

Exploring the symbolic representation of stone monoliths in Feast of Merit of Poumai Naga tribe, Manipur

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Abstract

The Feasts of Merit, a prominent social practice among various tribes, notably in Southeast Asia, were once prevalent among the Poumai Naga tribe in Manipur. In this tradition, feast-givers distributed their wealth through sacrificial offerings of animals during consecutive feast stages, in exchange for a higher social rank and the privilege to erect a monolith to commemorate their societal achievement. These stone monoliths, rich in historical significance, provide a vital window into the extinct practice of the Feast of Merit among the Poumai Naga tribe today. This study, aims to illuminate the enduring legacy of these activities through interviews with village elders who have performed the feast as well as with people who are well-versed in megalithic traditions. Additionally, the study examines megalithic monuments and its symbolic representation in the Poumai culture. Using ethnographic research method, this study serves as a preliminary exploration of these unique practices, paving the way for a deeper understanding of the Poumai's rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Monolith, Feast of Merit, Poumai Naga, megalith culture, Ethnography

Introduction

In '*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is a seminal work in anthropology, Malinowski describes how Trobrianders would travel by canoe across the vastness of the dangerous ocean, to give or exchange Kula rings, what they considered valuable artifacts without expecting gifts in return (Malinowski, 1922). He established that they were part of a system of exchange linked to political authority for the purpose of establishing strong, lifelong relationships between the exchanged parties besides enhancing the giver's social status and prestige. He stated that return gifts were given to maintain healthy relationship between the individual givers, and that a failure to return a gift ended the relationship (Yekha-ü & Marak, 2021). Unlike Mauss, however, when discussing the system of potlatch, the emphasis was not on individual gifts, but rather on the exchange of gifts between

representatives of a larger collective. In his book *'The Gift'*, Mauss described potlatch, "a whole system of exchange in tribal societies," as a "system of gift giving," with "political, religious, and kinship," as well as economic, implications that he called "total prestige" (Mauss, 1967). Malinowski and Mauss concurred that, in non-market cultures, gift exchange performed political, economic, familial, and religious purposes that were indistinguishable from one another and affected the very nature of the practice. However, gifting not only revolves around material gift alone, but it also involves showing and giving away wealth in order to attain power, social status or higher ranking. In "*The Nature of the Potlatch*" by Barnett (1938), provides insights into the intricate cultural significance of the potlatch among Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. The potlatch is a complex ceremonial event involving the distribution of wealth, status, and prestige among tribal members where only rich people could host a potlatch. In Northeast India, the Naga tribes also exhibit a similar kind of gifting ceremonial event in the past known as the Feasts of Merit, which became obscured into symbols and motifs in the weaves of the Nagas with the coming of Christianity (Yekha-ü & Marak, 2021). Huge dolmen or monoliths were raised after throwing a feast for the entire village which became a symbol of prestige for the host. Till date, those monoliths are traced and reminded of the wealth and generosity of people.

The Living Megalithic Practice

Megalithic practice has survived as a living practice among some tribal communities in Eastern, Central and Northeastern part of India. (Fürer-haimendorf, 1982), reports that the Bastar Gond, hill Marias, Dorlas and Murias erect *uraskal* (menhir) and sometimes *danyakal* (dolmen) as memorial to the dead and the erection is generally accompanied by feast and the sacrifice of a cow and a bullock. Similarly among the Mundas of Chotanagpur, large stone slabs are put to cover certain graves and dolmen supported by smaller stones serving as family burial place where bones of the family members are buried. The Gadabas, Bondus and Keenghar of Orissa have the tradition of erecting menhirs, dolmens and stone circles for commemorative and funerary purposes. Stone erection with a feast of merit is reported among the Gadabas too. Besides stones, some tribes also erect wooden post. The Koyas of Hyderabad erect a temporary forked post on the place where the memorial feast is performed. It is to be noted that on such occasions that cows are sacrificed and are invariably tied to these posts. Square wooden post are also erected by the Korkus of west central India and Raj Gonds of Hyderabad in course of the memorial feast of the dead individual where large stone slabs locally known as *sasandri*. Similar practices and importance of stone monolith are seen and observed in Northeast India and the Nagas in particular.

