A Study Of Living Megaliths Among The Karbi Of Khamar, Assam

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Keywords

Megalith, Burahamal Gukhai Puja, Karbi, Dimoria zone, Assimilation and Living tradition.

Abstract

This paper explores the living megalithic tradition of Khamar village under the Dimoria zone of Assam, focusing on three important sites: the royal megalithic field, the commoners' memorial field, and the dolmen site. The Karbi people of Khamar have maintained their ancestral practice of erecting megaliths as commemorative stones after the death of family members. While the royal family continues to use large, traditional stone monuments, the common villagers have started using smaller and even concrete megaliths due to changing social and physical conditions. Despite these changes, the core rituals remain the same, showing cultural continuity. The dolmen site serves both religious and historical roles. It is the place of their local deity 'Burhamal Gukhai' and observed 'Burhamal Gukhai Puja' (a local ritual) that brings together different ethnic groups such as the Bodo, Tiwa, Koch, and Assamese communities. This reflects cultural assimilation and shared ritual practices. The study uses anthropological methods like quasi-participant observation and interviews, along with archaeological exploration to collect field data. It highlights how megaliths in Khamar are not just stones, but carriers of memory, identity, and collective tradition. This paper concludes that while the form and material of megaliths may change over time, their cultural importance and ritual significance remain deeply rooted among the Karbis of Khamar and neighbouring communities.

Introduction

Megaliths, meaning "large stones," are monumental structures constructed using massive stones, typically dating back to prehistoric times. Across the world, these stones have been associated with burial practices, ancestor worship, and ritual performances. According to archaeologist V.G. Childe (1948), megaliths are "stone built tombs, altars or cult places" that reflects communal efforts in prehistoric societies. In Northeast India, megaliths remain an integral part of the cultural and religious life of several indigenous communities. Among them, the Karbi people are prominent for preserving this ancient tradition through the continued erection of memorial stones. These structures not only serve commemorative purposes but also symbolize deep ancestral ties and community identity (Basa, 2005; Sharma, 2013). One such prominent site of megalithic activity is Khamar village, located under the Dimoria zone of Kamrup Metro district, Assam. The village lies at the boundary between Marigaon and Kamrup Metro districts and is predominantly inhabited by the Karbi people. Khamar is noteworthy for its continued practice of erecting megaliths, locally known as Longe Ke Ay, which serve not only as memorial stones but also as sacred and historical symbols for the community.

The Dimoria region, despite the absence of formal historical records, has a strong royal lineage preserved through oral tradition. According to local folklore, King Arimotta is considered the first monarch of the Dimoria kingdom, dating back to around the 14th century A.D. Although concrete historical data remains scarce, historian S.L. Baruah notes that the royal family of Dimoria lacks a detailed genealogy and that only a handwritten list of kings exists, where Arimotta is named as the first ruler (Baruah, 1995). The Karbi royal family of Dimoria continues to exist today, and the Dimoria king still holds ceremonial authority and cultural significance within the community. This paper explores the megalithic tradition in Khamar, focusing on three key sites: two memorial megalithic fields, one for the

royal family and one for commoners and a third, lesser-known site consisting of dolmens associated with royal meetings and sacred rituals. Through ethnographic observation and local oral narratives, the study examines how megalithic practices in Khamar embody a blend of ancestral memory, ritual performance, and cultural adaptation, reflecting both continuity and transformation in Karbi society. The study of megalithic traditions in Northeast India has received considerable attention from archaeologists and anthropologists, especially in relation to indigenous communities who continue to preserve these ancient customs.

