

Megalithic Monuments of Zeme Naga in Peren District, Nagaland

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Abstract: The present paper is an outcome of an ethnographic study conducted in the two Zeme villages old poilwa and old peren under Peren district, which is located in the southern part of Nagaland. The study was undertaken to examine the typology of various stone monuments and their archaeological relevance, associated meanings, functions of the stone monuments and to examine the socio-economic formation of the Zeme pre-colonial society and to understand the location pattern of the stone monuments. The erection of Zeme monuments is associated with feast and various stages of feast held and the monuments erected are a result of competitive feasting activities and surplus economy of the community. However, there are indicative of recursive relations of mutual aid and solidarity among families, clan and *khels* being highly practiced among the Zemes. It is interesting to find out that almost all the megaliths are being erected in prominent places around the village vicinity or on their way to the field where it is widely visible by the passerby. The tradition of erecting monuments and the practice of megalithic culture has been an important tradition among the Zemes in the past and is still in practice albeit in smaller scale and in Christianized ways.

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INTRODUCTION

Nagaland located in the Northeastern part of India and is known for its numerous megalithic structures from different parts of the states. The complex tradition of megalithism has been practiced by most of the Nagas in prehistoric times and some of which ended very recently. The Zemes are one such tribe inhabiting the southern part of Nagaland, known for erecting megaliths which are still in practice albeit with the coming of Christianity in the region it is now done without complex rituals and ceremonies. The Zemes of Peren district have a rich tradition of megalithism however apart from few other aspects like society, culture, religion and politics, no attempt has been made to study the megalithic tradition. The present study is a preliminary ethnographic work from the two Zeme villages of old Peren and old Poilwa, which shows in brief the different aspects of megalithic tradition practiced by the people. The tradition of erecting huge stone structures is found around the village vicinity. Strewn in the grass around were ancient relics, stone rows, and monoliths, the weathered remains of a century's occupation, and perhaps of settlements still earlier (Bower 1952). The megaliths were erected for different purposes like commemorative, memorials, village boundaries, village gates, warheads, rituals, etc. Among the Zemes, descent is traced patrilineally and marriage is patrilocal. Polygyny is not prohibited but occurs only in special circumstances but in practice the Zemes are monogamous. The smallest unit of the

community is the family and each family in the village is a member of a clan that of closely knitted which is seen till today.

PREVIOUS WORKS

The Zeme tribe have been mentioned sporadically in the work of the colonial administrators and ethnographers by Hodson (1911), Hutton (1922, 1926, 1929, 1965), Mills (1926, 1930) Haimendorf (1945), Bower (1950, 1951), Jacob (1990), which brought light on some few megalithic sites and briefly mentions the different types of megaliths in Zeme villages in Nagaland and North Cachar Assam. And after a gap of decades local scholars like Z Venuh (2005), Longkumer (2007), N Venuh (2014), Mepusangba and Changkiri (2019) through their work reported on some rituals involved in erections of megaliths, classified the different types of Megaliths, highlight on the social, religion cultural history of the Zemes of Nagaland.

STUDY AREA

The study area is located under Peren district in the southern part of Nagaland, bounded by Dimapur district in the west, Kohima district in the east, and Tamenglong district of Manipur in the south. It is located at Latitude- 25.5 and longitude-93.7. The altitude of the district varies from 800 meters to 2500 meters above sea level. The area is a sub-tropical mixed forest characterized by broad-leaved evergreen trees and deciduous trees abounds. It is a strip of mountainous territory having fertile foothill valley plains in the northwest and northeast. Metamorphic rocks, particularly quartz is the most commonly found rock in the district. During the fieldwork, in the two Zeme villages each monument was measured, photographed, and marked using GPS.



