



Stonehenge of Manipur: Re-examining the Studies of Megalithic Culture of the Maram Nagas

T. David Suanlian

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Eastern Christian College, Dimapur, Nagaland

Email: thomtedavid@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Willong megalithic site is a well-known but understudied megalithic site in northeast India. To date, the structures have been examined from the perspectives of sociology, history, anthropology, and folklore. No objective archaeological study has been conducted up to this date; in fact, because the previously described approaches have been thoroughly examined, there is nothing left to examine. Archaeology remains unfinished despite the efforts made. The aim of this paper is to address some of the remaining unanswered questions. This paper attempts to explain that the most important thing to remember is that there is very little evidence to support any interpretation that someone may seek to make about this site, which is that everything is being done in ethical and proper research.

Introduction

The term "megalithic culture" describes the continuing cultural traditions of several tribes in northeastern India, including the Khasi, Naga, Kuki, and others. The practice of erecting massive structures out of massive stone slabs to celebrate important figures, the dead, or important events, whether they be funerary or ceremonial. These consist of the alignments, avenues, dolmens, menhirs, capstones, stone seats, and stone circles. Traditionally, these stone monuments have been used for burial, commemoration,



recreation, and resting. This is based on their metaphorical perspective as exterior symbolic storage of the peoples' world view.

The Tenyimia, a subgroup of the Nagas to which the Maram belong, are all part of this culture, and they use megalithic monuments built in tandem with raising one's social standing. Willong is a Maram Naga village in the Senapati district of Manipur. It is one of the most well-known megalithic sites in Northeast India. The village of intrigue is given personality by this megalithic structure. The Willong megalithic monument is considered to be a collection of menhirs (monolith), which are one of the most powerful indicators of wealth. To elevate their place in society, wealthy people would lavishly host feasts for the populace and erect massive stone monuments as symbols of their power and wealth. The Maram people, who have lived in this region for countless centuries, have a ceremony that they would execute atop this hill. There is a long-lasting memory of it that goes back far further among the people who normally inhabit these areas.

This is an exploratory study based on fieldworks done on the site and analysis of data on the research problem. The study adopts both archaeological and ethnographic methods; the former was used for comparative analytical studies of all the available documents on the subject. The ethnography includes the collection of data on the various aspects of stone tradition such as folklore associated with the megaliths and monoliths.

Discovery

Though the discovery of the Manipur Stonehenge is credited to the colonial survey of 1900, the site has been known to the local people for much longer as they were living with the stones on the hills. It was only officially acknowledged by the academic community following the landmark G. Watt tour. Megalithic monuments in Manipur, first reported as early as 1887, are found in profusion in all the Naga inhabited areas, throughout Northeast India. What has made this site so famous is its denial of any other megalithic site ever found with this level of complexity.

Study of the site

The Willong structures have so far been investigated from a sociological, historical, anthropological, and folklore perspective. Although efforts have been made, more cannot be accomplished in the field of archaeology. Until yet, no objective archaeological investigation has been carried out; in reality, since the aforementioned methodologies have been completely studied, there is nothing more to be studied.



However, this paper aims to address some of the unsolved questions that still exist. This site has historically been interpreted as more of a cultural and ceremonial hub. The most crucial thing to keep in mind is that virtually little evidence supports any interpretation that someone may try to draw about this site is that everything is being done ethically and appropriately. There is a joke among archaeologist that when they do not know something they would call it ritual. (Whitehouse:1996)

The exact significance of this stone is still up for question, but it is remarkable to try and consider not only the intricate structural and archaeological features of this site, but also the society that the people who lived here would have belonged to. However, it is crucial to consider the surrounding area when attempting to understand the meaning of this massive and ancient site. This is because the piece was not erected as a standalone unit; rather, it was erected as a part of a larger ceremonial centre, so failing to discuss the intentions of the surrounding area is a lack of diligence and a failure to fully inform the true history of the site. Consider how strategically important this would have been for all of the local villages. Not only is it a spot where people from all of the surrounding areas could come together and converge on the summit of the mountain.

There is no engraving or writings of any kind in the monuments which is common in the region. So, we do not have any authors to tell us if we are wrong or right. They started being built on side of a hill and then it went down the slope that is facing the west, the horizon in the west. The stones are of the local production, were actually mined just about hundreds of meters away from site on the hilltop and they would have been carried down and placed into these flattened spaces. The rocks were coarse uncarved and erected as it is in the nature from the quarry they moved.

