are present then the soul of the deceased will achieve his or her destination and reach heaven. There is a special ritual for those who died outside the village or far away from the village. The family of the deceased sacrifices either a goat or cock in the name of the deceased person. Their bones are kept together along with the clan's deceased bones unlike those who have "made bad remark" during their lifetime. On two consecutive days including the cremation day, all the family members of the deceased do not take bath. They consider it as a mark of respect to the deceased and that it will provide a peaceful journey for the soul. The first night after the death, the eldest woman of the family sleeps in the deceased's room because they believe that the soul of the deceased will be present in the room, and a living person occupies the room then the soul will leave the room and the house, and it will go to another world.

Every year the bones of the deceased are transferred from *moowasa* to *mookylliam* by the elders of the clan which is done with or without the *kadaw*. It is conducted in the month of June by every clan of the village, but on different days for different clans. This is accompanied by feasts for the clan as it is considered to be a joyous occasion since all the deceased clan members have now reached their final resting place. Thus, the 12 original ancestral clans of the village have their respective clan burial stones. So those who settled there as a new clan member

should perform their burial depositions and related rituals in their respective own original village.

The burial stones are believed to have been in use and preserved for generations. For those who converted into Christianity, it still remains a sacred place but without any ritualistic meanings. It is the Niamtre followers for whom this areas, where the burial stones are placed, which continue to have present day relevance. Many sacred places are present in the village but there is only one specific sacred area for keeping megalithic burial stones. These sacred spaces are to be kept sacrosanct and protected from all harm, so that the deceased ancestors will look over the living and protect them from harmful deeds.

#### THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Many works have been done by archaeologists to examine the prehistoric social practices. So far burials are considered as reflections of prehistoric social orders and as important to the analyses of the social practices and social memory of the living (Binford, '71; Renfrew, '73). Prehistoric burials were viewed as material manifestation of prehistoric social order (Renfrew, '73). The connections between the living, and the dead can be extended to indicate an actual presence of the dead within the lives of the living and the deceased as active agents in the lives of the living (Adams and King, 2010). Similar beliefs are prevalent among groups in eastern Indonesia. In West Sumba, Indonesia, it is seen that performing large feasts is considered to be, in part, an obligation to ancestors to continue long-standing practices (Adams, 2004). The important burial traditions and ritual practices indicate the association of connection in between the living and deceased ancestors (Hodder and Cessford, 2004).

In Khasi-Jaintia Hills of north-east India, the deposition and preservation of deceased remains are considered a sign of respect, apart of matrilineal kinship solidarity, and social merit (Rao, '91; Mawlong 2004; Sen 2004). While among the Nagas of the same region, the erection of megaliths such as menhirs are associated with social merit and power (Rao, '91; Jamir, '98; Jamir, 2004). However the presence of secondary burials is rarely reported among them.

Many archaeologists over the years have interpreted megalithic tombs in western Europe to be

particularly symbolic of descent groups (Sjögren, '86; Powell, 2005) and markers of territories or resources (Renfrew, '76, Chapman, '81, '95; Madsen, '82; Lidén, '95). Rituals associated with the dead and the material remains they leave behind are aspects of commemoration that also become part of the archaeological record. In this sense, as ancient practices, the rituals associated with the deceased invoke the memory of past ancestors through their continued practice. Among the Jaintias of Shangpung village, there is a belief that the interconnectedness between the living and the deceased ancestors in the afterworld where the deceased live a similar life to the life on earth as a spirit. In burial ceremonies many offer food, drink, clothes etc. which the deceased liked or which once belonged to them. They believe that ancestors in the form of spirit abound around them and watch over them. Those who do not care for the deceased will supposedly attract punishment like sickness, accident, poverty etc. Those who fulfill the traditional norms will supposedly be blessed with social merit, fertility, good health, prosperity etc.

Megalithic burial stones and rituals of deceased ancestors have strong sense of connectivity in honour of their ancestors. So the deceased ancestors can affect the minds of their living descendents. Ethnographically, it is believed that ancestors are essential to the well-being of the living. In some societies, this connection can be manifested in beliefs that the dead can harm or cause misfortune to the living if certain rituals were not performed or they are not satisfied. Thus, the deceased can be viewed as guiding the behavior of the living. This illustrates the continual importance of deceased ancestors and social memory to their descendant i.e. in the lives of the living.

