

DOCUMENTATION, MAPPING, AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OF THE STONE MONUMENTS IN LIYAI KHULLEN VILLAGE IN MANIPUR, NORTHEAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a recent archaeological survey undertaken in and around Liyai Khullen, a village inhabited by the Poumai Nagas in India's Northeast state of Manipur. The survey was conducted in an area of about 16 km² in the hill landscape to a) document the unreported stone monuments and b) understand the indigenous knowledge of the residents. It documented 554 stone monuments and important features on the landscape, such as a renovated ancestral village gate and two sacred stone structures. Mapping these features on the hill landscape has revealed that most stone monuments are located in the habitation area, while a few are located near footpaths between the habitation area and terraced fields. Interviews with the residents who have witnessed and participated in the construction of stone monuments have shed crucial insights into the involved dynamics, which will be helpful for in-depth future investigations.

INTRODUCTION

Megaliths are prominent archaeological features across much of the world (e.g., Adams 2007; Midgley 2008; Marak 2019). The prehistoric examples are widely attributed as the material signatures of increasing social complexity within early farming societies (e.g., Bradley 1998). Studies on megaliths have considerably enriched our understanding of socio-political, economic, and ideological dimensions of agricultural societies. Various studies contend that they were built as markers of territoriality to assert control

over land and natural resources (Fleming 1973; Chapman 1981; Nelson 1999). Fleming (1973:189) suggests that early farming communities may have utilized tombs as markers of territoriality, serving to delineate control of land from neighboring communities. Other studies emphasize how some megaliths are lit up at conspicuous times of the year, and even suggest their use as astronomical observatories (Thom 1966; MacKie 1997). According to Thom (1966), megaliths at sites such as Moel Ty Ulcha, Woodhenge, and Druid circle (Penmaenmawr) in the United Kingdom were aligned with celestial bodies such as stars, moon, and sun at different times of the year. He contends that megaliths were constructed for predicting solar eclipses and understanding the earth's position by early farming societies (Thom 1966). Symbolism also played a significant role in the construction of megaliths, as highlighted by various studies (Sherratt 1990; Bradley 1998; Tilley 2004). Sherratt (1990), for instance, asserts that megalith construction became a crucial tool in shaping people's ideology and social organization during the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic era in Europe.

In the context of India, three regional complexes of megaliths have been identified with certain common elements between them: a) Southern, b) Northern and Northwestern, and c) Northeastern India (Deo 1985 cited in Hazarika 2017:150). The prehistoric megaliths in India are associated with Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Iron Ages sites (1000 BC–AD 1000), particularly in South and Northern India. The living traditions of building megaliths among various communities are found in an area extending from

the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Chota Nagpur region, and Northeast India (Hazarika 2017:150). However, they have no connection (Marak 2012:45; Hazarika 2017:150). As far as megaliths in Northeast India are concerned, they are found distributed widely in the areas inhabited by the Naga communities in the Indian states of Manipur and Nagaland (Devi 1993; Jamir 1998; Wangjin 2014), in Meghalaya where Khasi and Jaintias are predominant (Marak 2012; Meitei and Marak 2013; Mitri 2019), and the Karbis in Assam (Sarma 2014; Patar 2021). Recent studies have also brought to light lesser-known megalith remains and practices in the region, particularly among the Garo and Lepcha communities (Jamir and Müller 2022:456). Interestingly, in this region, megalith construction is still a living tradition among a few communities, such as Nagas, Khasis, and Karbis (Philip 2017; Marak 2019; Patar 2021). Furthermore, the stone monuments constructed in the past also have relevance in contemporary societies (Marak 2012; Khongreiwo 2014; Devi 2019). Therefore, Northeast India has considerable scope for archaeological and ethnographic studies of megaliths in the Indian subcontinent. However, in the areas inhabited by the Naga communities in Manipur, other than a handful of typo-morphological studies of megaliths (Singh 1985; Mutum 2002; Devi 2011; Philip 2017), not much research has been carried out to document, map, and record the indigenous knowledge of stone monuments.

Realizing the need for archaeological surveys in the unexplored areas of Manipur, a survey was conducted in 2021–2022 in a relatively isolated village named Liyai Khullen and surrounding areas. The information about the unreported stone monuments was informed to the author by the residents of Makhel, a Mao Naga village in Senapati District, while undertaking a survey. Soon after, a preliminary visit was made, and it validated the informants' claims. Later, a survey was conducted to document, map, and understand the stone monuments. Another larger objective aligning with other surveys in the Naga Hills was to generate a dataset of reuse potential and expand the existing dataset of archaeological remains the author has begun elsewhere (e.g.,

Singh 2020, 2021). The survey documented 554 stone monuments and important features on the landscape, such as a village gate and two sacred stone structures. Integration of indigenous knowledge as a method has also proven to be fruitful. First, it has revealed that the construction of stone monuments was a relatively recent practice that continued until 2004 in the village. Second, it has also illuminated considerably the dynamics that were interplayed in the construction process of stone monuments which otherwise would be difficult to derive from simple observation.

THE STUDY AREA

The village of Liyai Khullen (locally known as *Zhaimai*) is located in Senapati District of Manipur in a relatively isolated area of the Naga Hills (Figure 1). According to informants, this village is one of the oldest villages settled by the Poumai Nagas, who speak the *Poula* dialect, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The habitation area is confined on a hill ridge of about 38 hectares (Figure 2) and divided into four sectors: a) Baithrimai, b) Zhaieimai, c) Luthrena, and d) Lurina. Houses are usually small and built close to one another on the hill slope. The village has four clans; the nominal head is the village chief. The administration of the village is largely carried out through customary laws by the village chief and village council, although the village authority headed by the elected chairperson is entrusted with developmental work concerning the village.

According to the 2011 census, the village has 1220 households with a population of 7153 and the primary economy is agriculture (Census of India 2011). However, accounting for the population increase in the last decade, the actual population as of 2021 could be well over 7500 including the students and people away for studies and economic activities in towns and cities. Residents claim that above 200 households are followers of their traditional animistic religion, *zhaosomai/mavei nari*, while most are Christian. So far, no previous archaeological and ethnographic survey has been undertaken in this area.