Figure 1: Map of Nagaland; showing Peren district

TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF MONUMENTS

Functionally, the megaliths of Zemes can be divided into six types:

Chusum/Menhir: These are standing stones in single or in pairs, the larger or taller one representing the man and the smaller vertical stone representing the wife. It is mainly commemorative and sometimes memorial and is associated with a feast of merit. There is a huge difference in size where the biggest one has 389 cm height, 157 cm breadth, 50cm thick and the smallest one has 11cm height, 59 cm breadth, and 34 cm thick.



Fig. 2 (a): Menhir erected after completion of the whole feasting series in old Poilwa village



Fig. 2 (b): Menhir erected without the completion of feasting series in old Poilwa village.

Renei/Stone platform: It comes in different shapes like circular, rectangular and trapezoidal. In Poilwa village the platforms are associated with a series of feasting. The structures are constructed for memorial and also the commemorative purpose. Whereas in oldPeren village it is mostly associated with memorials, one significant thing was the multiple burials being associated with the platform. The interviewee from oldPeren mentioned that the circular platforms are constructed after proper rituals are performed and it applies the same when during the time of repair. It is built by individuals and also by clan/*khel* collectively. The platform serves as a resting place for the people coming from the field and also serve as a gathering place for peer in the village. On an average, the structure has 600 cm in circumference, 495 cm in diameter, and 208 cm in height.



Fig 3(a): Circular structure constructed after the completion of feast of merit in old Peren Village



Fig 3(b): Sitting platform constructed on the way to the field in old Poilwa village.



Fig 3(c): Sitting platform constructed in memory of a mother by a son in old Poilwa village.



Fig 3(d): Platform associated with burials in old Peren village.

Hedwa/stone circle: It is a circular stone structure made in a shape of a barn (where rice is stored), constructed by an individual who acquired the highest yield in rice that year. The structure is found only in old Peren. Altogether 5 such structures have been documented. And the average size of the stone circle is 914cm in diameter and 2871 cm in circumference.

Dolmen: A huge slab placed over piles of smaller stones in old Peren known as *Meurielecukwan* named after the wife of the feast donor in Peren village, a similar stone slab was placed outside a morung in old Poilwa known as widow stone or *Luigwamlie Rausam*. These stones are pulled after feasting with the village. During *Mileingi* festival the young lad fully dressed in traditional attire display their tactics over the stone.