Northeast India occupies a prominent place in the archaeological map of the world because of the rich megalithic remains (Bora, 2018). It is one of the few places in the world where this practice has still survived as a living practice. Though the megalithic culture had always played an important role in the North East states of India and the Naga society in particular, there are different stories and meanings associated with the stone monoliths in Naga Society and has different representation associated with it. Each Naga tribe has their share of practices, narrations and stories related to their monolith erected, some having historical importance like that of their origin. A tribe is a whole society like any other society, with their own language, territory, culture, customs, and so on (Ziipao, 2020) and when one studies the megalithic importance of the Naga tribes, it would be wrong to generalized that all the Naga community have same practices or stories associated with their megalithic culture. The study of tribes in India should not be caste, occupation, or social heterogeneity, but rather group or regional community, for example, Bengali, Assamese, or Gujarati (Xaxa, 1999).

Materials and Methods

This paper is an outcome of fieldwork conducted from February 2019 to July 2023. The primary data were collected from three Poumai circles, under Senapati district of Manipur, namely, Chillivai, Lepaona and Paomata through observation, interview, focused group interview, photographs, video recording, and ethnographic research methodology. Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data assortment that capture their social meanings and standard activities, involving the researcher's participation directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner however while not which means being obligatory on them externally (Brewer, 2000). This paper includes data collection from primary sources like fieldwork, gathering information through pilot study, observations, semi-structured interviews, memoirs, artifacts and materials. Secondary data were collected from journals and publications, books and archives. As this paper required detail examination and observation of signs and symbols, Geertz' concept of 'thick description' was incorporated to find better finding results. Thick description is an elaborative venture referring to the detailed account of field experiences, where the researcher makes precise detail of the settings of the field and put them into context.' *In interpretation of culture*, Geertz gives the example of Balinese Cockfight where cockfight for outsiders would just be a mere sport, but for the Balinese, it serve as a symbolic representation of social hierarchy, power dynamics, and identity within their culture (Geertz, 1977). Likewise, the stone monoliths found in villages of Poumai could appear to be any ordinary piece of stone laps; however, these stones are a part of community's history, unfolding many hidden past stories and also reflecting their unique culture. For this study, Interviews were conducted with the knowledge and consent of participants and field notes were prepared while some were recorded with their permission, especially those conducted over telephone. Most interactions were informal while some remained formal. The conversations were thematically organized rather than following a question answer method. The researcher's role as a Poumai researcher has played a formative role in this research, as the researcher could understand the dialect without needing much support from a translator, as there are cases where meanings are lost in translation.

Poumai Naga Tribe

Poumai tribe is a sub Naga tribe residing majorly in Senapati district of Manipur. The Senapati district is located in the Northern part of Manipur. It is bounded on the East by Ukhrul District, on the west by Tamenglong District, on the North by Phek district of Nagaland and on the South by Imphal East district and Imphal West District. The district is at an altitude varying from 1061 m to 1788 m above sea level. The hills run along the north south direction and gradually slope down towards south and meet the Imphal valley. Poumai Nagas are spread out over 100 villages, with population of 1,87,180 (Thohrii, 2016) that have been broadly divided into three blocks: Paomata, Lepaona and Chillivai. Houdu or Pouchii, the highest hill range in the region runs from North to South in the middle of the Poumai territory, and provides the people with rich flora and fauna. Important rivers like Vourei (Barak), Ngarei (Laini) and Phaomai Sorei (Iril) originate from this hill range and provides water to all the regions of Poumai land. The population distribution is mainly concentrated at Senapati district of Manipur and Phek district of Nagaland (Pao, 2017). Due to their backwardness during the colonial period, the original and the legitimate name 'Poumai' was ignored and the community was inadvertently recognised as 'Mao'(Veikho, 2019). The community struggled for the tribe recognition since 1950 till 2002 and they were recognised as one of the distinct Naga tribes in India by the Government of India only in 2003. According to the Ministry of Law and Justice, New Delhi, Paomata, Lepaona and Chillivai, taken together are recognised as the Poumai Naga tribe. The following act of Parliament, The Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes Orders Amendment, Act 2002 received the assent of the President on the 7th January 2003. The Schedule Tribes Orders were amended in the manner and to the extent