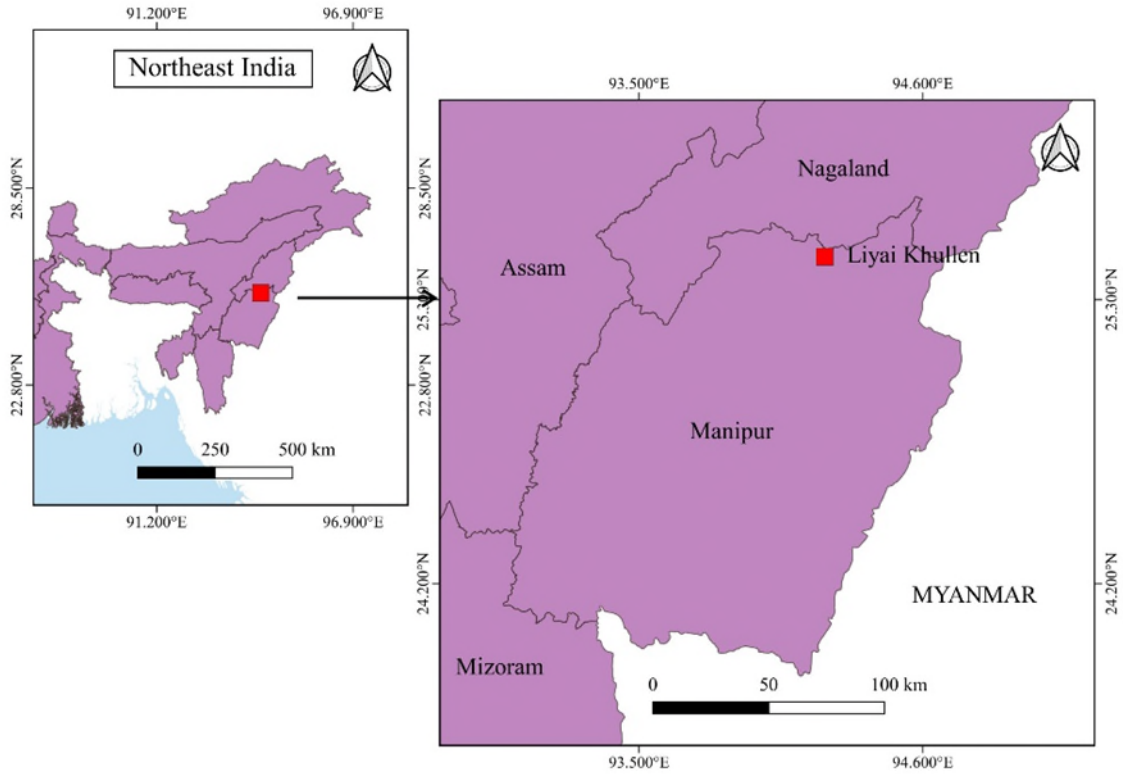


Figure 1. The study area. (Illustration: The author.)



Figure 2. View of the village of Liyai Khullen and the surrounding hilly landscape. (Photograph: The author.)

THE SURVEY METHODS

The survey covered an area of about 4×4 km² (Table 1 and Figure 3). The village was made the center, and about 1.8 to 2 km were radiated outward in all four directions as the larger extent of the survey area based on local knowledge and feasibility. It includes the habitation area, terraced fields, forests, and a portion of the Barak River. Although 100 % coverage was desired in the defined survey area by gridding, the steep hilly terrain and thick vegetation made it infeasible in the field. For foot walking,

accessible areas around footpaths and habitation, particularly spaces between the houses, were intensively walked, and steep hill slopes were extensively covered along with the support of residents.

Regarding documentation, a cluster of stone monuments and isolated ones were recorded as individual sites, and each archaeological feature was recorded with a designated separate code (Table 2). Furthermore, the shape and size (length, breadth, and thickness/height in meters) of each stone monument and orientation pattern (for menhirs) were recorded. To determine the

Table 1. The details of the extent of the survey area.

| SL No. | The extent of the survey area | GPS locations |
|--------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Westernmost longitude | 94.28891°E |
| 2 | Easternmost longitude | 94.24929°E |
| 3. | Southernmost latitude | 25.45046°N |
| 4. | Northernmost latitude | 25.48289°N |

Table 2. The codes employed in the documentation of stone monuments.

| SL No. | Stone monuments (local names) | Codes | Descriptions |
|--------|--|-----------|---|
| 1 | Menhir/monolith (<i>sochu</i>) | type 1(a) | A vertically erected stone block (Figure 4(a)). |
| 2 | Menhir/monolith (raised) (<i>chumatsu</i>) | type 1(b) | A vertically erected stone monument on a raised stone platform (Figure 4(b)). |
| 3 | Fallen menhir/monolith (<i>chujoh</i>) | type 2(c) | A fallen monolith on the ground due to natural (e.g., earthquake, landslide, etc.) and artificial causes (e.g., expansion of habitation, road cutting, etc.) (Figure 4(c)). |
| 4 | Slab grave (raised) (<i>khopochu</i>) | type 2(b) | A flat stone slab placed atop a burial and raised over the ground on small stones (Figure 4(d)). |
| 5 | Stone circle (<i>chushobuh</i>) | type 3 | A rectangular solid-shaped stone structure formed by small boulders encircling an area filled with soil and raised above the ground (Figure 5(a)). They are referred to as stone circles here as they resemble the shape of a circle, especially when viewed from the side. |
| 6 | Sacred stone structure (<i>sahvachuheuh</i>) | type 4 | A stone structure that is considered sacred by the residents (Figure 5(c)). |
| 7 | Village gate (<i>rochikhuh</i>) | type 5 | A stone structure used to check entry/exit in the village; and for defensive purposes (Figure 5(b)). |