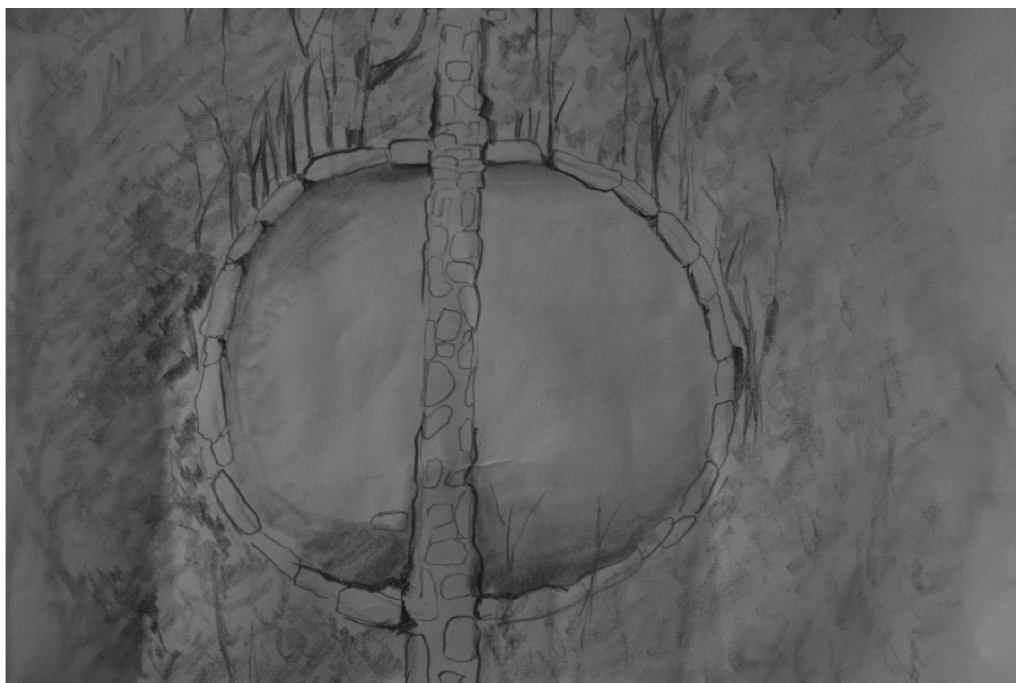


Fig. 4: Sketch showing the circular structure *Hedwa* constructed on the way to the adjoining village in old Peren village



Fig. 5: Dolmen over cairn erected in the name of feast donor's wife *Meurielecukwa* in old Peren village

Kirie/Herie: These are well-Fortified village gates, made of huge stone boulders and pebbles from the nearby river and a huge plank of wood to close the gate. It is pertinent to have well-fortified stone gate to defend the villagers from enemies during the headhunting days and the gate are close during bad times and *genna* in the village. There are two village gates in old Peren and four village gates in old Poilwa village.



Fig 6(a): A well-fortified village gate in old Peren, ditch dug in front of the gate to defend the villagers during war



Fig 6 (b): Similar gate in old Poilwa village. The gate has wooden door carved out of a huge tree and well-fortified with stones

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STONES

Stone receptacle: A cist-like structure constructed beside the village path and on the way to the field, a sacred place for the hunters to cut a small piece from the game and place it inside the receptacle as ritual.

War headstone: stone slab placed over the buried heads, brought by the head hunters during the headhunting days.

Oath stone: Stone slab placed over piles of small boulders. Whenever there arises any incident where it becomes difficult to solve the case like theft or land dispute etc. An oath is taken by both the parties over the stone.

Putting stone: Spherical boulder called *Tsugi* kept in each morungto display strength during festivals.

Pig and Tortoise stone: A pig brought for a wedding is believed to be transformed into stone in old Poilwa, and a tortoise believed to be transformed into stone in old Peren village. Both of which are located outside the village vicinity.

Fetish stone: A stone boulder placed near the village gate in old Poilwa village. It is believed that death befalls a person/animal when comes in contact with the stone.



Fig. 7: Stone receptacle with animal skin seen inside the structure in old Peren village



Fig. 8: A tortoise believe to have turned into a stone in old Peren village



Fig. 9: A pig believed to have turned into stone in old Poilwa village



Fig. 10: Oath stone placed besides village path in old Peren Village

LOCATION PATTERN OF THE MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS

In course of interview, it was mentioned that monuments can be erected as per the builder's preference. However, permission had to be obtained from the landowner, and normally such request is not rejected by the landowner. In that case, builder after the construction presents a token of gratitude to the landowner in lieu of the land given to them.

In old Peren, menhirs singly or in clusters are mostly erected in conspicuous location inside in the village. And stone platform in different shapes like circular, rectangular, and oblong structures,

associated with burials are constructed with the house compound or *khel* proximity. Whereas, raise platforms and stone circles constructed to commemorate surviving members or in memory for the dead are constructed in the connecting paths to the neighboring village where people frequently pass through.

In the case of old Poilwa, monuments which are not associated with feast of merit are mostly located in the vicinity of the village. However, monuments (mostly menhirs) associated with the feast of merit are all located besides the footpath leading to the terrace fields.

Aleida Assman (1991) mentions that “monuments are that part of a culture which stage-manage it: they want to be seen, preserved and remembered by contemporary and later generation. The monument is an erected sign, which encodes a message in a permanent way for communicating with people that are (possibly) millennia away: a monument is designed to survive the present and to enable cultural communication with the distant future” (Assmann 1991:13, cited in Holtorf 1997:47). Therefore, monuments act as a personal biography and it is possible to sustain through generations due to the permanence and durability of its material.