specified in the Second Schedule in Part X of the Act - Manipur - Poumai Naga, Tarao, Kharam and Kuki tribes (Veikho, 2019). Prior to recognition of the Poumai Naga as a separate tribe it was under one roof known as the 'Mao Tribe'.

Poumai Nagas, like the other Naga tribes, practiced animism in the past and their traditional belief system is variously termed—Ranalü by the Poumais (Yekha-ü & Marak, 2021). Each Poumai village had a religious priest or political chief known as Veo/Maveo who performed religious rites to their god to meet their own needs. Veo occupied the highest position in the village, made announcements, performed religious rituals, and dictated how a ritual had to be done. For instance, in the past, the priest would be invited to the house of the couple performing the Feasts of Merit to bless them and to formally open the feast to the entire village who would revel in food and drink (Fürer-haimendorf, 1982). Each Poumai village is divided into khels which are aggregation of spatially contiguous units (Srivastav, 1987, p. 68). Most villages comprises of two to three khels. It may be mentioned that 1937 marked the first establishment of church at Maiba village which is a major landmark in the history of Poumai Naga (Shah, 2012). Before this period the impact of outside forces was minimal (Nathan, 2016), not many changes took place in the lives of the Poumai Naga communities until Indian independence and the traditional education continued well into the 1940s (Pahrü, 2018). The entry of the British administration brought along the Christian missionaries resulting to changes in the local religious beliefs and practices and many aspects of life such as Christianity and education (John, 2017, p. 45). Ever since then, changes in cultural practices were felt and recorded; ceasing the practice of 'Feast of Merit' is one the many cultural practices that is no longer practiced today.

The role of Monolith in Poumai tribe

Reconstruction of the prehistory and early history of the Poumai tribe has been a difficult task due to non availability of written records and scientifically excavated archaeological materials. As such archaeological remains scattered on the surface and facts of oral traditions are the materials which can be fruitfully studied to know the past of this community as well as the dynamics of inter-territorial migration and cultural diffusion through ages in this region. The life of Poumai Naga tribesmen, like any other Naga tribes in general are closely associated with stone culture. As narrated in various traditional myths, folktales and folksongs; God, Tiger and man were once brothers and lived together in the same period upon the earth. Legend has it that the three brothers one day planned to decide which of them should occupy which corner of the world. They erected a large stone and agreed that whoever reaches the stone first from the starting point would occupy the land and the other two will have to move away to jungles and dark parts of the world. As the race began, the tiger and the spirit ached towards the stone, but the man shot an arrow towards the stone to claim his ownership and hence he was declared the winner and received the land as his prize. As for the tiger and spirit, they left the land for the man and chose to live in jungle and faraway place. Thus, the utility and importance of stone can be derived from this story as it marks the parting of the three brothers to their respective places. Thus, the importance and utility of stone can be derived from this story as it marks the parting of the three brothers to their respective abode.