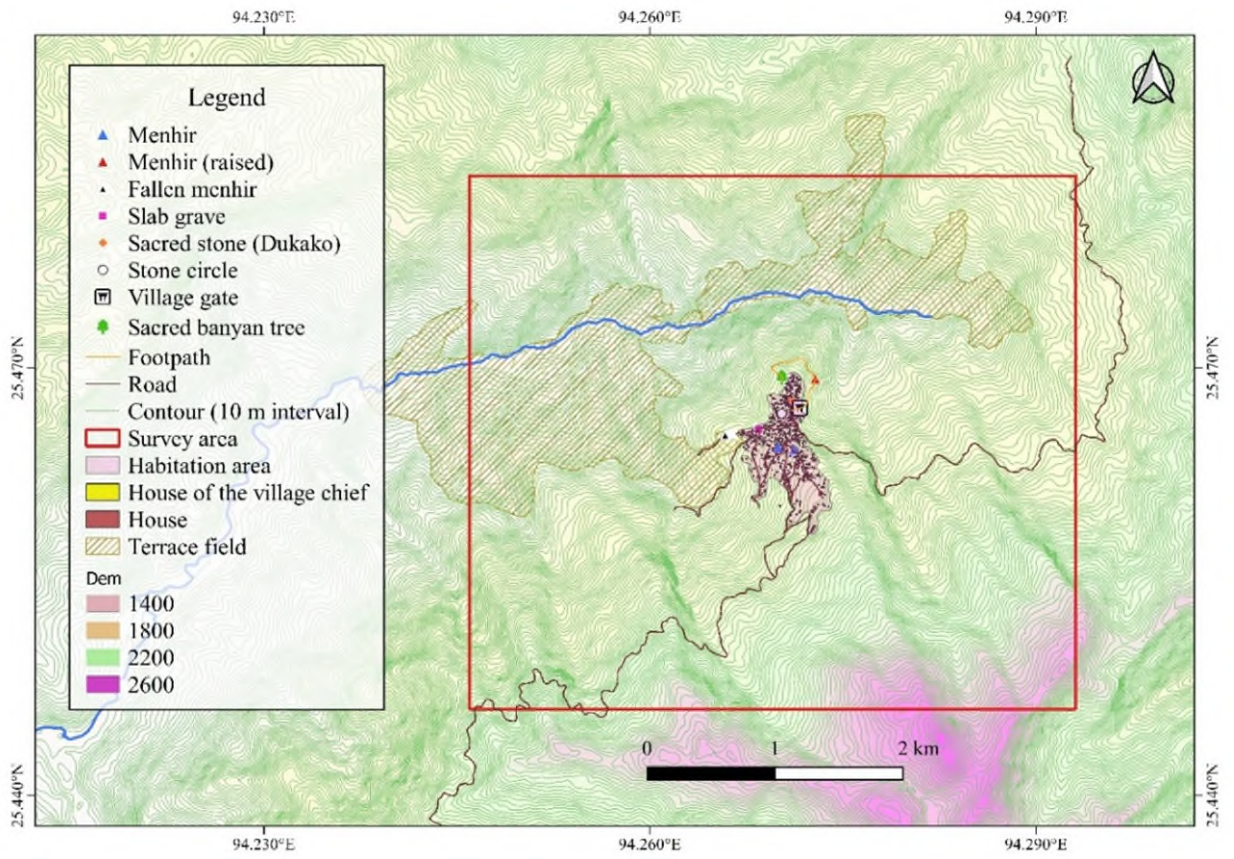


Figure 3. The survey area. (Illustration: The author.)



Figure 4. a) Menhir, b) menhir (raised), c) fallen menhir, and d) slab grave. Please note that the scale in the photographs is 1 meter. (Photographs: The author.)



Figure 5. a) Stone circle/sitting stone platform, (b) renovated village gate, (c) sacred stone in the courtyard of the village chief, and (d) menhirs located near roadside in the habitation area. (Photographs: The author.)

volumes of menhirs and rectangular solid-shaped stone monuments referred to as stone circles in this study, the calculation method used was length \times breadth \times thickness/height, added together for composite monuments. Residents who have witnessed and/or participated in building stone monuments and have a good knowledge of the oral accounts of previous generations were also interviewed. Interviews were carried out in the Manipuri language (i.e., *Meiteilon*), a Tibeto-Burman language which also happens to be a lingua franca among the Nagas and other communities in Manipur.

DOCUMENTATION AND RESULTS

The survey documented 520 menhirs, 6 menhirs (raised), 22 fallen menhirs, 4 stone circles, 2 sacred stone structures, and 1 renovated village gate. The detailed documentation of the stone monuments is presented separately in a supplementary file (Singh 2023). The survey has revealed that most of the stone monuments recorded are menhirs (93%). Most menhirs are observed to be in good and erect conditions, while a few are in fallen conditions. They appear as roughly dressed single-stone blocks, with their surfaces displaying varying degrees of weathering, ranging from moderate to high. Some portions of the stone surfaces are partially covered with lichens and small plants.

When considering the chronology of stone monuments, fallen menhirs appear to be the oldest surviving stone structures due to the remarkable level of weathering displayed on their sandstone surfaces. This suggests prolonged exposure to the atmosphere and implies their antiquity. Additionally, the standing menhirs exhibit varying degrees of weathering, ranging from moderate to high. This implies that they may not have all been erected simultaneously but constructed gradually over an extended duration. Nevertheless, obtaining radiometric data would be necessary to establish a more precise understanding of the chronological sequences of these stone monuments. Furthermore, the stone circles in the habitation area appear to have been renovated partially by the villagers and are used as sitting platforms by the residents; therefore, it is challenging to draw any chronological

inferences. The village gate is no longer noticeable, but the residents preserved the carved wooden door—carved with human and buffalo heads and other symbols—at the site where it was originally built (Figure 5(b)).

The majority of the menhirs are oriented east-west ($n=474$), followed by north-south ($n=51$) and northeast-southwest ($n=1$) directions. Hence, east-west and north-south directions were the preferred orientations for setting up menhirs. An analysis of the volumes (m^3) of menhirs ($n=520$) shows a right-skewed distribution (Figure 6). Most menhirs have a volume between $0.4 m^3$ and $0.95 m^3$. A volume of $1.2 m^3$ is not uncommon in the dataset; however, the volume of $3.5 m^3$ of a single menhir and volumes of less than $0.25 m^3$ are uncommon. In short, the volumes of menhirs are not evenly distributed, and size variability in the dataset is observed. Similarly, the volumes of stone circles ($n=4$) also show considerable variability. For instance, the largest stone circle (i.e., Site LS 19) measures a volume of $21.9 m^3$, while the smallest one (i.e., Site LS 8) measures a volume of $2.0 m^3$. The remaining two stone circles measure $3.0 m^3$ and $4.9 m^3$ respectively (Figure 7). These inferences can indicate differential labor efforts in building stone monuments.

Based on the observation of material remains, it is also hard to infer how many stone monuments have been destroyed in the study area. Residents claim that a few stone monuments have been destroyed for village road construction, but any unreasonable destruction is considered a punishable offense and a violation of customary laws by the village authority. According to informants, a villager was fined a cow recently (about three years back) as a punishment by the village authority for deliberately damaging a menhir in the forest after he drank alcohol; and the same person was also directed to renovate the menhir in its original location, which he did by cementing it on its original location. It must be noted that it is a common tradition amongst the villagers to pay a fine of cows or buffaloes for the offense committed against the customary law among the Poumai Nagas.