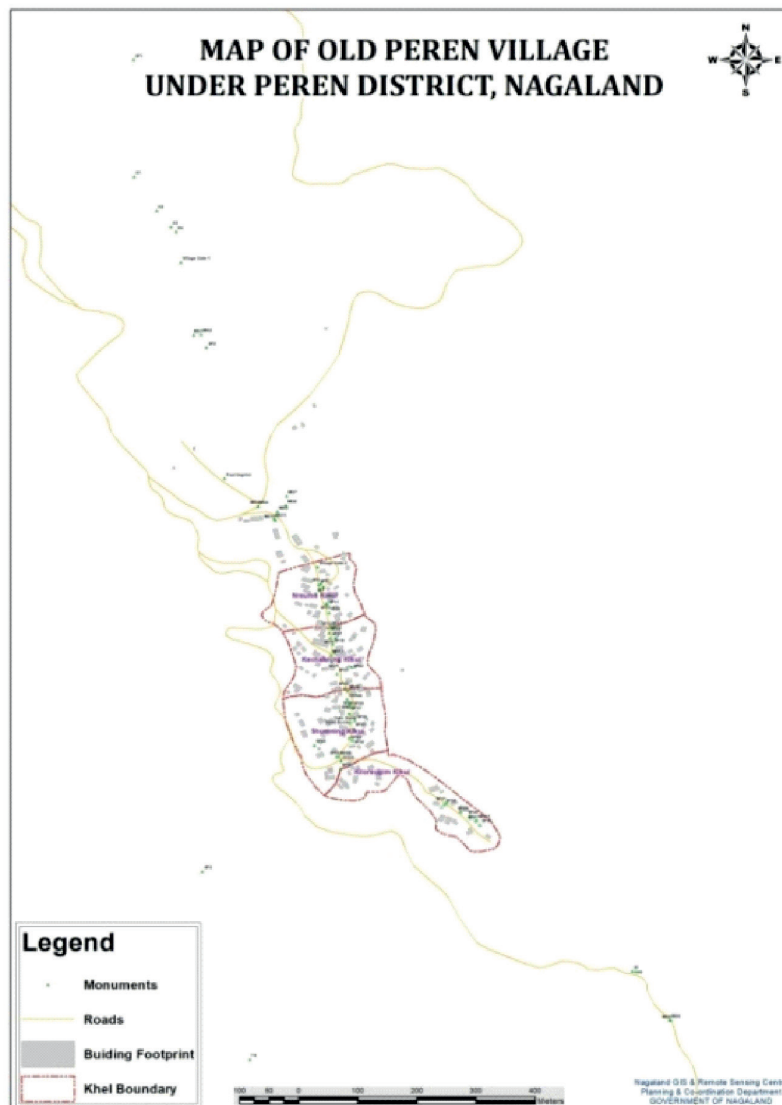


Fig. 11: Map of old Peren showcasing the distributions of Monuments

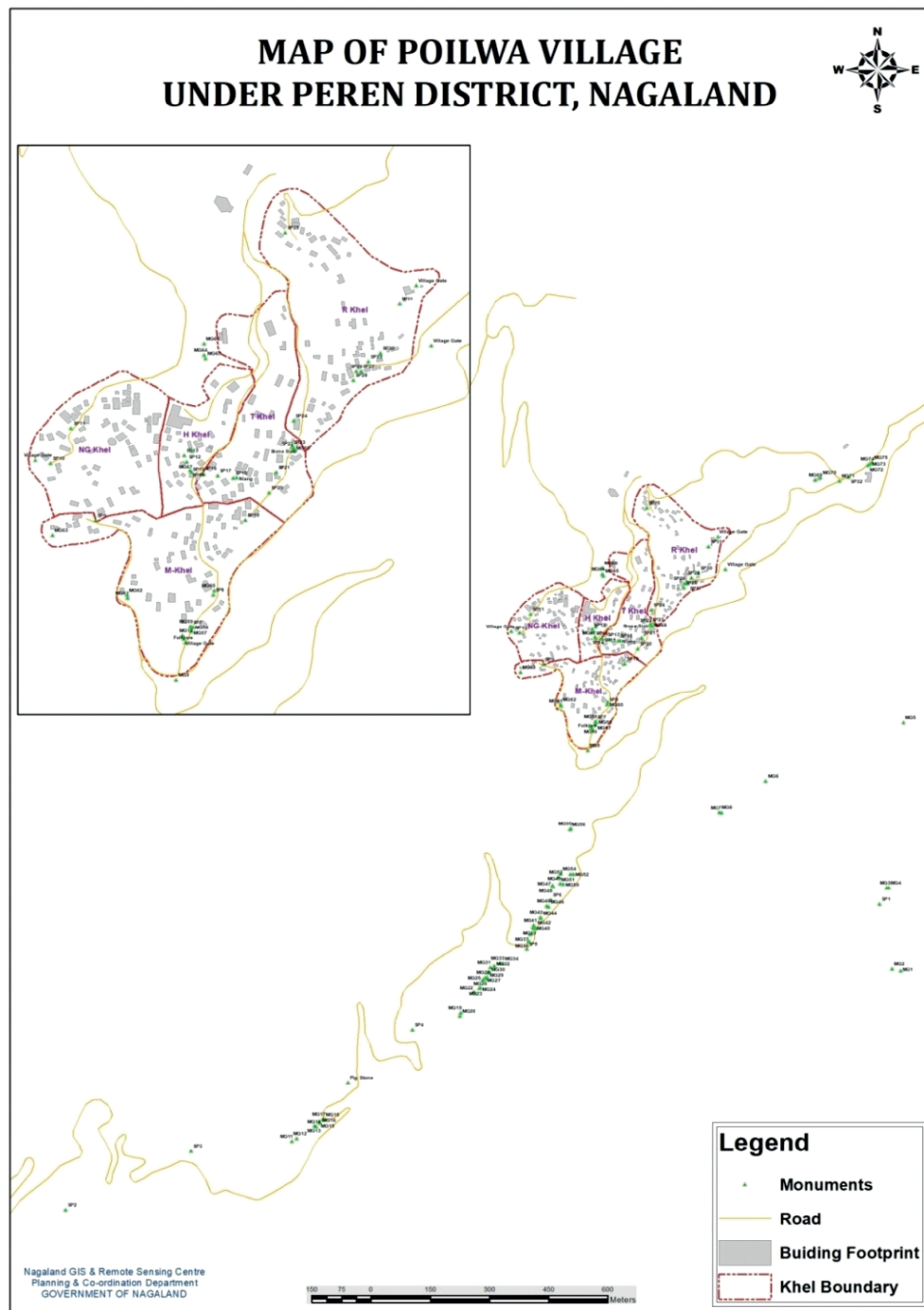


Fig. 12: Map of old Poilwa village showcasing the distribution pattern of the monuments

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FORMATION OF THE ZEME PRE-COLONIAL SOCIETY:

The primary unit of the social organization among the Zemes is the nuclear family *kelak* which comprises of the father, mother, unmarried children, and sometimes the grandparents. And is the lineage and the clan which traces to their common ancestry. The different lineages come together to form a clan. Like most of the Naga tribes, the Zeme trace their descent patrilineally, and marriage is patrilocal. Within the clan, there is a cooperative and reciprocal help being meted out in agricultural