Since time immemorial, stone monoliths have played a very important role in the lives of Poumai community; the stone marks various important occasions and historical importance like the origin, death, marriage, wealth etc. They used stone for agricultural tools and implements, hunting and war weapons, construction of houses, etc and the use of stone is inseparable from their traditional life. The village gates and the footpath leading to the villages are constructed with finely arranged stone boulders, it is also compulsory for every village to have a place encircled by huge boulders, stone slabs and rocks for holding important village meetings and discussions (Fig-1). Huge boulders are also used to demarcate one's paddy and forest boundaries. Stone

Monolith is often seen as a way of immortalizing an individual's legacy based on cultural values and tradition (Philip & ManiBabu, 2017). It has played crucial importance in elucidating the ideology of meritorious feats by erecting crude stone monuments (Yekha-ü & Marak, 2021). The social customs involving the selection of the stone, participation of the men folk in dragging the stone, economic order, and the religious beliefs that prevailed in erecting a monolith gained worldwide fame and the monoliths that stand today are considered to be "the most common object for transmitting social memory" (Blackburn, 2007, p. 265). Furthermore, the social and cultural memories existing in the Naga oral history relating to megalithic culture and the associated Feast of Merit has been recognized as an informative agency of the domestic and social activities within the community in a series of rituals. Erecting a monolith to perpetuate the memory of a person incorporates feasting with the whole population of his village and "consists of a series of feasts, each costlier than the preceding one, and each higher in status" (Lotha, 2018, p. 52). And this Feast of Merit is considered the most important social ceremony in Poumai community.

Feast of merit

The feats of merit is an occasion for the community and to perform this feast, one has to lavishly sacrifice cattle, pigs, dogs, fowls, etc and feed the entire village (Mayirnao & Khayi, 2023). This feast usually took place in stages and the successful completion of each stage of this meritorious feast elevates the social status of the host to a higher level. Any married couple are eligible to perform the feast, but, there are exceptional cases where a single man or woman performs the feast. In Poumai community there are records of eight stages to perform these feast namely; 1. *Mouzii* 2. *Zhoso* 3. *Kiveisou* 4. *Thouzhi* 5. *Chukho kho* 6. *Zhomae* 7. *Lesho* 8. *Chizio* (Pao, 2017). After completion of these stages, Stone monoliths know as *Chukho* are put up that holds great honour for the people of the Poumai in all its villages. The details of the feasts in some parts of Poumai villages vary, but the basic pattern is consistent: animal sacrifices comprise the slaughter of Buffalo (*ha*), pigs and chickens and the distribution of meat, which earns the sponsor not only increased rank or a higher status but also the privilege to wear certain clothes, particularly a shawl (*Hapeidasa*)¹, which in translation means buffalo head shawl (fig.2) and on further giving or hosting another feast to the village, they were allowed to decorate their house in a special way. Commenting on Angami Naga houses, (Hutton, 1922, p. 51) writes "for these and for the further marks of social distinction the builder of the house must duly qualify." Likewise, for the Poumai community, people who had performed this second feast were entitled to put up a crossed buffalo horn on top of their house (Fig.3) symbolizing the completion of feast. It has been observed that the details of the decoration become more elaborate from one series of feasts to the next, symbolizing the status of the feast donor. The fifth stage of the feast is done by constructing a monumental circle with stone boulders to commemorate the achievement of the host. It is accompanied by a grand feast that last for an entire day where all the men folk donate a stone boulder each for the construction of the stone circle while coming for the morning rice wine tasting and drinking ceremony. But, in some cases, where the stone circle is constructed in the jungle, the stone boulders are gathered from around the construction site. The next day, the monument is constructed by all who were present during the previous day's feast where rituals and ceremonies are performed. The rituals, ceremonies, mode of celebration of erecting this stone monolith are similar with that of construction of cross buffalo horn.

¹ Hapeidasa also known as 'Rich man's shawl' is exclusive male attire and to wear this one had to earn it by throwing/giving feast to the entire village. Anyone wearing it without credentials were taken to task by the village council and were made to pay appropriate fine for violating the code.

Pulling of memorial stone/Stone monolith

The selection of the stone is the hardest in the celebration procedure. The owner does not choose and select any stone, but prior to his selection he makes sacrifices and prayers. He then ventures into the jungle with accomplice in search of stone and when the stone is found, after performing rituals and waiting for right stone through signs and dreams, the stone is dragged home.

