Megalithic tradition associated with agricultural ritual: a study of the Chongkhong Phuja among the Hill Tiwas of Umswai Valley in Assam, India

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ABSTRACT - The Tiwa community is one of the autochthonous communities of Northeast India. An important aspect of Tiwa culture is the erection of stone monuments during the celebration of Chongkhong Phuja. This ceremony is performed before the commencement of their yearly agricultural cycle which falls in late April and continues to early May. On this occasion, a menhir and table stone are erected by the head priest of the Tiwa village, who then invokes their village guardian deity to call for a better harvest as well as for the wellbeing of the villagers. This elaborate ceremony marks the beginning of the agricultural season for the year, following which the villagers commence their agricultural activities. This paper deals with the performance of Chongkhong Phuja and the associated living megalithic tradition among the Hill Tiwas residing in the Umswai Valley. It also documents the oral traditions associated with the origin of the megalithic tradition in the community. As most of the living megalithic traditions among the ethnic communities of Northeast India are either related to burial practices or commemorating the death of a person or an event, this Chongkhong Phuja represents a unique example of a megalithic tradition related to agricultural practice. Indirect evidence suggests the megalithic structures present at the ceremonial place of the Chongkhong Phuja in the Amsai village of the Umswai Valley have been continuously erected for the last thousand years. The paper also hypothesizes the shifting cultivation in the area to be as old as the practice of the megalithic tradition.

KEY WORDS – megaliths; living tradition; oral tradition; menhirs; animal sacrifice; jhum cultivation

Megalitska tradicija, povezana s poljedelskim ritualom: študija obreda Chongkhong Phuja med ljudstvom Hill Tiwas v dolini Umswai v Assamu v Indiji


KLJUČNE BESEDE – megaliti; živa dediščina; ustno izročilo; menhirji; žrtvovanje živali; selilno poljedelstvo

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Introduction

In archaeological and prehistoric research, megalithic monuments have drawn considerable attention since the 19th century (Herbert 1849; de Malahide 1866; du Noyer 1866; Lewis 1871; Godwin-Austen 1872). These monuments, known by different names such as monoliths, menhirs, cromlechs, orthostats, dolmens, cists and so on, have been recorded in a wide region of the Old World, from the shores of England to those of Japan (Moorti 2008). These were often seen as linked with burials, tombs and sacred places. However, with prolonged research in various cultural contexts, geographies and chronologies, it is widely accepted that the function and significance of these monuments are far wider than previously thought. With the discovery of the megalithic monumental complex at the Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2010) in southeastern Anatolia, Turkey, the antiquity of megalithic monuments has been even pushed back to c. 10th to 9th millennia BCE. Since megaliths are a prehistoric tradition that is found in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, and even historical periods in most nations, archaeologists and anthropologists have often tried to look at the ethno-graphic practices persevered among various communities (Bloch 1971; Basa et al. 2015; Adams 2019) to develop analogies for interpreting the social and cultural nuances from ethno-archaeological points of view. However, in recent years many of these archeaic traditions are facing serious challenges with regard to constant change and eventual extinction, which is why the study of the ethnic communities that still maintain megalithic practices is now extremely important, before they have completely altered or vanished.

Northeast India is one such region, which is well known for the presence of a variety of megalithic monuments and structures, of ancient as well as recent origin. One of the first written accounts of the megalithic tradition in Northeast India was published in 1832. It was Lieutenant Murphy who wrote about the Khasi megaliths in his ‘Account of the Cossyahs, and of a Convalescent Depot established in their Country, 280 miles N.E. from Calcutta’ (Murphy 1832). He stated that during funeral ceremonies the Khasi people marked the cremation spot with a stone enclosure; the ashes were collected, put into earthen jars or pots, and then deposited in a regular square stone box with a small door to it, over which they erected immense slabs of stone, varying in number from three to seven, according to the wealth (not rank) of the deceased. Godwin-Austen (1872) also reported on the megalithic remains and associated rituals performed throughout the Khasi Hills. Subsequently, several colonial administrators took a keen interest in the stone monuments scattered around this region (Clarke 1874; Gurdon 1914; Hutton 1922a; 1922b; 1925; Mills, Hutton 1929).