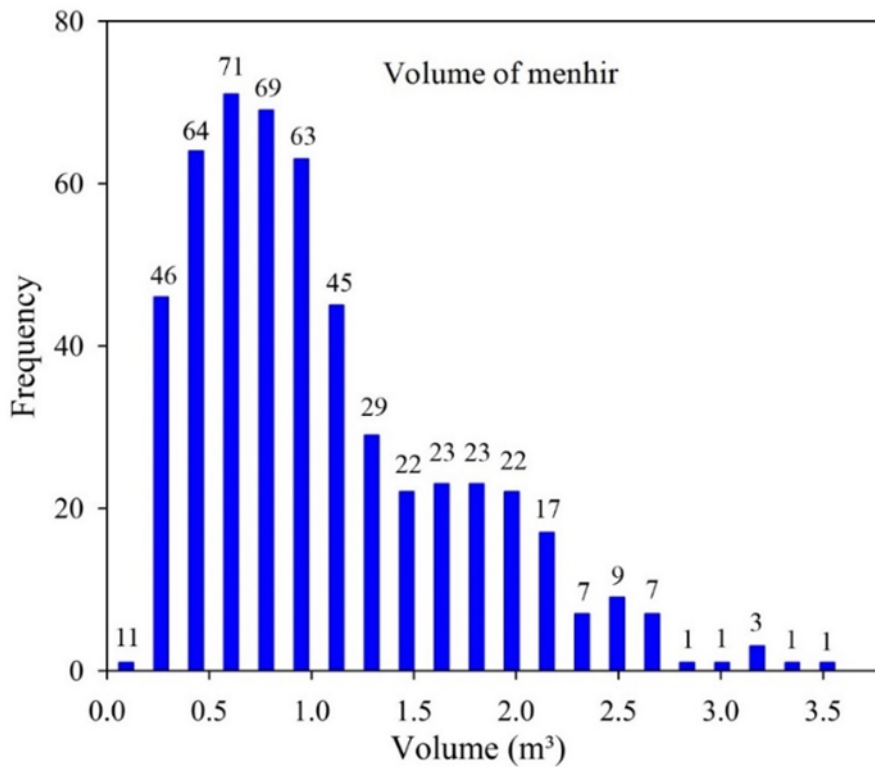


Figure 6: Histogram of volumes (m³) and frequencies of menhirs. (Illustration: The author.)

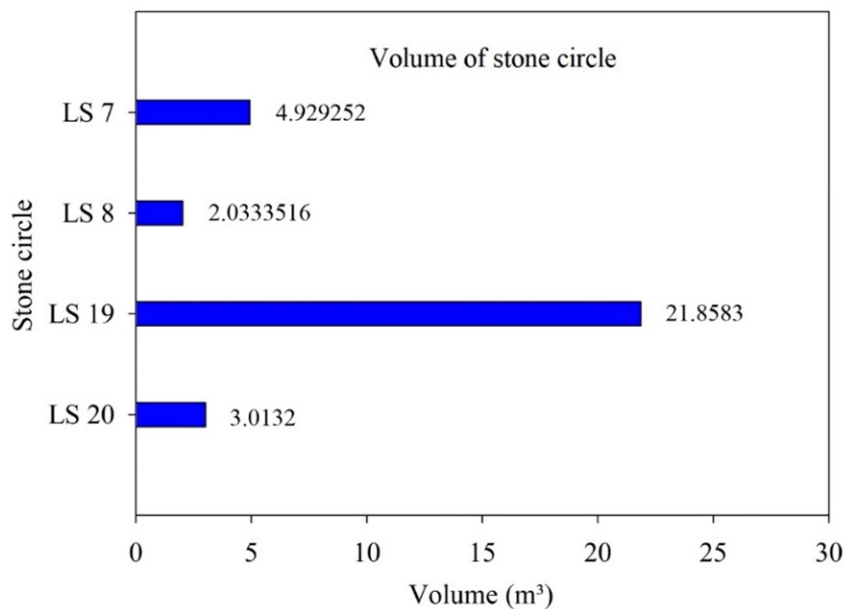


Figure 7: Graph showing the volumes (m³) of stone circles. (Illustration: The author.)

In light of this recent incident, it can be expected that most stone monuments are well preserved in their original locations, other than a

few stone structures destroyed for construction activities. Furthermore, firewood and house construction materials are commonly placed near

stone monuments, particularly those that are located in the habitation area. This gives the impression that the areas between the stone structures could be used as long as the integrity of the stone monuments is not damaged. Furthermore, a few stone structures built in the past are not just material relics but are also used by people daily. For instance, stone circles are still a favorite spot for use as sitting platforms by the villagers.

MAPPING

The stone monuments are largely concentrated in and around the habitation area, while only a few are located in the terraced fields and near footpaths on hill slopes (Figure 8). They are not located on the elevated portion of the habitation area but tend to be concentrated on relatively lower hill slopes. Furthermore, most stone monuments tended to be located westward and northward of the habitation area, which is a moderately sloped area, while no stone monuments are recorded on the steepest hill slope east of the habitation area. Another general distribution pattern of stone monuments is that they are located in cluster forms. Exceptions are sacred stones that occur in isolated forms in the habitation areas. Isolated menhirs are uncommon, and only a few are recorded by the survey: one in the lower hill slope north of the habitation area (forest) and another in the habitation area.

Interestingly, menhirs are distributed in clusters, while some are located west of the habitation area (Figure 9). The clustering of menhirs is less on the lower hill slopes. They are erected very close to one another in a few sites, sometimes just adjacent to or even less than a one-meter gap between them, forming rows and columns of menhirs (e.g., Site LS 10, Site LS 5, and Site LS 6). Another distribution pattern of the menhirs is that they are located either near the roadsides or footpaths in rows and columns (Figure 5(d)). This suggests a careful selection of erection sites of menhirs so that people could see them after their construction as they walk by road or pass through footpaths (Figures 8–9). The only exception is menhirs located in the terraced field

west of the habitation area (e.g., Site 12, Site 13, and Site 14). Since terraced fields are also open areas, they would be more readily visible than their location in the forest with no footpath. In short, the display-oriented nature of the menhir is clearly expressed as menhirs are not located in the forest.