work, economic assistance in times of need and also in a festival or assisting in the feast of merit, in times of building a house, also in matters of concerning the defense of the village. Each clan has its totem which is usually derived from birds, trees, and animals. Among the Zeme each clan have their dormitory which is looked after by the eldest member of the clan. The next unit which comprises an important part is the *khel*, which not only acts as a spatial place subdividing the villages but also helps in the proper working agent of the village. A *khel* could be an amalgamation of different clans or a few clans from the village. And in each *khel* there exists one common dormitory and normally in a large village, the *khelis* divided into upper, middle, and lower *khel*. Probably the most important aspect of *khels* was that they provided a communal framework for the socialization and education of children. In addition to that, on occasions like festivals, different *khels* form groups and compete with each other in games, dance, and singing, etc to keep a close attachment with one another. The morung which no longer held its importance like it was back then, constituted an important institute in Zeme society as it is here that youngsters are imparted with traditional lessons like folktales, folklore, folksongs, and various dances and certain life skills like crafting, various arts, spinning weaving, etc. There are two types of morung namely, *Rehangki* (boys' dorm) and *Releiki* (girls' dorm) a separate dormitory for the girls and boys. The family entrusted to look after the clan morung *Peiname ki* acts as the patriarch of the clan dormitory. In cases of dormitories attached to private houses, the owner act as the patriarch and matriarch of the dormitory. The dormitory plays a pertinent role as it inculcates the young minds the sense of responsibility and cooperation among themselves which sustains the tribal community life (Venuh 2014:832-834).

The economy of the Zeme depended mainly on agriculture. And the method of cultivation can be divided into two-Terrace cultivation (wet rice cultivation) usually begins in mid-February every year and harvest in October and jhum/shifting cultivation begins in the January and harvest begins in August. As for the Jhum field, unlike the terrace field, the land is utilized for two years and left fallow for about ten years. The main crop planted in the former is the rice whereas in jhum along with rice other crops like millet, jobs tears, maize and other vegetables like taro, beans, squash, are also grown. Work-gangs are made up of kinsmen, neighbors, or simply of men whose fields adjoin which is characterized by cooperative, reciprocal, and recursive in practice (Betts 1950:85). Animals like dogs, fowls, cats, pigs, cows, and mithun are also domesticated. The higher number of animals like mithun and cows enhance the prestige of the owner. The villagers are engaged in different professions like pottery making, weaving, basket making, carpentry, etc. There was also the practice of barter system between the neighboring villages. Though few coins were in circulation, it was not accessible to all especially the poor masses so in the absence of money the villagers used various type of conch shells, animal bones, horn and tusk, baskets, pots, grains, metals, cotton, vegetables as their means of exchange. The villagers with their goods travel far and distant places for days for the exchange of rare articles especially salt.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Megalithism has been a prehistoric practice among the Zeme tribe of the Peren district and is still prevalent in the community without the complexities of rituals involve in it. Even if there are differences in stages of feasting and the process of erection varies from one village to another, the concept of fertility, prestige, memory, procreation, solidarity among members remains the same. The different types of megaliths like the standing stone and stone platforms depicts the economic status of the Zemes as it involves various stage of feasting, so as to erect the monuments. However, it also shows the cooperative character as the relatives and clan members contribute the resources as well as

their time and energy to the feast. Also, the cooperative behavior and the recursive help among the clan members and the relatives further strengthens solidarity among them, the multiple burials associated with the clan platform shows the strong clan solidarity even after one's death. Besides strengthening clan solidarity by hosting the feast, the location of the erection of megaliths plays a major role as the megaliths are not constructed anywhere randomly, but if erected inside the village it is being placed within the clan compound or on conspicuous places where everyone can see. Most of the megaliths are erected on the way to the field or along the path where it is seen by the passerby easily. As to when ask why the megaliths are erected in a certain place, the answers is immediate and prompt 'the stones are erected for others to see and praise them' which acts as a personal biography of the person in whose name the stone has been erected. With the coming of Christianity in the region and the introduction of western education, the rituals involve and the erection of megalithic in its original form is not in practice anymore. However, the stone erection has taken a collective form such as commemorating jubilees celebrations, village founding stones, or in a simpler and Christianized way.

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