These megalithic monuments and structures of different shapes and sizes are recorded in a belt extending from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills through Karbi Anglong up to the Naga Hills besides Manipur, Mizoram and certain areas of Arunachal Pradesh. One of the major concentrations of megaliths is observed in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, where large clusters occur at Cherrapunjee, Mawphlang, Laitlyngkot, Laitkor, Jowai and Nartiang (also spelled Nartiyang) (Bareh 1981; Rao 1991; Sen 1991; Mawlong 1996; 2004; Mitri 2016; Marak 2012a; 2012b; 2019; Meitei 2019; Meitei, Marak 2015). In Manipur, megaliths are found to be spread over the Naga-dominated areas of the districts of Chandel, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati, and Churachandpur (Singh 1985; Binodini Devi 2011; 2019). Megaliths are also found extensively in the Kohima and Phek districts populated by Angami and others in Nagaland (Jamir 2004; 2005; 2019; Jamir 1997; 1998; 2019; Venuh 2005; Devi, Neog 2014). Carved monolithic pillars are recorded at Dimapur in Nagaland and Kasomari in Assam (Hutton 1922a; 1925; 1933; Sarma 2016). A large number of megaliths with petroglyphs on some of them are also seen in Vangchhia, Talvenk, Lung Ropui, Sazep and the Maurum Hills in Mizoram (Lalminghla, Sarkar 2017; Malsaumliama 2019; Singh 2019; Nayan 2021). Only at a few sites in Arunachal Pradesh are megaliths reported, such as at Jamiri, Shergaon, and Songlong Thong (Thakur 2004; Gogoi, Baruah 2021). In Assam, megaliths are mostly concentrated in the Morigaon, Kamrup, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts (Medhi 2000; Bezbaruah 2003; Choudhury 2004; 2019; Sarma 2014; Thakuria et al. 2016; Devi Bora, Bezbaruah 2018; Roy 2019; Hazarika 2016; Hazarika et al. 2020; Borghain, Sarma 2021).

Northeast India is one of the few areas of the world where the erection of megaliths persists as a living practice in the form of memorial stones commemorating important events or the disposal of the dead in accordance with old customs and beliefs (Rao 1979). After cremating the dead, the ashes and decalci-
bones are deposited in a stone chamber and a memorial stone is erected by several communities in Northeast India. This living practice is closely associated with the socio-cultural traditions, social merit and religious beliefs of the people associated with the dead (Mawlong 2004). David Roy (1963) described the funeral rites of erecting megaliths amongst the Khasis of Meghalaya. Dwipen Bezbaruah (2003) extensively studied the living practice of erecting megaliths among the Karbi community as a post-cremation rite and drew parallels for the prehistoric megalithic remains found in the Karbi Anglong in Assam. In some instances, menhirs also function as a boundary marker for an individual or a community.

As mentioned earlier, several British administrators and Indian scholars (for recent reviews see Mitri 2016; Marak 2019) contributed valuable writings in their observations on the rituals related to the megalithic structures. Nevertheless, due to factors such as cultural change and loss of traditional practices, besides the emergence of Christianity, this tradition has been lost among many tribes. However, while the tradition of erecting stone for commemorative, funerary and functional purposes is widely studied, the origin and chronology of this tradition is poorly understood in the region (Sarima, Hazarika 2014; Marak 2019). Moreover, there has been hardly any excavation conducted at megalithic sites in the region, nor have they been dated absolutely. The lack of datable materials associated with the megaliths is another limiting factor. The clusters of menhirs that can be seen are the results of the frequent use of same area for erecting menhirs by a village or clan.

Differentiating the recently constructed megaliths from the ancient ones is also difficult due to the fast weathering of the stones and overgrowth of vegetation in the area. This makes all the structures look alike and impossible to differentiate without the help of a local. People's memories and oral sources are thus extremely important in such investigations. As such, in-depth studies are required in order to establish a chronology of the living tradition among various groups, as well as of the megalithic structures made by the ancient communities with varied cultural backgrounds. In this regard, a study among the Tiwas has provided some interesting insights about the origin and association of megaliths with agricultural practices in Umswai Valley.

The Tiwas

The Tiwa (aka. Lalung) community is one of the autochthonous communities of Northeast India, with one group speaking a language that belongs to the Bodo-Garo family of the Tibeto-Burman language family (van Driem 2001). Settled in the Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup, Jorhat, Dhimi and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya, the Tiwas have long been referred to as ‘Lalung’ or ‘Laloo’ by other neighbouring groups such as the Khasi, Jaintia and Karbi. The Buranjis or the Ahom chronicles (Bhuyan 2012) used the terms like ‘Lalung’, ‘Garo’ and ‘Dantiyalias’ interchangeably to denote the Tiwa people. The people in question, however, refer to themselves as Tiwa. The detailed ethnography of the Tiwas is recorded in several notable publications (Baruah 1989; Baruah 2015; Bordoloi 2002; Deka Patar 2007; Gogoi 1986; 1987; Gohain 1993; Patar 2021; 2004; Sarma Thakur 1985; Shyamchauhdhury, Das 1973).