Several researchers have studied the megalithic traditions in Northeast India, offering valuable insights into their diverse uses and cultural significance. Thapar (1990) discussed megaliths in the broader archaeological discourse, focusing on their typologies, construction techniques, and ceremonial functions. Baruah (1995) briefly referenced the Dimoria royal lineage in his historical writings, emphasizing the absence of genealogical records and the significance of oral narratives in reconstructing local history. Bezbaruah (2003) explored megalithic ruins in Karbi Anglong and provided a detailed account of the associated Karbi rituals. Choudhary (2004) focused on the megalithic remains in the Dimoria area of Kamrup district, classifying them into types such as menhirs, dolmens, table stones, and stone seats. Basa (2005) highlighted the ethnographic importance of megaliths among the hill tribes of Northeast India, noting their role in ancestor worship, status display, and maintaining social memory. Marak (2012) studied the megaliths of Jaintia Hills, classifying them based on shape and function and noting the diversity of their purposes across tribal groups. Sharma (2013) emphasized that megaliths in Northeast India are not just archaeological remnants but serve as active cultural symbols embedded in everyday rituals and community life. Bora and Bezbaruah (2018) reviewed megalithic traditions among tribal societies in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, discussing their ritualistic significance and types. Gogoi (2019) analyzed megalithic practices in Arunachal Pradesh among tribes like the Wancho and Nocte, categorizing them by structure and function. Mitri (2016) explored the symbolic meanings of clan-associated megaliths in the Khasi-Jaintia landscape. Dhanaraju and Engtipi (2020) focused on the oral traditions and cultural practices of the Karbi people in Karbi Anglong. Thakur (2021) examined the technological and socio-economic aspects of megalithic culture in Karnataka. The current study builds on this emerging body of work by documenting and analyzing the ongoing use of megaliths in Khamar, where megaliths are still used in rituals and continue to hold the spiritual importance. The present study builds on this by documenting the active use and evolving interpretations of megaliths in Khamar village.

Methodology

The present study is based on a combination of both anthropological and archaeological field methods conducted in Khamar village under the Dimoria zone of Kamrup Metro district, Assam. A quasi-participant observation method was employed to closely observe the rituals, festivals, and community gatherings related to the erection and worship of megaliths. The researcher engaged with the community during Burhamal Gukhai Puja, gaining insights into their cultural practices without fully participating in sacred rituals. The interview method was also applied, using semi-structured and informal interviews to collect oral histories, ritual details, and community perspectives. Key informants included village head Banthe, members of the royal family, local priests Kathar, and residents involved in the rituals. In the absence of extensive written records, oral narratives served as vital sources of historical and cultural knowledge. In addition to anthropological methods, the archaeological exploration method was employed to locate, document, and analyze the physical remains of the megalithic sites. Measurements of megaliths were systematically recorded, noting their height, breadth, thickness, alignment, and condition. A photographic survey was conducted to visually document the stones and site arrangements. Blending ethnographic observation with archaeological documentation allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the living megalithic tradition in Khamar and its ongoing cultural relevance.

Continuity and Transformation of Megalithic Traditions in Khamar Village

Khamar, a historically significant village located under the Dimoria zone of Kamrup district, Assam, represents a living legacy of the Karbi megalithic tradition and they are known as Longe Ke Ay. The megalithic sites of Khamar not only serve as commemorative markers but also continue to strengthen community identity and historical continuity. The present study identifies and documents three distinct

megalithic sites in the village and each carrying unique socio-cultural connotations. Two of these sites are primarily memorial in function, one exclusively reserved for the royal family of Dimoria and the other site is used by the commoners of the Khamar village. These two sites, situated merely 65 meters apart, differ in historical significance, physical dimensions of the megaliths, and the social status of those commemorated. The third site, distinct in function, is used by the Dimoria king as a political meeting ground and continues to serve as a religious space for the community.

The archaic royal megalithic field reflects deep ancestral veneration and royal exclusivity. According to oral accounts, this site has been in use since time immemorial and continues to serve as a commemorative ground for the royal lineage. A total of 125 megaliths were recorded across the three sites, of which 54 are categorized as large and 71 as medium-sized. Among these, a distinctive multilateral megalith, crowned with an iron rod, stands as a significant marker believed to honour King Arimotta, a powerful Dimoria ruler of the 14th century A.D. Another important megalith was erected in memory of Aikon Rani, a former queen, approximately 37 years ago. The erection of such stones is marked by elaborate feasts organized by the royal household, accompanied by traditional rituals conducted by local priests, where a feast of merit was prepared by the member of the royal family and the villagers as well as guests were served by rice, local vegetables, pork, and rice beer. The measurements of megaliths at the archaic site indicate the monumental scale of these stones.

Figure 1: Erected stone in memory of *Aikon Rani* (former queen).

Figure 2: Archaic royal megalithic site in Khamar village.

Table 1: Measurements of archaic megaliths of Khamar village

Measurements	**Largest Megalith**	**Smallest Megalith**
Maximum height	11 foot 5 inches	2 foot 5 inches

Maximum breadth	1 foot 7 inches	1 foot 4 inches
Maximum thickness	9 inches	2.6 inches

As recorded in Table 1, the largest megalith reaches a height of 11 feet 5 inches with a maximum thickness of 9 inches. Even the smallest in this field stands at 2 feet with a 2.6-inch thickness, demonstrating the labour and significance invested in royal commemorations.

