

Research Article

Life Behind The Monolith Culture of the Chakhesang Community

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A B S T R A C T

The Nagas depend on their history through oral narration due to the unavailability of a written script. Like any other community in the world, they have their own way of preserving their tradition, that is, verbal narration and erecting monoliths. The Naga people believe that the monolith they have erected will be the living proof of the glory and their living history to the coming generations. The monoliths that are found among the communities of the Nagas have distinct features. They are rough, shapeless with engravings or scripts being absent on them. The purpose of erecting monoliths among the Nagas may differ from one community to another community. Some communities erect monoliths for rituals, some to show prosperity and get recognition from society, some to signify death and birth etc. Whatever may be the reason, the monoliths that survive for ages and are seen till today are a living tale to tell the people about their ancestry. The monolith reflects the past life of the community. This article is intended to study how monoliths play a pivotal role in (re) discovering and (re) structuring their past. The article is based on the personal fieldwork undertaken for the research purpose.

Keywords: Monoliths, Community, Oral Tradition, The Feast of Merit

Introduction

The Chakhesang community once live in an age where stones were considered as a status symbol just as the crown gives entitlement to a king. Different stones from different generations show the specific period of how and when the community started or where the idea of using stones as a sign of their social life started, link up with the oral tradition of the society. There is no written script found on the stones erected in this community. They are rough and of different shape, though with the passage of time, the shape of the stones changed due to weather and natural forces. Jelle J. P Wouter in his experience with the social

lives of stones of Phugwumi village also called Kikruma village pointed out "The local command of monoliths lies in their robustness. They withstand and endure, unlike wood that rots, clay that dissembles, and unlike humans who decompose".¹ Supporting his personal experience, he further asserted, "A study of the social lives of such stones can provide a window into the past, casting rays of light on a history that has gone largely unwritten and undocumented, although not, of course, unremembered as rich repertoires of oral history flourish from one Naga village to the next".² Whenever one crosses any village of the Chakhesang community, one finds the stone being erected outside the village boundaries, some single, some

¹J.P. Jelle Wouter. "Feast of Merit, Election Feasts or No Feasts? On the Politics of Wining and Dining in Nagaland" in Northeast India in The South Asianist, Vol.3:2. p. 22

²Ibid, p. 21

in two's or three, or some numbering up to nine. These stones were erected as an entitlement for hosting the feast of merit for the villagers, or to commemorate the death of a family member, or were put up for ritualistic purposes.

The community is not one that worships stones but believe that some stones are said to be the abode of spirits, both good and bad. People pray to their god, Kumunypvu to protect them from the evil spirit of the stones. Most of the village settlers traced back their settlement through the stone erected or placed in the village. The oral tradition is been carried down through monoliths in some way, as each erected stone has its own story to tell, and thus the stories lying behind the stone are being passed down from one generation to another generation.

The monolith portrays the society of the Chakhesang community at large. As Hermaendorf puts it, the dolmens and menhirs are a "living and vital part of the Naga culture".³ One relates the history of a great man who hosted the feast of merit according to the number of stones he erected. People find a replacement in stone as a trophy to preserve one's entitlement. These menhirs show the prosperity and wealth that flourished during the ancient period besides showing their laborious work in the field, still finding a way to socialise and enjoy their. The whole social life in a way goes round the clock the feast of merit in the past. Today when one looks the erected stones at the boundaries, it reminds one of the past where holding the feast of merit is the best status one can attain his position in the society. People struggle and work hard so that their rice barns will be full and be sufficient to grant a feast to the whole village. They sacrifice even to the extent of having meagre food than usual for days to save their rice and when they work in the field, they tie a cloth around their waist so that they will not feel hungry and save their lunch for their rice storehouse.

Any feast of merit giver who is able to erect nine stones is called Sachomechi. This is the highest entitlement one can give to a man. Though one find numerous stones lying in the village boundaries in different places, there are quite a few where these nine stones were erected in line by one feast holder, as it takes hard work, patience, sacrifice, strength, health and wealth to erect them.

People believe that spirit dwells in the stones. Thus, whatever entitlement it is, they dread to bring it inside the village lest it brings curses or ill-fated luck to the villagers. They fear that the spirit might harm the people. Therefore, it is kept outside the village gate. One finds the memorial stone of a dead person to commemorate the deceased person. The stones have been placed in different places to

perform various rituals like the prediction of the warriors luck or prediction of weather amongst other reasons. These places are usually found a few meters away from the village boundaries. The people differentiate the stone as living or dead or male or female and sometimes even talk to them as though the stone can hear them.