The Tiwas are divided into two socio-cultural groups, those settled in the plains who speak Assamese and follow a patrilineal descent system bearing Assamese patronyms, and those residing in the hills, speaking a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo group, that follow a matrilineal descent. The Tiwa thus follow a bilateral descent (Williams 1990.267) system which recognizes that descent may be traced from either the father or mother, depending on the decision taken at the time of marriage. Hence, they are divided into Hill Tiwas and Plain Tiwas.

The comparatively bigger villages of the Hill Tiwas are located in the Amri Development Block in the West Karbi Anglong district of Assam and the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. They are situated on elevations ranging between 600 to 900m. They practice both wetland paddy and upland shifting cultivation depending upon the physical features of the land. Shifting cultivation is practised on high slopes where irrigation is not possible. According to Chatrasing Darphang (58 years old), a resident of the Kromkhunji village in West Karbi Anglong, crops like cotton, sesame, castor oil, and chilli pepper have been cultivated along with their main crop, paddy. They would use a plot of land for three consecutive years to grow a great variety of crops. In the first year, the above-mentioned crops were cultivated but from the second and third years onwards they would cultivate only paddy.
The Plain Tiwas are mainly settled in Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup and in some pockets of the Titabor subdivision of the Jorhat district of Assam. A few Tiwa villages are also located in the Dhemaji district on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra and the Sadiya sub-division of the Tinsukia district of Assam. While the Hill Tiwa professes their ‘traditional’ religion, the Plain Tiwas are by and large, Hindu. The process of Sanskritization of the Plain Tiwa began in the mid-17th century with the subjugation of Tiwa chiefs of Gobha, Nellie and Khola by the Ahoms (Patar 2021). Subsequently, the conversion of chiefs of the minor Tiwa principalities collectively known as Sato-raja (seven kings) and Paso-raja (five kings) to Neo-Vaisnnavism led to the conversion of more Tiwas into the fold of the latter. However, a large section still follows the traditional religion. According to Allen (1906:62) “... the Tiwa religion is based on the worship of natural forces and the ordinary animistic type and is chiefly concerned with the propitiation of the evil spirits and with sacrifices to ensure prosperity”. However, since the 1950s, there has been a growing number of converts to Christianity, especially among the Hill Tiwa population.

Megaliths are an important aspect of the Tiwa ethno-history (Patar 2016). These have different terminologies in the Tiwa language according to their types and purpose. The megaliths (Figs. 1 and 2) among the Tiwas of the Amsai village of the Umswai Valley are found in different contexts such as (a) menhirs erected at the present-day cremation ground, (b) megaliths used as a modern Hindu shrine, (c) stone slabs at the old residences of the kings, (d) megaliths (in the form of a heap of stones) in front of the residence of the Loro (chief priest), (e) alignments erected as boundary walls of the youth dormitory, known as Samadi, and so on. The construction of the alignments as boundary walls of the Samadi, placing the stones in a row, is a recent phenomenon at the Amsai village.

Both the Hill and Plain Tiwas practise several traditional religious ceremonies. Among these, the Chongkhong Phuja is significant as far as the living megalithic tradition is concerned. The Chongkhong ceremony is performed in two stages, the first one is known as Bor Chongkhong Phuja and the second as Phidri Chongkhong Phuja. The construction of megaliths is done during the performance of the Phidri Chongkhong Phuja at the Chongkhong Sal of the respective village. The Chongkhong Sal is a sacred patch of forest adjacent to the Tiwa villages dedicated to the guardian deity of the village where, apart from the megaliths, the cremation ground (known as Mangkhor) and other localities for religious ceremonies are demarcated. While performing these rituals, the role of the council of village elders, known as the Pisai is extremely important (Patar 2020). The formation and role of the members in the Pisai are provided in the Table 1.

**Bor Chongkhong Ceremony**

The Bor Chongkhong ceremony is held annually in the villages of Amsai, Marjong and Amkha clans (scattered in the west Karbi Anglong district of Assam) of the Tiwa community. In this ceremony, a pig is sacrificed in the name of Palakhongor, the presiding deity of the Amsai, Marjong and the Amkha clans and twelve fowls are sacrificed in the name of the nima or deities who protect the borders of Palakhongor’s territory. In the Bor Chongkhong ceremony, the Pisai (the council of village elders) seek permission from their principal village deity to begin
the cultivation season. It is believed that they should not till the soil or clear the jungle for cultivation without performing the Bor Chongkhong ceremony, as it may bring a bad harvest. According to the Hill Tiwa belief, if anyone begins cultivation before performing the ceremony there will be bad omens for the village in the form of attacks by a tiger on humans and domestic animals, and the occurrence of an epidemic.