The stone dragging is the 7th stage of the feast of merit which is also a much awaited event where all the villagers come out with great festivity clad in full traditional attires and proceed to the spot to witness where the stone is laid. This event of dragging stone is only participated by the male members of the village inclusive of the younger boys. The younger boys' participation in the dragging ceremony is led by their respective father or by an elderly male relative. The host, who is tabooed to participate in the dragging, is accompanied by the priest throughout the dragging ceremony while he would watch from a distance and pray "I choose to willingly, reach your destination gently, smoothly and safely to stand tall as a monument for generation to come in my name". The stone to be dragged and erected as a monolith is mounted on a wooden sledge and securely fastened by rope creepers in a systematic crisscross fashion. Three sturdy creepers of which the middle is an unblemished one are positioned lengthwise underneath the stone parallel to one another and the stone is dragged, Fig-4

According to Puh Liba, the last second person who performed the feast of merit in 1996 at Phuba village of Poumai tribe

"The feast of merit would take one to three years for preparation and mine took about a year. I started with an announcement to the village heads and authorities that I wish to perform a feast for the community, then by February and March I had butchered a young buffalo and distributed to the elders of the village. By July, I had brought my mature buffalo from the forest to home, so that the buffalo can be domesticated until the day of feast and remain clean for feasting. Starting by August month, I had harvested my paddy field and stored rice, followed by sharing wine and side curry to the relatives. By this time, my wife and I had stopped sleeping together as we have to abstain ourselves from any sexual contacts and remain clean. When December came, it was time for selection of stone monolith and this is the hardest in the celebration procedure. I had to go to the forest and book a huge stone monolith so that the stone can be dragged home and erected in significance of the completion of 'feast of merit'. On choosing the stone, ginger was placed on the thumb of my hand and placed on top of the stone and prayers were performed and let it be there for a day. The next day, when I went back to check the stone, the ginger remained in its place without moving its position, so that was how it was decided on that particular stone to be dragged home. Had the ginger changed its position from the placement of the previous day, I would have chosen another stone to drag home, as it was considered not a good sign. By 11th January, next year, that particular stone that had been booked by me was dragged home by all the men folk in the village, the stone was brought home and the buffaloes that had been domesticated at home were killed and feast was thrown to the entire village and then the stone monolith was erected to signify the completion of the feast"

Discussion

"Feast of Merit," is a crucial cultural practice of the Poumai community as this feasts celebrate not only the individuals' ability to feed the entire village, which is a significant achievement but also highlights one's culture deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community. The practice of stone erection though mainly signifies the status of a person and the wealth one can achieve, the Poumai system of transforming large stones into monuments involves giving these tangible materials a deep inner meaning. The stone monolith also serves as a

visual marker and symbol of the successful completion of the Feast of Merit. It represents the host's dedication, effort, and the entire community's participation in the celebration. As remarked by an interviewer, Hrai Hriini

“like how you are doing your research and getting your Doctorate degree, feast of merit can also be considered as a degree back then when putting up stone monolith is like a degree certificate and the shawl (Hapeidasa) as the Dr. title”.

Putting up stone monolith also symbolises the social status, prestige and identity of the host, the presence of the stone monolith signifies the elevated social status of the host who sponsored the feast. It is a tangible marker of their achievement and contribution to the community, and it distinguishes them as a respected member of the society, which are similar to the people of Goodenough Island in Melanesia and New Guinea where feasting were thrown as a competition to gain prestige, strength, relationships, and demonstrate one's ability to contribute to the well being of the community (Hayden & Villeneuve, 2011).