Their largest concentration (e.g., Site LS 10) is in the habitation area, where they form rows and columns in the courtyards, backyards, kitchen gardens, near footpath areas, and between houses (Figures 8–9). It is unclear whether these menhirs were built before the houses were constructed or they were built after the expansion of habitation into this area. However, the overall distribution pattern of menhirs indicates some notable observations. A limited number of menhirs are found within the habitation area, while they tend to cluster near footpaths or roadsides in the forest and in areas farther away from the habitation. Relatively uncommon are the occurrences of menhirs in kitchen gardens and backyards. This suggests a gradual expansion of the habitation area. Additionally, the fallen menhirs hold intrigue due to their placement within the terraced fields. (Figures 8–9). It appears that tilling of the soil for farming activities may have loosened up the soil around the foot of menhirs, which in turn, caused them to fall on the ground. It also appears that residents did not re-erect them to preserve them. Interestingly, no fallen menhir could be recorded in the habitation area. This could be either because residents re-erected them or moved them away from their original locations.

The stone circles are located in the habitation area, while menhirs occur in the habitation area and on hill slopes. The stone circles are located only in the habitation area, particularly in the courtyard and near roads. They are concentrated in the elevated areas, which offer a wonderful view of the surrounding landscapes (Figures 10–11). The slab grave is located in the courtyard in the habitation area; similarly, the sacred stone is located in the courtyard of the village chief. The sacred banyan tree, identified by residents as the ancestral tree first planted when the village settlement was started, is located near the end of the habitation area at the north (Figure 11).

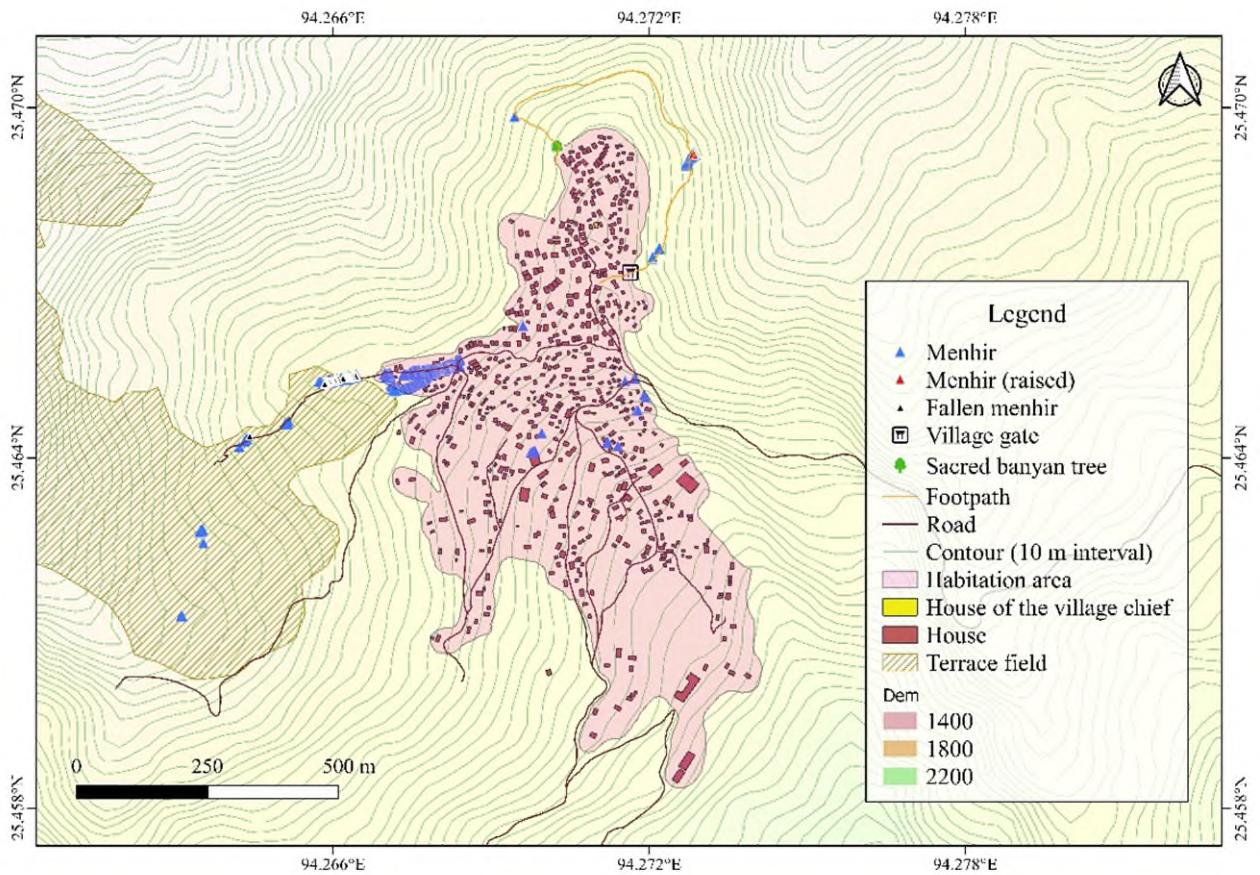


Figure 8: Distribution patterns of the menhirs. (Illustration: The author.)

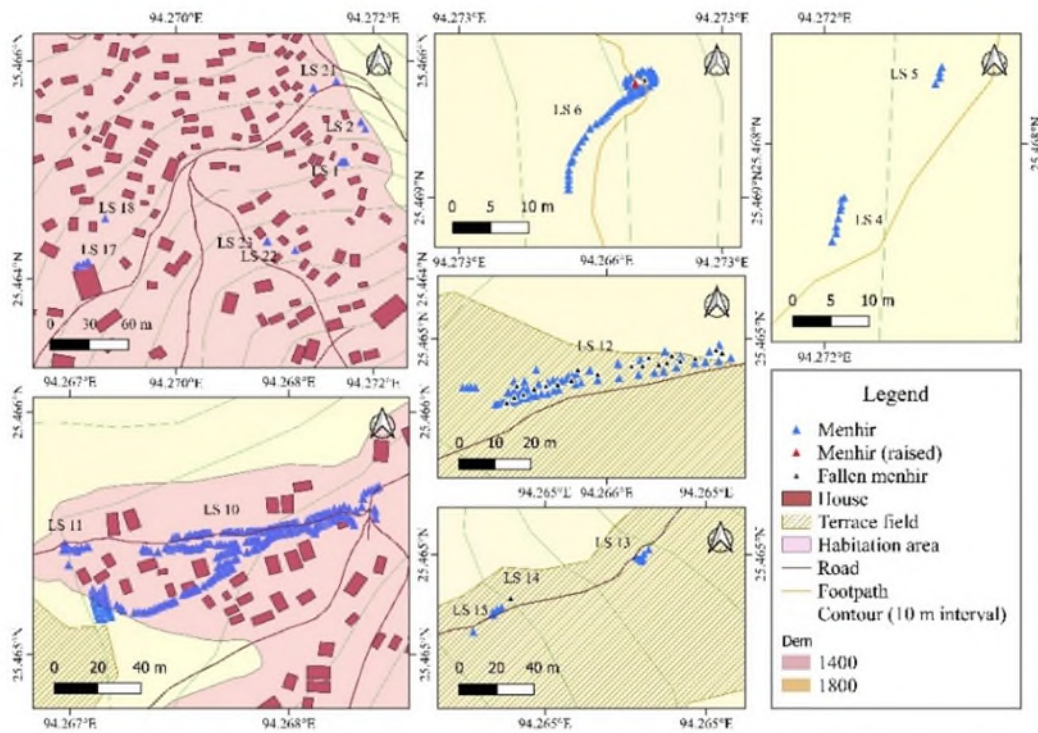


Figure 9: Zoomed-in distribution patterns of the menhirs. (Illustration: The author.)