**Phidri Chongkhong ceremony**

This ceremony is performed three weeks after the conclusion of the Bor Chongkhong ceremony at the end of April or at the beginning of May, depending upon the decision taken by the council of village elders. This ritual takes place only on a Thursday. In this ceremony, the Pisai gets permission from the guardian deity of the village and the spirits of ancestors of the village, known as the Phidri, to dig canals to bring water from the streams to their paddy fields and to commence the sowing of seeds and saplings in their *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields. On this occasion in Amsai village three pigs are sacrificed in the name of the principal deity – Palakhongor – and the spirits of the ancestors.

**Ceremonies performed at the Chongkhong Sal**

The erection of stones on the occasion of Phidri Chongkhong is an important ritual of the Tiwa society. During this ceremony two flat stones are erected;

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loro</td>
<td>He is the head priest of Tiwa root villages. He leads in all the community-level religious ceremonies and presides over any socio-cultural functions and disputes in his village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toloi/Doloi</td>
<td>He supervises the overall preparation of religious ceremonies in his village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadari/Hatari</td>
<td>He is the personal assistant to the Loro and provides all the necessary help while the Loro is performing religious ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maji</td>
<td>He is responsible for procuring animals and birds for the sacrifice at religious ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phador</td>
<td>He keeps records of the paraphernalia required for religious ceremonies and collects stones for the installation at the <em>Chongkhong Phuja</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shangot</td>
<td>He is responsible for procuring animals and birds for sacrifice at religious ceremonies and collecting stones for the installation at the <em>Chongkhong Phuja</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barika Baro</td>
<td>He is the head messenger of Tiwa village who has to convey important information about different religious events to the villagers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barika Pisa</td>
<td>He is the assistant messenger who helps the Barika Baro in disseminating information on different religious ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phayak Mul Kra</td>
<td>He is the head of the four Phayakmul who are responsible for cleaning, cooking and serving food at religious ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phayak Mul Majowa</td>
<td>He is the deputy to Phayak Mul Kra. He is responsible for cleaning, cooking and serving food at religious ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phayak Mul Jokha</td>
<td>They are responsible for cleaning, cooking and serving food at religious ceremonies. During the <em>Chongkhong Phuja</em>, they are to keep an eye on the observance of taboos and rules by the village households that are prescribed on the day of the ceremony.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 2. a Megaliths in front of the residence of a Loro; b, c, d megaliths installed as a boundary wall of the youth dormitory.*

*Tab. 1. Role of different members of the Pisai, the council of village elders.*
one vertically (upright stone) and another horizontally (table stone) at the Chongkhong Sal to mark the annual ceremony. The upright stone or menhir is known as *Orlong thuna* (*Orlong* means stone and *thuna* means sacred pillar) and the table stone or flat stone is known as *Phidri tongkhra* (*Phidri* means ancestor and *tongkhra* means flat seating place). The size of the menhirs found in the Chongkhong Sal of Amsai village ranges from 30 to 110 cm while the table stones are generally 10 to 20 cm wide. The menhir is buried 10 to 30 cm deep depending upon the size of the stone.

Selection and installation of these stones are done by two village officials, namely the *Phador* and the *Sangot*. These stones must be installed at a location designated for these structures. As this is an annual activity among the Tiwas of Amsai, the same location is preferred for the ritual as well as the erection of these structures. These structures are erected as an alignment in the east-west direction. The Tiwas of Amsai believe that Palakhongor, the principal village deity visits and eats the offerings and sacrifice and takes rest at the stones placed there. Cotton threads are tied on the top of all these stones during the Chongkhong ceremony, signifying turbans.

The villagers also plant a flame tree (*Erythrina* sp.) or *mandarphang* close to the erected stones on the day of the ceremony. It is believed that if the flame tree survives then the person who planted it will die. However, if the tree does not survive then it signifies that the principal deity, as well as the ancestors of the village, is happy with the sacrifice and the entire village will have bumper crops for that year. According to Phulson Kholar (62 years old), the assistant priest of Amsai, a few years before, the *Sangot* of their village died of some unknown sickness after a few months of the Chongkhong Phuja. Interestingly they attribute his demise to the survival of the tree that he planted during the ceremony.