When one looks over different menhirs and dolmens, one can categorize them into different groups as entitlement stone, war stone, spirit or magical stone, memorial stone and ceremony stone. The entitlement stones are stones that have been put up to commemorate one's achievements in war or in giving a feast. Both ways, these help a person to climb the social ladder of position in society. There are some stones in the community that remind the people about war or head hunting in the past. Stories of legends or great warriors have been passed down from one generation to another generation through the reminder of the stones that still stand today. The stone put up on the way to Kikruma village where, near the village gate metal cut marks by Niho and Mushuyo, were once believed to be the bravest warriors of the village. The metal marks show that they are the signs of the spears, which bore the head of the enemy. The number line of the marks shows the number of the head taken by them. Their stories have been told from one generation to the next generation. It has been told that they strike their spear on the stone below the village gate, saying that it is not the warrior who killed and took the head of the enemy but the armour. In this way, if any curse or ill-fated luck, befalls the armour and not on the warrior. The stone today, though small in size, marks the bravery of the two brothers who stood for the villages and fought for them. It stands as a living representative of the two warriors generation after generation.

People believe in supernatural elements, spirits or things that are beyond their knowledge, a belief that is very strong in society. They believe that some stones are the abode of spirits, especially when unusual things happen to the stone or unanswerable occurrences take place near the stone. No matter how so true it is, one cannot distort the belief of the people. Back in the days of the headhunting period, the Sumi⁴ village came to ambush Kikruma village at night. They waited to execute their plan at a distance from the village gate until it became completely dark. When darkness crept in, they sent two of their best men to spy on the village and find a way to ambush the village and told them to report back. These two men headed towards the village through the streamside but they neither made their entry to the village nor did they return to the group waiting for them. People believe that the two men turned into stones, one on the left side of the stream and the other on the right side

³Furer-Haimendorf, Christopher Von, The Naked Nagas, p. 24

⁴One of the Chakhesang villages, which were believed to be the original village of the Sema Nagas, their adventurous nature makes them migrate to the present side of Zunheboto, while a few people stayed back and established a village under the name called Sumi village.

of the stream. While the other man waited down below, they did not make it back to their own village nor were killed in the war. When the morning came, these men had turned into yellowish stone. A message was reported to the villagers about the ambush of Sumi village people the previous night. A young man rushed down to chase the people away. But to their utter surprise, they found two extra stones by the stream in the village, while a group of yellowish stones stood at some distance in their village. The enemies believe that it was the spirit of the village that guarded and protected the people from their enemy even when the people were in deep slumber.

A dolmen situated in Khezhakeno village is also believed to be the abode of spirits, which is been said to double the rice that is being dried over it. When the stone broke, the belief was that the spirit left its abode to another better place as they saw a white pigeon flying out from the stone. Many such stones are believed to be the abode of spirits and many of them still stand today to tell the story to the younger generation of past interventions with the spirits. No matter how the stones are classified or categorized, they are the living history of the past for generation after generation of villagers. The stones or dolmens that lie within or outside the boundaries of the Chakhesang villages are not just stone, but reflections of the past glory and the social lives of its people. Every stone has its own story to tell and carries its own significance.

Feast of merit

In the agrarian society, where money was not known, a person's status was maintained by the prowess and strength in war, or by the number of the Feast of Merit a person hosted. Wouter rightfully asserted, "For an aspirant villager to climb the social ladder, to expand his sway and have his voice heard more loudly in the village, a single feast would hardly do the trick, however in the course of his life-time, an ambitious person was expected to provide a series of feasts".⁵ The Chakhesang community does not have the social hierarchical structure. In order to control the gap between the rich and the poor, when a person becomes rich by his sheer hard work, he voluntarily holds the Feast of Merit and gives away his wealth by sharing it with all the village people. Furer Haimendorf after witnessing the series of the Feast of Merit in one of the Chakhesang villages in Cheswuzu hosted by Netsoho, accounted, "A pair of newly carved house-horn adorned Netsoho's house

revealing to the entire world that he had performed the stone-dragging rite, the first of the major Feast of Merit. He climbed a large step on the social ladder, and two grey stones on the path to the fields would perpetuate his glory for many generations to come".⁶ Sometimes a rich man would be requested by the villagers to give them feast when they saw the increasing wealth of a person. In this way, one finds the neutrality among the people. The case of very poor and extremely rich in the village is rare. Every person in a village has their own land to cultivate and own house to live. If their poverty deprives them of all that, then they search a rich godfather in the village, and then he is given a part of the land to cultivate and sustain himself.

A Feast of Merit holder is given respect in the society, but when it comes to decision making, they are bound to the rules and regulations of the common people's decision. In the Chakhesang community, the feast of merit is obtained from one stage to another stage. The first stage is called Zotho Thumuza. In this stage, the host of the feast of merit distributes the meat to all the households of the village. He then gives a feast to the three clans, Hes,⁷ depending on the group he falls in, in the clan's division. To help him precede the other stages of the feast of merit, the villagers help him in doing the work. They even help him in his fieldwork, in cutting and carrying firewood, pounding and husking the rice, brewing his rice beer etc. The gratitude of the host to the people who helped him is given in the form of a dinner that very night. In this stage, the host gains the respect and honour among his villagers, but he does not get any special entitlement from the people.