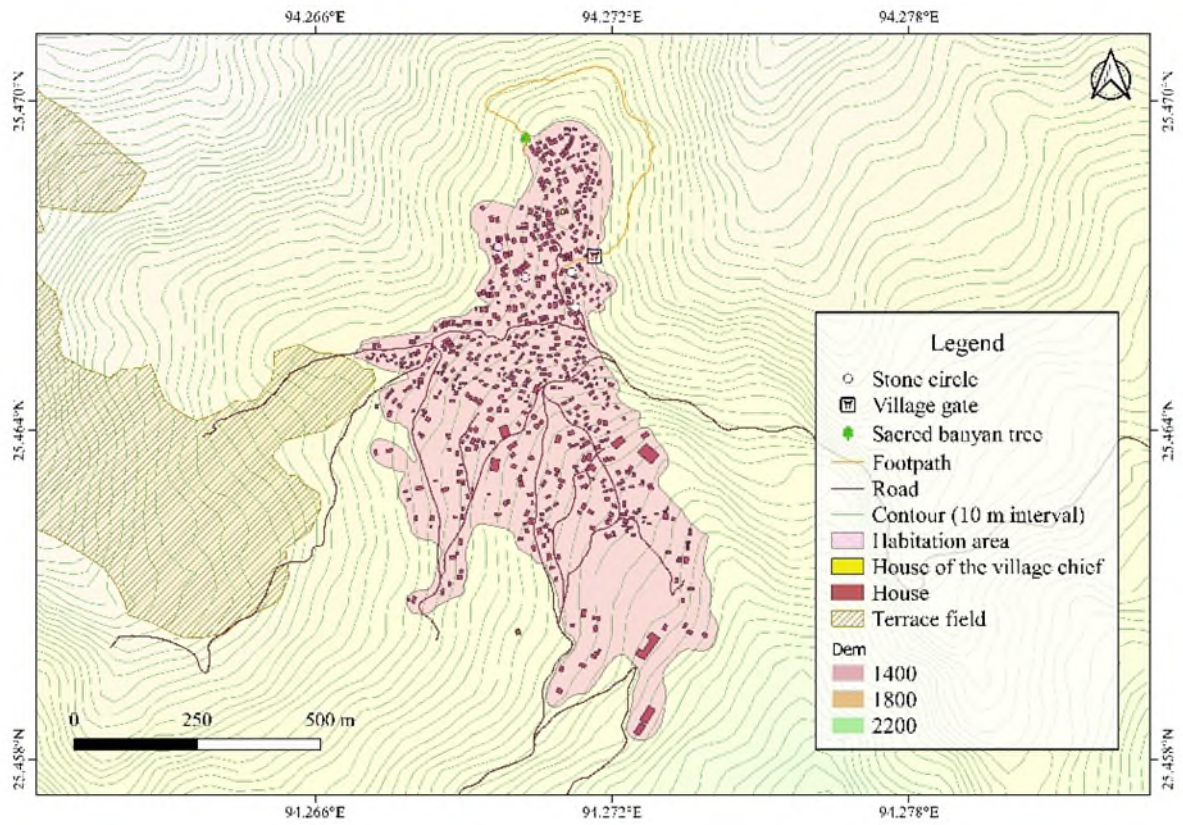


Figure 10: Distribution patterns of the stone circles. (Illustration: The author.)