At the start of the Phidri Chongkhong ceremony, the location designated for these stones is cleared of the undergrowth and vegetation by the *Pisai*. As these stones are considered sacred, villagers or any other people, including visitors and tourists, are forbidden to disturb the structure in any manner. This provides us with some scope to assume these *in situ* structures are still in roughly their original locations, although they must have been disturbed by various natural forces over the years. Overall, however, and with some caution, these structures can be counted as evidence of the annual ceremony of the Phidri Chongkhong. During our fieldwork at Amsai, we counted 2048 menhirs and table stones, including those raised in 2017. These have been counted based on the intact nature of the standing stone as well as the flat table stone in front. The 1024 pairs of *Orlong thuna* and *Phidri tongkhra* thus indicate that this practice has been in existence for at least a thousand years. However, this hypothesis needs to be supported with absolute dates.

The day-long Phidri Chongkhong ceremony is an important religious event for the Tiwa people. In the early morning on the day of the ceremony three male pigs, one of which should be black, are sacrificed (Fig. 3) by the *Loro* of Amsai with the assistance of the *Hadar* and *Toloi* and other members of the *Pisai*. While chanting mantras outside the residence of the *Loro* the pigs are sacrificed by stabbing them with a pointed iron implement called a *pla* specifically reserved for this task. A pig is dedicated to Palakhongor, the principal deity of the village, and the other two are killed in the name of the dead ancestors. This part of the Phidri Chongkhong ceremony is called the *Phidri Chongkhone waphawa*.

After this ceremony, the *Phador* and *Sangot* of the village move to the Chongkhong Sal to erect the *Orlong thuna* and *Phidri tongkhra* (Fig. 7). They select a specific place in alignment with the previously erected stones and plant the flame tree (*Mandarphang*) behind the erected stone. This event is known as *mandar gaina simli gaina*. The size of the megaliths varies from 30 to 110 cm in length depending on the availability of stones in the nearby area in the hills. These are mostly undressed stones. Every year, either of these two village elders find two pieces of suitable stone from the neighbouring hills.

Meanwhile, the *Loro* sacrifices a red fowl under an altar called the *Rongdo-Akur* specifically made for this ceremony. The *Rongdo-Akur* is a bamboo stand with four bamboo poles decorated with different designs where at the top two earthen pots called *thukli* are placed. In one pot, grains of rice are kept and the other one is filled with water. After the sacrifice of both pigs and the fowl, members of the *Pisai* clean their skins and intestines and rub them with rice powder.

At midday all the members except two *Phyakmul* (there are four *Phyakmul* in the *Pisai*) who are sent
to visit every house to check if the families are observing the taboons and rules that are prescribed for that auspicious day, go to the Chongkhong Sal. While going to the Chongkhong Sal, the Pisai take a specific route which goes through the Langkhon Sal via the Mangkhor Sal and the Sogra Sal. This trail enables the Pisai to enter the Chongkhong Sal from the western direction facing the east. According to the village elders, on the day of the Chongkhong Phuja it is forbidden to show their back towards the east where the sacred mountain Makha Koja (part of the Himalayan mountain range in Tibet) is situated. It is believed that their ancestors once lived in the Makha Koja. Before entering the Chongkhong Sal, the Loro and Toloi invoke their deities and inform them about their entry to the place. After arriving each member of the Pisai take up their assigned responsibilities for the ceremony.

At the ceremonial location of the Chongkhong Sal, there is a designated open space with a few stone seats of flat stones. These stone seats are used for sitting by the members of the Pisai (Fig. 5). According to the Pisai, these stones arranged in a semi-circular fashion are of considerable antiquity. The members of this group can only take their designated seats when in their roles as Pisai (Fig. 4). The Phyakmul place wild tara leaves (Alpinia sp.) on the stone seats to facilitate the sitting. The Loro and the Hatari prepare offerings under the newly erected Orlong thuna and Phidri tongkhra. The Loro assisted by the Hatari offers chicken feathers smeared in blood, the bladder of a pig, and a bunch of Tulsi (basil) leaves on a wild banana leaf in front of the Orlong thuna (Fig. 8). While placing the items the Loro and Hatari chant a mantra and prays for the well-being of the village and the prosperity of everyone, including the animals. The offerings (Fig. 6) include twelve packets of rice collected from the twelve members of the Pisai. After this offering, the Loro tie cotton threads (Fig. 8) on the top of each Orlong thuna starting with the one erected in the current year. This symbolizes the offering of Phaga (turbans) to their ancestors. Each standing menhir is considered as an ancestor of Amsai village. These stones are also decorated with wildflowers, as well as leaves of Alpinia sp. and Drynaria sp. (Fig. 8) and orchid roots, which symbolize giving honour to their ancestors. The decoration of the stones can be attributed to the utmost concern for the dead ancestor spirits which are believed to have lived in the stones.