The modern megalithic site used by commoners reflects both continuity and adaptation. Here, megaliths are arranged in a linear north-south alignment, with each stone commemorating an individual. A notable development at this site is the increasing use of concrete as a substitute for natural stone. Villagers cited labour shortage and difficulty in transporting stones from the hills as key reasons behind this shift. The practice of erecting concrete megaliths began around two decades ago and continues to be integrated into traditional ritual practices.

Table 2: Measurements of modern megaliths in Khamar village

Measurement	Largest	Smallest
Maximum height	2 foot 5 inches	1 foot 2 inches
Maximum breadth	1 foot 2 inches	8 inches
Maximum thickness	2.5 inches	5.6 inches

Measurements from this modern site Table 2 show a significant reduction in size compared to the archaic royal megaliths. The tallest megalith in this field is only 2 foot 5 inches high with a maximum thickness of 2.5 inches, while the smallest stands at just 1 foot 2 inches. Despite the material and dimensional changes, the community maintains traditional rituals during the erection process, mirroring those performed at the royal site.

This ethnographic insight into Khamar's megalithic traditions reveals a layered cultural practice that blends ancient customs with modern constraints. While the form and material may evolve, the essence of commemorating the deceased through stone persists, embodying a strong sense of cultural continuity among the Karbi of Khamar.

Figure 3: Modern Megalithic site in Khamar village.

The Khamar Dolmen Site -

In addition to the two megalithic memorial sites of Khamar, another culturally significant megalithic site exists at the edge of the village, referred to as the Khamar Dolmen Site and consists of 12 dolmens, of which only three remain in well-preserved condition, while the others are in varying stages of decay. Despite their condition, these dolmens hold deep spiritual and historical significance for the Karbi people and other ethnic communities residing in the Dimoria zone.

The dolmen are known as Marjhangi Shil by the Karbi of Khamar and the site revered as a sacred space where villagers perform a major ritual known as Burhamal Gukhai Puja, held every five alternative years to honour the local deity Burhamol Gohain. This ritual attracts participants not only from Khamar but also from surrounding villages, including ethnic groups such as the Bodo, Tiwa and Koch communities. Each group actively contributes to the preparations by performing specific tasks like clearing the site, collecting bamboo from the hills, and providing ritual materials such as banana leaves. This cooperative participation reflects a shared sacred tradition and the collaborative spirit of inter-community relationships in the Dimoria zone.

Interestingly, the dolmen site is not exclusively a Karbi ritual site. The Koch community, a non-tribal group in the Dimoria region, also worships the site and conducts their rituals with the assistance of Brahmin priests, instead of Karbi religious leaders. This practice reflects a process of cultural assimilation, where Karbi spiritual traditions around dolmens have been integrated into the broader religious fabric of the region. Moreover, even the Karbis themselves occasionally invite Brahmin priests to conduct rituals, adopting elements of mainstream Assamese Hindu practices while maintaining their unique ethnic identity.

The Khamar Dolmen Site serves as a political and historical landmark. Oral narratives reveal that in earlier times, this site functioned as the royal court for Dimoria Kings and their council members. It is believed that former kings of Dimoria used the dolmens as seats during important gatherings and decision-making sessions. This tradition is symbolically maintained today by Dimoria King Holi Singh Ronghang, who still visits the site annually with his council. However, instead of sitting on the ancient dolmens, the current king now uses a newly constructed concrete rest house built adjacent to the site. This newly constructed house is named as Roja Boha Griha. When asked about this change, villagers expressed a desire for their king to be seen as dignified and royal by outsiders an aspiration reflected in the decorated rest house that now serves as the new royal court.

This transformation from stone seating to concrete structures reflects two key processes: cultural continuity and adaptive change. On one hand, the site continues to function as a royal and sacred space, preserving traditional meanings. On the other hand, its physical transformation represents efforts in cultural resource management, balancing preservation with modernization. The villagers' pride in maintaining the site and organizing community-wide rituals demonstrates their commitment to safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage, even as material conditions evolve.

Figure 4: Dolmen structure.

Figure 5: Dolmen site in Khamar village.