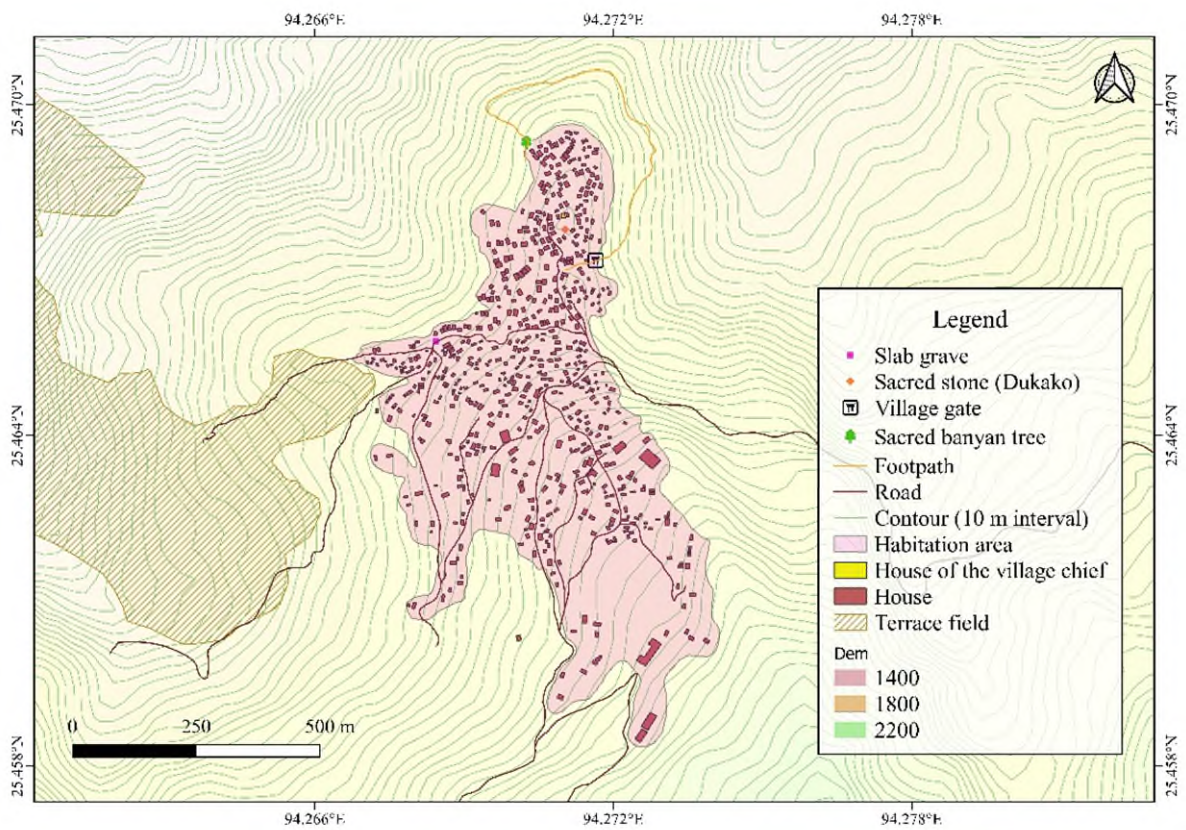


Figure 11: Distribution patterns of the slab grave and sacred stones. (Illustration: The author.)

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND STONE MONUMENTS

According to informants, the last event of a monolith construction in the village was held in 2004; this undertaking was done in the traditional style, where rites were also performed, and animals were slaughtered for the feasts. It must be noted that these informants claim that they had witnessed and participated in the construction of the stone monuments since their childhood. Today, this tradition is not continued; however, the construction of monoliths for jubilee celebrations of the Churches and organizations in modified manner is continued using trucks, machines, and iron chains as a substitute for traditional methods.

Information obtained from the villagers points to two primary causes that led to the decline in the construction of stone monuments. First, the establishment of Catholic and Baptist churches and increasing conversion of the residents to the Christian religion; second, increasing integration of the traditional economy into the market economy in the post-independence period of India. These developments in the past decades made residents view such undertakings as economically and religiously unfavorable. In terms of economy, investing in business activities is seen as a better option, and religiously, as most people are Christian, traditional rites are seen as “heathen” practices. The information obtained through the interviews of residents are as follows.

Monoliths (sochu) and raised monoliths (chumatsu)

Monoliths were constructed in the second stage of feasts of merit (*zhosou*) of the Poumai Nagas of Liyai Khullen. Traditionally, there were seven stages of feasts of merit. Feasts of merit (hereafter, FoM) entailed a series of ranked feasts and couples who sponsored such events were accorded higher status in the society. Those couples who intended to sponsor FoM and build a monolith would first seek permission from the four clan leaders/elders (*pukriii madai*) and village chief by serving rice beer. After this, the intended host would distribute small pieces of meat (*vaovii*) in the village as a formal invitation

to their event. In cases where ten couples in the village sought permission to erect stone monuments in a year, then a sequence of the turn of the event would be made by the elderly people.

The intended host (man) and two boys would find a suitable stone in the forest land of the village. Stones that occurred naturally and partially in the ground were generally selected. Stone quarrying was uncommon, but sometimes stones were partially quarried/modified from natural stones to achieve the desired shapes. The host would place two small sticks on top of the stone to indicate that it has been selected for the event. According to informants, the intended couple would abstain from copulation from the day of stone selection until the feasting day. The intended man would sleep dreaming about the stone, and if his dream were good (*meishi*) or nothing could be seen, the stone would be selected for erection; however, if his dream were terrible, a new stone would be selected. However, no modification/quarrying on the stone was allowed after the host dreamt about it. The clan members would collect creepers (*tareh*) from the forest, and a wooden sled (*chuh-mathri*) was prepared from magnolia trees.

The villagers would assist the host in stone pulling. The village chief, ritual specialist (an elected man based on seniority), and host would attend the event; however, they would not participate in the stone pulling. Women were also prohibited from participating in the stone pulling in the forest, and they would assist the host in preparing and serving rice beer to those in attendance. Three creepers would be tied to the wooden sled: a creeper in the center (*malurai*), and two creepers on the sides (*zhohrai*). There would also be a small creeper (*aohpeideobai*) tied to the sled, which the ritual specialist would pull and break first by pulling it. This small creeper would be considered an offering to God so that other creepers did not break upon pulling by people. Then a virgin man would initiate the stone pulling by hauling the creepers tied to the center of the wooden sled, uttering these words: “Allow us to transport this stone readily” (*matha tria heupalaidekhe*).

Utmost care was taken during stone pulling because if the stone rolled on the hill slopes, a

new stone would be selected. In case the stone could not be pulled, it would be erected on the site where it could not be pulled. If it were erected on other people's land, a two-half *tin* of paddy (1 *tin* is about 9 kg of paddy) would be given to the land donor. The sled would be erected with the stone and tied with the creepers so that the erected stone did not fall on the ground. Monoliths were often erected near footpaths so that people would see them and remember the couple that built them. According to informants, monoliths were erected in the east–west and north–south; however, the east–west orientation was most desirable as it indicated the sunset and sunrise. The stone erections were performed in the months of November–December (*donii*).

The host would offer a feast a day after erecting the monolith. At least one cow and two buffaloes would be slaughtered on a subsequent day. The blood taken out from the first slaughtered animals' hearts (*havei zii zhe*) would be splashed on the erected stone by the host. The animal would be slaughtered by the relatives of the host, assisted by the villagers. The meat would be distributed to each household, and rice beer would be served to the attendees of the feasts. The chief would be given the right leg of the buffalo; the heart and tongue to the best friends of the host; the intestines to the sub-clan (locally known as *punamai lisoupya*); and uncooked meat to the ritual expert and villagers. The head of the animals would be used for decoration in the house of the sponsor. The host would serve villagers rice beer only six times. After the feast, the host would be formally entitled to wear a shawl called *mahrasha* and an especially embroidered shawl called *haapeitaisha* after one year of the event. Those couples who had successfully performed the second stage of the feast were given the prestigious title *peih laotuomai* and enjoyed a higher social standing in the village.

Slab/boulder graves (khopochu)

The construction of a slab grave was not a part of the FoM. It was held as a separate event. The choice of construction of the slab grave atop the burial depended on the deceased person's family

members. Only a few wealthy people opted for the construction of slab graves, and such undertakings were not common among the residents. Such endeavors were considered costly affairs that only a few couples could afford as animals (e.g., cows, buffaloes) would be slaughtered, and copious rice beer would be prepared for the event in the form of a feast.