Then similar offerings are made at the pair of stones called Tana-
Megalithic tradition associated with agricultural ritual: a study of the Chongkhong Phuja among the Hill Tiwas of Umswai ...

ing the village to record violations of the taboos reach the Chongkhong Sal. One of the taboos is that it is forbidden to dry clothes in the sun on the day of the Phidri Chongkhong Phuja. Moreover, no ploughing, cutting of soil, or construction of any sort is allowed, while sun-drying vegetables such as bamboo shoots, mushrooms, yams, sesame, and chilies is also prohibited. These taboos are strictly maintained by the villagers and the Phayakmul watch for any violations.

With permission from the deity and the Pisai, the Phayakmul enter the ceremonial ground and report everything they have seen during their tour of the village. The reporting of the Phayakmul to the Pisai is detailed. After hearing the reports, the Pisai pray to the deity and their ancestor spirits and express anguish over the families who have not observed the taboos. After this ceremony, the Phayakmul serve the Loro, Toloi, Hatari, Phador, Sangot, and Barika with cooked meat, rice beer and other food and drink. All the members of the Pisai then leave the place of worship after performing another round of invocations to their deity and ancestor spirits.

 Rao and Puwarao. Tanarao is the god of storms and Puwarao is the god of rain. While making offerings to the principal deity of the village at the Chongkhong Phuja, the Tiwa of Amsai also offers sacrifices to these two important deities that have control over the weather. On this occasion, the priest sacrifices two fowl and a pig in the names Tanarao and Puwarao, and calls for the protection of the village’s house, fruit trees, paddy and other crops.

Meanwhile, the members of the Pisai apart from the Toloi cut the sacrificed pigs into pieces. The wa-leng-jai or the tail of the pig is given to the Loro, the wa-khalao or skull is given to the Toloi and Sangot, wa-kunthri (snout) is given to the Hatari and the wa-ya-thong (legs) are provided to the Phyakmul and Barika. These pieces of meat are tied to sliced bamboo and cooked separately, while the rest of the meat is boiled in a pot with rice powder. The intestines of the pigs are mixed with wild herbs and cooked in bamboo tubes. After the meat is cooked, the Loro, Toloi and Hatari make offerings to the deity and chant several rounds of a mantra and call for bumper crops in the village and seek protection from natural disasters and diseases.

Meanwhile, the two Phayakmul who were given the responsibility of tour-fig. 5. a, b Stone seats designated for the members of the Pisai; c, d members of the Pisai taking their respective seats at the Chongkhong Sal.

Fig. 6. a, b, c Arrangements; b, e cooking in bamboo tubes and metal vessels for the offerings.
As we have seen, sacrificing animals is a common practice of the Hill Tiwas in their traditional rituals. In the pre-British period, there was also a tradition of offering human sacrifice each year at Chongkhong Sal at the bottom of Palakhongor Hill. The place is bounded by a sacred grove where of the four British officials abducted by the Gobha Raja’s soldiers three were sacrificed in 1832. However, this was the last year with any human sacrifice.

Ceremonies performed at the village
In the evening after arriving from the Chongkhong Sal, the members of the Pisai gather at the residence of the Loro and perform some further rites and rituals (Fig. 9) associated with the Phidri Chongkhong. As part of this flutes and drums are played and three rounds of dance are performed by the Phyakmul, Phador, Sangot, and Barika. The Loro, as the chief priest, keeps a close watch on the entire ceremony. The first dance group is called Orlong Gai, the second group is called Khum Duwa and the third group is called Di-Tha Rakha. While dancing, the dancers with bamboo hoes made especially for the ceremony called Pakhu dig a pit almost 30cm in diameter in the floor of the Nukthi (the first room of the residence of Loro). Soon after the dancing, the Phaykmuls cover the pit with soil and once again level the ground with mud plaster. The symbolic use of digging tools, particularly the bamboo hoes in the ceremony at the Loro’s residence in the evening, along with the dancing, signify the jhum agricultural tradition in the hills.