Rituals related with Khamar Dolmen sites –

The Burhamol Gukhai Puja is a highly symbolic and historical ritual. During the ritual, a bamboo platform and throne are temporarily constructed and placed at dolmen. A banana flower symbolizing divinity is anointed with vermilion and trimmed to resemble human hair. This floral effigy is placed at the centre of the platform while the Kathar (village priest) recites incantations. Subsequently, four hens are tied to each corner of the platform. The dramatic movement of the bamboo platform believed to be infused with divine energy is interpreted as the presence of Burhamol Gohain, the dolmen deity.

The hymns are collected through the primary data from the field, which are used by their local priest Kathar is written bellow-

1

Lunglearnamnangsar

Lal arnamarni

Naliyaak man dan pisi

Haneke ne asosayoklaangpone

So hajarpisineki

Sarpo adding badi

Sarpe adding badi

Meaning: O God, this is your land. We are living here for your kindness. Today we are praying for the peace of our deceased member and we are erecting stone with return of certain amount and through your permission. May his soul rest in peace, we pray for your blessings, on behalf of villagers.

2

Nangsoayok

Nang ayoayok

Naalinokhanikorinanid

Bighnikorinanid

Ne ayaleayok

Dan naangpidohe

Nang asoayok

Nang ayoayok

Nanilekiyagurilagile

Kiha muri lage

Pusi nail ayokhane

Man nangpidohe

Dan nangpidohe

He arnam, he arni

Hey iswara

Meaning – the 2nd stanza is related to the information to the God and the priest, for safety of the villagers and the family of the deceased person.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has focused on documenting the megalithic tradition of Khamar village, exploring how this tradition continues to exist and change over time. The study identified and recorded three important megalithic sites in the village. These include the royal megalithic field, used by the Dimoria royal family, the modern commoner's field, where smaller or concrete stones are erected by villagers; and the dolmen site known as Marjhangi Shil, which serves as religious purposes.

The royal megalithic site shows how traditional beliefs are still alive among the Karbi people. The large megaliths, over 10 feet tall are only used by the royal family to honour their ancestors. The stone erected in memory of King Arimotta, believed to have ruled in the 14th century A.D., shows the long historical connection between megaliths and local kingship (Baruah, 1995). The tradition of organizing a grand feast during the erection of these stones also continues today, showing the importance of this custom in the social and cultural life of the Karbis.

The modern megalithic site for commoners shows some important changes. The villagers still erect memorial stones, but these are much smaller, and some are made of concrete. According to villagers, this shift is due to the difficulty of finding large stones and the lack of manpower to transport them from the hills. However, even with this change, the rituals such as sacrificing pigs, chanting by the Kathar (priest), and community feasting remain the same. This proves that while the material form has changed, the spiritual and social values remain unchanged.

The dolmen site is known as Marjhangi Shil by the Karbi of Khamar, contains 12 dolmens, of which only three are well-preserved. The dolmens were once used by the Dimoria king to hold meetings and settle village disputes. Today, the site is still visited by the present king, but a modern rest house has replaced the dolmen seats, indicating a shift in how traditional spaces are being adapted for comfort and symbolic presentation. Moreover, the Burhamal Gukhai Puja, held at the dolmen site every five years, is a clear example of how multiple communities including Bodos, Tiwas, Kochs, and Assamese people participate in the worship of local deities. Each group contributes in its own way, such as collecting bamboo or preparing banana leaves, showing the shared cultural space created around these megaliths. Some non-Karbi groups have even started using Brahmin priests and Hindu rituals at the dolmen site, which shows religious and cultural assimilation. As noted by scholars like Dutta (2010), such blending of tribal and non-tribal practices is common in the cultural zones of Assam.

These findings highlight that the megalithic tradition in Khamar is not just about stones, but about memory, identity, and community. The megaliths serve as historical records, spiritual symbols, and gathering points for collective rituals. The changes like the use of concrete or the involvement of Brahmin priests do not mean the tradition is disappearing. Rather, they show how the tradition is adapting to new conditions while keeping its core meaning intact.

In conclusion, the megalithic culture of Khamar village is a living tradition. It connects the past with the present, and it brings together different communities under shared rituals and beliefs. This study has shown that the megalithic sites in Khamar are important not only for the Karbi people but for understanding the larger cultural heritage of the Dimoria zone. The tradition is still alive, changing slowly, and adapting with time, making it a valuable part of Assam's rich cultural history. It is important to document and preserve such traditions so that future generations can learn about their roots and heritage.

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