One interesting fact is that, they might not have dug the ground to erect but stood the rocks on flattened surface and due to time, the base is covered with earth about half a foot or six inches at the most. The common way in megalithic site to erect a rock was to create a hole that has this kind of a slope on one side, so they slide the menhir in and then with ropes you just pull it in the opposite direction. And once it is up, you just fill what is left of that part of the hole with dirt and stones and that is how it stays up. But in this site, it does not look like that.

Speculations

The structures were oriented in the shape of an avenues or alignment and it is theorized that at one time these monuments had been more than the existing numbers and the most intriguing part is that at the



centre of this avenues there is an open space and this mysterious place on the hill, next to the village was dubbed ‘Stonehenge of Manipur.’

It might retain a religious significance with a large open proportion at the centre or astronomical significance of this site. There have been archaeological misconceptions that this stone represents some specific astronomical date it has been claimed that these stones points to one specific star in the sky. People gathered here during a particular period of the year probably during festivals or when they performed ceremonies.

The stones talk at night, they called out their names (the name of the person in who’s named it was erected). A perfect way to describe this site, people wanted Willong site to be something that was magical and mystical something and inspires a sense of mystery.

A theme of masculinity at this site is male all of them displaying either a penis or other traits that are consistent with males, it theorized that this place had something to do to with some form of fertility right. Two depressions, at one of the stone at about 5.7 feet where they say when men reached the height of the depression can get a bride and the other one is a hole at about 3.5 feet where they say they could put their penis in the depression, if it so then they would have been a giant. And no female is allowed to climb up these monuments.

Analysis

The site of Willong has also been home to a whole lot of archaeological misconceptions with some postulating that it is evidence of some lost advanced civilization and others going as so far as to say that it was built by giants however these concepts and theories all tie back to a very outdated archaeological principle known as Hyper Diffusion, the idea that ancient people were all taught by one lost source and that every group on Earth was somehow descended from a shared pool of knowledge. Now this was a belief system that was much more common during the repressive early days of archaeology where many archaeologists were inspired to do this work because they were being paid by those who were searching for evidence that their culture was descended from an ancient lost Master race.

Now with the scientific evidence that we have to this day we know that this is not the case with sites like Willong being so closely related to other things like Naga culture which spread all over the regions. We know that this is not a global diffusion but a regional diffusion something which we see played out time and time again in just about every cultural region of the world.



Now technically, this name is wrong because Willong megalithic is not actually a 'henge', a henge is normally a circle of either stones or timber which has a related earthen-work associated with it, this could be in the form of a trench or a mound or something like that but either way. Willong site does not have one of those making, its henge status rather nefarious but we are going call it a 'henge' anyway as there is no better name for it. There are actually three different types of henges, there is a type one henge which will have a single entrance into the middle of the circle, there is a type two henge which has two entrances that are opposite one another and there is a type three henge which has four entrances which are on opposite sides of the circle. Now if we were to class Willong structures as a henge, it would be a class one henge this is because it had a rudimentary doorway fashioned out which would allow one access to the centre circle.

The question that still remained unanswered is how old is it but since nobody in the area could remember building it and it did not have a valid form of state proof. Most forms of dating have a pretty significant margin of error, of course as technology progresses things like radiocarbon dating become ever more accurate but there will always be a plus or minus of years on either side of the given date but the dating could not be done on the stone or rock, or we have to wait until a new technology is invented to test such monuments.

All the approaches information is not that useful, it does not get us any closer to learning what this site was for which really would be the most interesting thing to know. Some people theorize that it was a dolmen (tomb stone) of commemorative rituals. There is not nearly enough information to justify as dolmens because such were to be seen in few numbers all over the Maram Naga villages. It could be argued that the Willong village was very prosperous and gave birth to men of importance so the site is massive unlike it is at other venues. If so, they must have a pretty much inexhaustible supply of food they could focus their energy into large-scale architectural projects and not have to be worrying about hunting and agriculture. This is an outlier that the harvest has to be lavish throughout the century or at least few decades. And there must be good numbers of men in the village. This place would have offered a vantage point, it is also worth noting that the climate would have been vastly different at the time the rocks were erected.