After this the Pisai invites the Panthai Khel, the youth groups led by the Changdoloi, and the Changmaji and Huruma, to come inside the Nukthi. The Panthai Khel enters the residence of the Loro while singing traditional songs and after paying respect to the Pisai, then sits at the designated seat called a tongkhra. The Loro starts the invocation of the principal deity of the village and the ancestor spirits in the presence of the Panthai Khel. After the invocation, two rounds of rice beer are served to the members of the Pisai and the Panthai Khel in bamboo tubes. At the end of the drinking, the Loro and Toloi hand over the Khram Panthai (the drum) and Pangsi (the flute) to the Panthai Khel who is the custodian of these musical instruments. Soon the Panthai Khel leaves the Loro’s residence and deposits the musical instruments at the Shamadi, the bachelors’ dormitory in the village. The Phidri Chongkhong ceremony ends with another invocation of the deities and ancestor spirits at the Loro’s residence. This Chongkhong Phuja is also performed by other villages of the Umswai Valley.

Agricultural practice among the Hill Tiwas
As mentioned above, the megalithic stones erected during the Chongkhong Phuja at Amsai village are related to agricultural practice. This can be considered unique to the Tiwas, as most of the living megalithic traditions among other communities of Northeast India are related to burial structures, commemorating the death of a person or an important event, apart from other functional purposes like establishing boundary demarcations, sitting stones and so on. As such, a discussion on the agricultural practices among the Hill Tiwas would be pertinent here to understand

Fig. 7. a Selection; b carrying of the stones; c erecting of Orlong thuna and Phidri tongkhra at the Chongkhong Sal.

1 According to the legend, on the occasion of Phidri Chongkhong a human was sacrificed each year by the priest of the Amsai village. This incident was documented by Pemberton (1835.229) in his “Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India”. These sacrifices are believed to have brought prosperity and security to the village from the evil spirits.
their relevance with the megalithic tradition. Agriculture has been the principal means of livelihood of the Tiwa community since the pre-colonial period. Paddy is the main crop of Tiwa agriculture, both in the hills and plains. The distinctive eco-cultural features of the Tiwa economic organization lie in its communal activities and inter-dependence among the families living within a village for the satisfaction of basic needs of with regard to food, clothing and housing.

In the hills, *jhum* – slash and burn or shifting cultivation (Fig. 10) – is practiced by the Tiwas, which is woven into the fabric of their lifestyle and cultural milieu (Gohain 1992:32). The calendar for shifting cultivation starts with *Mahak* (January/February) when the plots are selected for cultivation by the households. The Tiwa refer to their *jhum* fields as *maiha* (*mai* meaning paddy, *ha* meaning field). The households have their own plots used with the consent of the *Pisai*, and the head of the family decides which plot is to be selected for that particular year.

Selection depends on the *jhum* cycle, as abundant vegetation is necessary after a plot has been cultivated and left fallow for a period of four to six years. The land left fallow to regain its fertility is called *hagari* (*ha* meaning land, *gari* meaning leftover). At the end of the *jhum* cycle, the family returns to the same plot of land they had cultivated at the beginning of the cycle.

In the following months of *Phagun* (February/March) and *Chit* (March/April), parts of the jungle are cleared before the monsoon starts. The trees and shrubs are cut and the entire plot is allowed to dry for thirty to forty days. Just before the rains are expected the plot is set on fire on a day fixed by the common consent of the villagers, as they must see that the fire does not get out of control and spread to the plots of neighbouring villages because of dry weather and strong winds. After the fire, the burned soil is thoroughly hoed and mixed with the ashes so that it is not washed away by the first rains. In mid-April after the Phidri Chongkhong ceremony, the sowing of seeds takes place. Carefully preserved seeds (*kho-dya*) of other vegetables are selected for sowing. Several varieties of seeds may be sown in one plot, all mixed together. Usually, eight to ten grains of paddy
are put in a hole made with a pointed stick (*khadi*). Both men and women work together while sowing the seeds. Men dig the holes starting from one end of the plot, followed by women who drop the seeds and cover them with soil.

The Hill Tiwa grow a number of crops simultaneously on a plot of land. Chilli, cucumber, gourd, egg-plant, sesame, arum, sweet potato and yam are grown in a common plot. Sowing activities take about a month to complete. Shoots of yam and arum are generally planted at the end of the sowing season (*Patar* 2021).