As narrated by sons of a feast giver,

When the third brother, Pou, was questioned on memories about the feast hosted by their father, he said “well, I have no memories of it, but, my older brother should know about it. However, I was told that I was born in the year when Zhosu was performed by my family, during 1963-64. Then, attention was drawn to the first brother, Kho, for questions, he began “it was 1964 of December, I was 10 years old when my house had long days of celebration. For 2 days, food was served to people; there were many rituals and animal sacrifices that happen those days. I clearly remember 3 buffaloes, very big ones, it must have weight more than 400kgs, about 500kgs per buffalo, that was butchered and given to people, my families had distributed a little more amount of meat to people just because we were able to provide a little more as more meat means more wealth and more respect from the people. Then the 6th brother, Roh, interfered and said ‘we also have the stone monolith erected in our father’s name, after the feast was given to the villagers, and is a female stone and also pregnant’. On being asked ‘why were stone monoliths put up?, Kho responded that ‘it is a memory stone today, memory of a rich man, as back then it was the only way of showing one’s status and that’s how one could get or claimed their identity in the society’

Not only status and prestige, but, the stone monolith is also a representation of the unique cultural identity and traditions of the Poumai community. It is a testament to their rich cultural heritage and the preservation of traditional customs. The individuals who initiated the construction of these stone monuments feel a strong connection to them, and their social identity is closely tied to the erection of these stones. It represents the symbol of Status and Identity, and social standing of the individuals who initiate their construction. Those who can provide for an entire village and organize the feast associated with erecting these monoliths are considered to hold a special status in the community. This status is closely tied to their ability to provide for the community, and the monoliths serve as a tangible representation of this achievement. The act of erecting stone monoliths and organizing the associated feasts is a way for individuals to establish and solidify their social identity within the community. It sets them apart from others and recognizes their contributions to the well-being of the community. The status achieved through these feasts of merit is distinct from traditional social hierarchies, such as being a chief or belonging to a noble clan. It highlights the dynamic nature of status within the community and emphasizes the significance and meaning attached to one's actions in social life. This system of status attainment through feasts of merit does not conform to a strictly stratified society. It suggests that social status and identity are not solely determined by birth or hereditary factors but can be achieved through individual actions and contributions to the community.

Community Unity: The pulling and erection of the stone monolith involve the participation of the entire community, particularly the male members of the village. This communal effort symbolizes unity and cooperation within the community. The feast also symbolises economic support generosity and leadership within the community, It symbolises the community's social bonding which is reflected in the art of coming together for a feast fostering a feeling of togetherness and belonging. The dragging of stone by the community also shows another kind of bonding and cooperation that encourage mutual support and solidarity within the community. It also showed a sense of belongingness to the community as when the villagers have more to spare, they were giving away to the community in the form of feast and in return the village folks helped the host by dragging the stone and putting it up in gratitude for the donor's kindness towards them.

Monument to Future Generations: In this cultural context, the monoliths and the feasts associated with them are also powerful symbols that reflect the values, social dynamics as they demonstrate how material culture and social interactions are intertwined, and they provide a unique perspective on how individuals perceive and establish their status within society. The entire community participates in various stages of rituals from stone selection to communal feast, emphasizing the collective nature of this cultural practice. Megaliths have become a prominent aspect of Poumai Naga identity, deeply rooted in the collective legacy and ideas of inheritance. The stone monolith is erected to stand tall as a monument for future generations to come. It serves as a reminder of the traditions, values, and accomplishments of the community's ancestors and is a source of inspiration for future generations.