It is this climatic condition that would have likely given this site such an immense significance to the megalithic-builder groups that would have converged here because these hills while slightly green today would have been much more lush, the climate would have been wetter and cooler and allowed for a much



more diverse array of wildlife and this is part of the reason why people think that they were able to construct this without large-scale agriculture because all of the resources they needed would have been available in the wild, just in the hills surrounding the site whether it be food grains and other lives stock needed for the rituals it was pretty much all able to be found in the surrounding hillsides.

The gathering of people at certain days in a year may probably be not just for rituals or to celebrate ceremonies but also to exchange products and animals, we know, ancient Nagas were hunters and farmers, so planting during spring and harvesting during autumn. Consequently, this could be an important place for agricultural communities of the period.

The building of these places would have required a lot of effort, and this area is steeped in generations of labour. It took time to build this site. Just moving each stone must have taken a long time. They do not have the concept of wheel; therefore, they must have rolled the stones on logs for transportation. A stone can be readily moved using ropes and levers, but a large number of people are required. Someone was carrying stone, and that person had a purpose. Not as the people who constructed it would have perceived it in their prime.

Fertility and reproduction were highly valued in megalithic societies, most likely as a result of their hostile living conditions like head-hunting culture and lack of medical science. It makes reasonable that these people would have placed a great deal of importance on reproduction given their short lifetime and high death rate. Therefore, it is quite probable that a lot of stress would have been placed on reproduction in order to preserve the culture and customs in a world as harsh as the one these people would have lived in. This is something that has probably been passed down through the generations to the local population.

What is very interesting about this site is that there is no bones, charcoal, pot sherds etc. anything that could be dated but the village council men narrated that there is a small metal plate probably iron on every bottom of the menhirs, they had seen them when the highway next to the site was constructed and many of the stones have been uprooted and also in the past few years an earthquake felt some monuments, in there also there were metal plate. But they were reluctant to excavate further and date the metal plate.

It is crucial that we do not oversimplify a site like this because these people lived in close proximity to one another and would have interacted, hunted, and even fought with one another. It is much too simple



for us to gaze upon this and allow our thoughts to wander to the notion of extinct advanced civilisations and giants, when in fact it was constructed by individuals just like you and me, driven by the same set of beliefs, and desiring to live, love, and be able to build a home and society. Thus, when we attempt to oversimplify these sites and assert that they are only a component of a larger design, we run the danger of losing the narrative that the researcher is trying to communicate. In actuality, some of the longer-term residents of this region are not even unfamiliar with stones.

Willong megalithic site may not be correct to call an archaeological site, as archaeology is the study of the past and analysis of its material remains. And this site has never been archaeologically excavated or studied. If archaeologists set their sights on this location, they may find information to re-write history which is far older, far less understood and far more mysterious.

It is a well-known archaeological principle that the things that you find are never going to be the oldest things it is just the oldest thing you have found so far are and so to call Willong as the most massive site of Maram Naga would be a falsehood but as of right now it is the most extensive site of this complexity that we have ever found.

Suggestions

When the site gained academic and tourist importance. The village authority devises a plan and choose to call a public meeting of the village populace to deliberate and determine what would be most advantageous for the local community as well as the preservation of historical landmarks. These days, the village draws a lot of visitors, not just from neighbouring towns but also from far away. Travellers from all across the country and foreign are arriving for weekend getaways and day trips. Due to its popularity, the village receives a large number of visitors, including scholars, students, day trippers, and others. The village welcomes tourists to swing by and take a look at the location, but they are not financially able to carry out an archaeological dig or have adequate preservation policy.

A site like this could provide some ground-breaking information, and the government must be obligated to care for the unattended site on the hill as well as to the tourists and day trippers who wanted to visit. On the other hand, the local community adored this place, which not only helped the village's economy but also served as a source of pride that they were proud to own, preserve, and honour.

Conclusion



The locals at Willong site were very respectful of the area's pre-Christian history, which is evident in the numerous megalithic sites with their cognate tribes scattered throughout Northeast India. The megalithic culture is fast losing its ground, but the experience of being here made one feel so sacred that it continues to have an impact on many people in the modern world.

Archaeologists and anthropologists are all too aware with the phenomenon of cultural diffusion, which has impacted almost every society on the planet. Megalithic found at this site and other nearby locations are only one example. There is a great deal of spiritual and cultural value in this location. We may allow our thoughts to stray to even more fantastical and bizarre interpretations of the stuff on this site. The sooner we can start considering these locations as having a shared cultural heritage, the better. How, when, and why does this culture end? is open for further research.

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