Traditionally, burials were commonly constructed in courtyards and sometimes rarely in the forest. The deceased family members could place the slab grave immediately after the deceased person was buried, or they could build it after several years. Slab graves were constructed between December and March but not in other months. If a household wished to place a slab grave above the burial, they would seek a person from the four clan leaders and village chief. The stone would be transported on the wooden sled with the support of the clan members and villagers, similar to how stones were transported to construct monoliths. After the stone was placed and raised above the burial, the intended host would offer a feast of meat and rice beer to those in attendance.

Stone circles (chushobuh)

The construction of stone circles that serve as sitting stone platforms was not part of FoM. Usually, those wealthy people who hosted a few stages of FoM often sponsored the construction of the stone platforms. Stone platforms were also constructed between December and March. Stone circles could be built for the family members and stone circles for the village wards and the whole village. In all cases, the intended host would first seek approval from the clan elders and village chief for building a stone circle.

If a stone circle was built for a family, clan members would assist the host; for a village ward, the people from the village ward would extend their support; and for the village, then entire villagers would extend their support. They were built in the courtyard if it was meant as a resting platform for a family and near a footpath if it was built for a village ward and villagers. As they were used as sitting and resting platforms for villagers, sites that offered beautiful

landscape views were often selected as construction sites. In all cases, the sponsor of the undertaking would bear the cost of the expenses.

Sacred stone structure (sahvachuheuh)

The sacred stone structure was built as a part of the last stage of FoM (*dukako/dhukako*). This stage was considered the most difficult stage of the feasts because intended sponsors had to sponsor all the previous stages of the FoM. Informants claim that only three couples had hosted this stage of FoM. This stage was particularly performed to bring peace between Liyai Khullen and neighboring villages settled by other Naga groups.

Informants claim the sponsor would slaughter 30 dogs and 30 cows at this stage of FoM; piglets would be slaughtered every evening and placed in the barns (*bao*) to seek the approval of spirit (God). The local belief is that a rat bite mark on the piglet was considered a bad sign, and when the piglet had no rat bite mark, then only the rite of *dukako* would be started. The ritual specialist would be fed for a year to become unusually fat before observing the rites. On the day of observing the rites, the priest would burn a circular-shaped stone boulder (*chiichu*) until it was red hot. A few villagers would walk with the ritual specialist to as many villages as possible, including the villages settled by other Naga groups. The villages they passed through had to respect the rites and agree not to wage wars for seven years. The couple who hosted this stage of FoM was given the esteemed title *zhopei zhocheimai*, and would be awarded the largest share of meats in the feasts of others.

Village gate (rochikhuh)

The village gate was built at strategically important locations to check entry and exit and protect villagers from hostile enemies and wild animals. Informants identified four households whose ancestors sponsored the construction of the village gate. They were built with stone boulders, and an engraved wooden plank was used as a door. The areas surrounding the village were encircled by ditches and bamboo spikes, leaving the gates as the only entry and exit points. Especially in the pre-colonial period in the Naga

Hills, when headhunting was common, village gates served as a watchtower against enemy attacks. Individual households sponsored the construction of the village gates, and those households that built village gates were rewarded with a large meat share and special rice beer during the FoM. Village guards were permanently deputed on a rotation basis day and night at the village gate.

DISCUSSION

The documentation and mapping of the stone monuments in and around Liyai Khullen have revealed the variability in the sizes and distribution patterns of stone monuments on the hill landscape. The mapping of stone monuments shows that they were built in areas such as footpaths, paddy fields, or near roadsides where people could be seen readily. That said, the majority of menhirs are concentrated in the habitation area. The survey has revealed that the construction of stone monuments was a part of the FoM. However, the practices of megalith building in Liyai Khullen differ from those documented ethnographically among the other Poumai Naga villages (for more, see Philip 2017; Devi 2019). These differences could be attributed partly to variations in dialect, culture, and practice among villages within the same ethnic Naga group (Jacobs *et al.* 1990; West 1992; Kumar 2005), as well as the fact that each village was considered an independent unit of social organization among the Nagas (Oppitz *et al.* 2008; Stockhausen 2008).

Megalith builders in Liyai Khullen were accorded higher status within the village socio-political structure headed by the chief. Though sponsoring such an undertaking was theoretically open to all, the wealthy people sponsored expensive feasts and built stone monuments. Therefore, there is also some aspect of redistribution of resources accumulated by the wealthy people in the village. This practice mirrors similar patterns observed among the Angami Nagas and other Naga communities, where prosperous individuals sponsor such events to attain elevated social standing (Jamir 2004; Devi 2011; Wunderlich *et al.* 2021). The survey has further supplemented that sponsors of

such undertakings in Liyai Khullen were also accorded practical benefits, including prestigious titles (*peih laotuomai*), status shawls (*mahrasha* and *haapeitaisha*), and special rice beer (*chizao*) and larger share of meat (*bazhii*) during feasts organized by others. Successful sponsors also gained increased influence in the village's decision-making process. This bears a resemblance to ethnographically documented instances of stone monument construction in West Sumba, where practical benefits were among several motivating factors for sponsoring such elaborate events (see Adams 2007, 2019) and also a general motive for hosting feasts among the traditional small-scale societies in South East Asia (Hayden 2016). Furthermore, in Liyai Khullen, the power of the village chief is hereditary. Therefore, the feasts' sponsors and those who built stone monuments could not bypass the chief's authority despite enjoying the higher status and practical benefits denied to the commoners. The involved dynamics also show the competitive and cooperative nature of society. First, sponsoring lavish feasts and building stone monuments was socially encouraged with higher status and social benefits and every married couple was allowed to sponsor. Second, the solidarity and support among the sub-clan, clan, and villagers enabled the sponsors to build stone monuments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the survey has documented the details of stone monuments in Liyai Khullen and the surrounding areas, revealing their distribution pattern with a notable concentration in the habitation area. The documentation of these stone monuments as a reproducible dataset holds the potential for future reuse. The survey result suggests that besides the higher status accorded to those who built stone monuments, practical benefits were accorded to sponsors of such expensive events. However, feasts and the construction of stone monuments were dynamic social events showing aspects of competitive and co-cooperative behaviors. This societal system allowed ambitious and affluent individuals to pursue their interests while simultaneously upholding the social structure of the chiefdom society, thus attaining higher status and practical

advantages. Additionally, the support and solidarity of social networks played a crucial role in enabling sponsors to achieve elevated status within the community. Considering the recent practice of constructing stone monuments in this village, there exists ample opportunity for in-depth multidisciplinary investigations into the underlying dynamics of such undertakings.

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COMPETING INTEREST

I have no competing interest to declare.

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