Additionally, the placement of stone monuments within the village's spatial boundaries follows a particular pattern. Space syntax analysis reveals that the distribution of megalithic monuments is related to areas with high human accessibility. These monuments are often located along inter-village lanes or in the central areas of the village, demonstrating a spatial logic of human movement. When selecting a location for erecting a monument, individuals typically place them within the boundaries of their khel, the land associated with their affiliation. This choice reflects the management of space and how it relates to an individual's connection to their spatial boundaries, thus influencing the concept of spatiality within the settled area. The meanings established from the monoliths scattered in and outside the village are commemorative of a feast given by a rich man. However, in recent times, there is a newly developed trend of viewing these monoliths as not just historical artifacts but as a symbol that carry memories of different perspective on monumentality and the concept of landscape. Jamir's work is also a demonstration of deriving the idea of landscapes and social memories from stone monuments and how the conception of monumentality and landscape among the Nagas is connected with social memories (Changkiri, 2018; Jamir & Hazarika, 2019). Another study amongs the tribe of Phungwumi of the Chakesang tribe by (Wouters & Subba, 2013) also deliberates over the social role of stone monuments and their potential for understanding a village ethno history. He further adds that megaliths both produce and communicate the form and substance of social life. Apparently, the ideological meaning of a monolith erected in the name of the host signals his wealth and also creates a memory of his lifetime achievements. The memory of the feasts is not just about the events themselves but also encompasses the broader social and cultural significance of these gatherings. The monoliths encapsulate this significance and transmit it through generations.

Conclusion

The Megalithic culture is not only confined to past but continue to be an integral part of today Poumai's society. Commemorative stones are still erected today by the community to mark any big events; it could be mile stones of church events, or historical importance or anything important. Stone pulling/dragging

ceremonies are carried out during events, which are an elaborative traditionally performed by the men folk. A large slab is pulled or dragged from the hillside or jungle to specific location village and these stone Monoliths are made in the hope that they carry a particular message into the future. The messages these stone monoliths carry are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the cultural, social, and historical context in which they are erected. They serve as powerful symbols that communicate a wide range of values, beliefs, and aspirations of the Poumai community. It is important that our megalithic culture be preserve and continued as it represents a huge part of our history, like the fossils that can bring us many information about the furthest past, stone monolith for the Poumai community bring back the history and identity of the community alive. According to Poumai village elders, stone monoliths are put up to show that the people of the village are prosperous and their land is fertile, it signifies the importance of wealth and fertility for the population. The expression of being self-sufficient connoting the rich man (the feast donor), his clan and the whole village population relays a strong signal of wealth as the bastion of the village population. Perhaps it played an important role in the past in portraying the power and might of a village and also building relationships between different clan members. It is quite probable that there was competition between villages and even between clan members of the same village in performing Feasts of Merit, which not only created a memory of a member's lifetime achievement but also enabled him to ascend to a higher status and exercise power by bringing together the village members to work collectively for "megalithic construction, organization of feasts, labor and resources"

The proposition of the present discussion explores how indigenous people, like the Poumai Naga tribe, transform natural stones into symbolic monuments, showcasing their wealth and status through communal feasting and physical representation. These megaliths hold subjective meaning, and their placement in the village landscape is not just a backdrop but an integral part of their culture, reflecting spatial cognition and boundary marking. This practice also aids in identifying deserted ancient habitation sites based on the spatial characteristics of stone megaliths. With time, a society will either accept or change or re-adapt old cultural ways depending on the needs of the society or the popular trends which the society accepts. Among the factors bringing change, Christianity has played the most influential part in the lives of the Nagas, their material culture and on their ideologies about their ways of life today. Though it cannot be said that it completely changed their perspective about their culture, rather, they have incorporated, ancient practices and new knowledge which has resulted in a fusion of both tribal and Western lifestyle. However, it is interesting to point out that despite the change in their religion, rituals, and lifestyle, Feasts of Merit continued to hold a significant part in Poumai Naga culture, in which the feast givers attain social status and power as in the past. The monolith continues to uphold an important part of the Poumai culture as it not only defines the social status and power of the raiser, but also as symbol of ethnic identity, of wealth and honor but also is a symbolic metaphor of "gift economy."

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Fig-1: The village gate at Tungjoy village



Fig1.1.Stone slabs and rocks built for sitting and resting at Oinam Poumai Village



Fig : 2.: Only men who have performed the feast of merit is illegible to wear this shawl known as Hapeidas



Photo retrieved from Discover Senapati instagram page

Fig:3

Chikai



Fig 4 (Men enacting dragging stone monolith during a festival in Tungjoy Village)