After going through the first stage, the second stage follows, known as Kuda. In this, the host distributes a piece of meat to every household as a part of a ritual and thereby a common feast is thrown to the whole village. After giving a feast to the whole village for the second time, the host is entitled to wear Thuvobvuto Khwu.⁸ On this day, they are allowed to decorate the front of their house with wild grass. While on the third stage, the host again distributes a piece of meat to every household during Thurinyi festival.⁹ The host then again gives a feast to the villagers during Sukrunyi festival,¹⁰ where a maximum number of cows, pigs, dogs and hens are butchered for the feast for the people and for the joy of the children, boiled sweet potatoes and yam are given to them. The youth dress up in their colourful traditional attire and help the host in distributing the food and wine to the villagers during the feast, so that nobody is

⁵Anthropology today an international peer reviewed NEIRA journal,p. 26

⁶Furer-Haimendorf, Christopher Von, The Naked Nagas, p. 24

⁷As recorded in one of the Chakhesang village, Kikruma, consists of six clans. These clans has two group,Tunyi, Puro, Yhobu and Vero, Thira, Kezo.

⁸Thuvobvuto refers to pig excreta and khwu means shawls. It is call so, because of the big round design pattern in the centre of the shawls.

⁹A festival of the Chakhesang community celebrated right after the harvest.

¹⁰A purification festival among the Chokri Chakhesang.

left out in getting their lions-share of food and wine. In this stage, the host is entitled to wear Thupikhwu.¹¹ This shawl is used among the Chakhesang Naga as their feast of merit shawl, but his wife continues to wear Thuvobvuto Khwu. People revere this shawl and maintain a kind of taboo over this shawl. No man should imitate the design and modify it or put it on disrespectfully. Women are prohibited to put it on and wear it in any way. If anyone goes against that, it shows disrespect to the community sentiments. He or she can be cast out of the village. As the crown is to the king, this Thupikhwu is revered and respected. Besides the entitlement of the shawl, he erects a Chika¹² (a big wooden plank in X-shaped) in the front of his house.

The next stage is called Zhothi, where the host gives a feast to the whole village. All the villagers, uncaring of their age, dress up, adorn themselves with the colorful traditional attires and partake of the feast with merriment and happiness. In this, the men folk in the village help the host to pull the stone and erect it. This first stone monolith is erected in honor of the man. In the fifth stage, also called Zhothi, the same procedure of the fourth stage is followed and another stone is pulled and erected representing man. The sixth is also call Zhothi, where the procedure of the same ritual is followed. However, in this stage, the people pull two stones, one for the husband and the other for the wife. Before they drag and pull the stone one a wooden sledge, they say to the stone as if the stone can hear them; "This is not a good place for you. We have prepared a better place. Come, follow as we lead." They then pull the stone representing the man to lead, with a repeating chant, oh ho oh ho, and then the wife's stone follows.

In the seventh stage, the same sequence of feasting and pulling of stone follows, representing the husbands and wife. The monolith is then erected accordingly outside the village gate. Any stone erected for the feast of merit or any stone erected as a memorial for the dead person is kept outside the village gate and is not allowed to be brought inside the village gate, because the people fear that some of the stones might bring bad omen to the villagers or an epidemic disease would befall them. In the seven stages, the host again gives a feast to the whole village and on this day, the villagers help the host to pull and erect three stones thus totaling nine stones. The people who had succeeded in erecting nine stone monoliths are titled Sachomechi. The host does not necessarily need to go through all the eight stages of the Feast of Merit. He can stop according to his capacity and wealth. Many people are able to reach the fourth or fifth stages of the Feast of Merit and earn the entitlement of the shawl, house horn, chode and pulling and erecting two stones for both the husband and wife, but

it is very rare in the villages that a person succeeds in all the eight stages and the resulting erection of nine stones. For, nine stones it is the highest entitlement one can confer on a person who gives a Feast of Merit.

Conclusion

The oral tradition of the Chakhesang community is more than mere storytelling; it is the whole life of the community, social customs, beliefs, taboos etc. A community with no written record or script in the past has no other means to transmit oral tradition, but by the chain of transmission by word of mouth from one generation to the next is the only way of doing so. Jan Vasina defines "Oral tradition as messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation".¹³

The glories of the past are seen today through the stones they have been erected and the house horn they have put up on their houses signifying the prosperity of the people after holding a series of the Feast of Merit. When might was given more honour than knowledge during the headhunting era, the legends of the great stories were been told and transmitted from generation to generation.

The rich tradition of the community, however received a fatal blow when it was struck by the new religion, Christianity. In spite of the resistance, they were sooner or later manipulated into embracing the new religion, which forced them to abandon their traditional practices that were once considered as life- sustainers in nurturing generations. The traditional belief that was once revered and honoured becomes a 'taboo' that needed to be avoided and shunned. The practice of erecting monoliths is still very much prevalent among the communities, but its practice has been Christianized. For example, one sees the church erecting monoliths to glorify God.

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¹²Chi means house and ka means horn. Thus, Chika literally refers to the house horn.

¹³Jan Vasina, Oral Tradition as History; p.27

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