Within the geographical space of the village in a sacred place (*kpep* or *klooblai*), burial stones serve as places or residences of the deceased ancestors of the family and the clan. It is in the social memory of the young generation that all the deceased clan members stay together thus showing clan solidarity and unity even in death.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Jaintia Hills many types of megalithic stones are found – many of them having similar

morphological features, but with different functional connotations and meanings varying from village to village. In the case of Shangpung, these are mostly used as burial stones, foundation stones, and path stones. This megalithic tradition seems to be a continuous process since times immemorial, with the present people not being able to narrate how long ago this tradition started. However, it goes without saying that majority of these stones were erected many years back, but still has meanings to the present population.

One of the interesting megaliths found and discussed in the preceding pages, are those closely connected with the cult of the dead and ancestor worship, the *mooshyien* or bone depositories like *moowasa* and *mookylliam* stones. Thus in Shangppung village, there were no singular type of burial stones, but a group of stones with different physical dimensions that are collectively a part of the burial process. These are the stone circles, cists and cairns, which are the most important part of the post funerary rituals among the Jaintias. All the bones of the deceased person are deposited in their respective clan stone (cist), and each clan therefore has one *moowasa* stone and one *mookylliam* stone. These are present in a single sacred grove. As mentioned earlier the *moowasa* is a temporary bone repository whereas the *mookylliam* is the permanent stone for depositing bones. The transfer of bones from *moowasa* to *mookylliam* is said to be related to the rebirth of the soul.

Thus the practice of megalithism is seen to have a strong cultural tradition among the Jaintias. It is their matrilineal character that is underlined in the burial stones as well. Just as when a person is alive he or she is an integral part of the Jaintia matrilineal clan system, so too after death. In fact, once a person dies a series of rituals take place to help the deceased to reach its final resting place which is the clan cist – for the ultimate goal of the deceased clan member is the unification of all its clan members after death which shows kinship solidarity. This deceased ancestor then takes on the role of offering protection to its living clan members, and hence the annual ancestor worship take place regularly at clan cist stones by their respective kins. It is believed to be a direct connection between the deceased ancestor's spirit and living peoples. To be part in the same clan



after death, the behavior of the individual during his/her lifetime is also of great concern.

Interestingly, when a burial stone is broken down or falls, the members of the particular clan first performs a ritual to rebuild it with newer stones or re-erection of fallen stones. They believe that the gods or goddesses of the sacred grove are angry or dissatisfied by their behavior and therefore these burial stones break down which could be an indication of some harm that will befall the clan members. Therefore, in order to prevent evil eye, diseases, calamities, and accidents the priest is called and asked to perform a ritual where a cock or a he-goat is sacrificed to the residing god or goddess (or ancestors) at the spot where the burial stones broke or fell down. This ritual also includes the offering of areca nut and betel leaf. This ritual is followed by a feast as well. Thus protection of ancestral bones is considered the sacred duty of the family and clan.

Religion plays an important role in the erection of megaliths among the Jaintias. It is the Niamtre followers who continue to practice not only the veneration of dead ancestors, but also the protection of ancestors' bones in the repositories. However, with the coming of Christianity into the village, many converts have given up this tradition. However, it is interesting to note that even Christian families can point out which burial stones belonged to their ancestors. However, secularization of megaliths in the village is also witnessed in that many menhirs are used as boundary markers etc. It is interesting to note that to commemorate the centenary of the state capital of Meghalaya in Shillong in 1975 few menhirs were brought and set up in the centre of the city though done under the patronage of the government.

Unlike other village of the Jaintias, the burial system among the Jaintias of Shangpung is not associated with elaborate feasts and its ritual performances are rather short. Nevertheless it does not in any way take away the sacrosanct nature of these burial stones. These stones which are bone repositories in reality are still practiced by the *Niamtres*. The use of burial stones and performance of its accompanying rituals are the duty of the deceased's descendents and it is performed for the well being of the deceased's new journey into the afterworld. It is believed that this process will bring

prosperity to the descendents, and prevent the village from harm and evil. In the life of Jaintias of Shangpung, there are two important aspects of this burial stones – the inter-connectedness of deceased ancestors and the living and the kinship solidarity of all the clan members' afterworld.

Finally, one of the most interesting features was that morphologically the burial stones in Shangpung differed from each other, but they all played an important part in the post-funerary rituals of the dead in the village. These burial stones have been maintained for years altogether and no new megalithic structures have been erected; rather the existing ones are meticulously maintained.

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