Mixed cultivation requires more sustained and greater attention and care than the wet rice cultivation in the valleys. The crops are weeded twice, in July and late September. A watch has to be kept over the fields day and night. Two huts are built for this purpose; a bamboo hut in treetops (*thunggi*) and a small shed on the ground (*maru*), used for guarding in the day. At night a small fire is lit near this. The man who guards the plantation at night stays in the higher hut from where he can easily watch out for elephants, wild pigs, deer or porcupines.

The Hill Tiwa also practice wet paddy cultivation in the narrow valleys of Umswai, Morten, Bormarjong and Ulukhunji. They call their wet paddy fields *fadar*. Unlike their plain counterparts, the Hill Tiwas do not use ox-driven iron ploughs. Instead they use hoes to prepare the soil, a process which begins at the end of March and continues for about a month. After hoeing and irrigating the soil, water buffalo are allowed to tread on the soil to make it smooth. When there are no buffalo, loosening of the soil is done by hoeing only and the work is very strenuous. The process of wet paddy cultivation seems to be more labour-intensive than *jhum* cultivation, as both men and women need to hoe the field in the absence of a plough. Although the normal practice is to transplant seedlings from the seed-bed (*thuli*), which is prepared well ahead of transplantation, some varieties of seeds are planted directly in the irrigated fields. Direct sowing of seeds is undertaken at the onset of the monsoon in June.

The paddies are harvested in December. The Hill Tiwa do not use ox or human feet for separating the grains from the stalks of paddy, but rather they use three- to four-foot long wooden or bamboo sticks to separate the seeds by beating, which is known as *maipothala*. For this purpose, a small plot of land is selected in the paddy field. Men and women in separate groups of seven or nine takes turn separating the grains from the stalks by beating them with sticks. The process continues until the entire paddy has been threshed. The grains are then gathered in a heap and fanned with a winnow to blow away broken stalks. After this, they are collected in baskets of straw called *maipur*, each containing 30 to 35 kilograms of threshed unmilled rice. The hill Tiwas do not construct separate granaries to preserve their rice. Instead, they keep the *maipur* or the straw basket inside *nukthi* (part of the traditional house *nobaro*) along the walls.

Shifting cultivation is a common mode of subsistence among the population residing in the hilly areas. It is also considered as a continuation of the Neolithic tradition (*Sharma* 1990). Many times polished and chipped stone artefacts are found by the villagers while clearing the forest and tilling an area for shifting cultivation. These are believed to be thunder-axes by the villagers and occasionally collected and kept in their possession for various magical-religious practices. Interestingly, many of the stone artefacts resemble modern day axes and adzes made of iron used for various domestic and agricultural activities. A comparative study made by *Roy* (1985) on the Neolithic tools from Garo Hills and artefacts used in shifting cultivation reveals homogeneity in function of both these modern and ancient tools. The use-wear...
patterns of the present day as well as prehistoric items suggest similar kinds of use have been maintained. The site of Bargaon, associated with the Hill Karbis in the Garbhangar Reserved Forest has also produced some iron implements which might have been used for shifting cultivation (Hazarika 2016). Similarly, Ajay Pratap (2000) has correlated the shifting cultivation system of the Paharias of Santal Paraganas with the archaeological record. Eleanor Kingwell-Banham and Dorian Fuller (2012) suggest that shifting cultivation may have been a widespread economic system during the Neolithic period, in both the Ganga Valley and the Deccan Plateau of South India. This might have been the case for certain areas of Northeast India, too, where the early settlers adopted the incipient mode of shifting cultivation and developed a strategic subsistence economy over time, exploiting the hilly terrain. The long association of the inhabitants of the hilly landscape with shifting cultivation is thus reflected in their tangible culture as well as intangible cultural practices.

Conclusions

Based on the above discussion, it can be surmised that the Chongkhong Phuja performed by the Hill Tiwas is a unique cultural tradition attached to their agricultural practices. The annual custom of erecting megaliths associated with the Phuja provides us with ample clues regarding the antiquity of the megalithic tradition, as well as the long history of *jhum* cultivation in the area. Moreover, the symbolic use of bamboo hoes in the dance associated with the Chongkhong Phuja ceremony highlights the central role of agriculture in the Tiwa way of life. This symbolism also suggests how the community has been practicing the *jhum* cultivation with simple implements such as digging tools over the years. Based on archaeological, historical and ethnographic evidence, shifting cultivation can be considered as a mode of subsistence supported by gathering, hunting and fishing that has existed since the Neolithic period in these areas of Northeast India (Hazarika 2017).

While there is lack of absolute dates for establishing the antiquity and chronology of shifting cultivation in the region, the intricate association of this farming practice with the Tiwa life-ways suggest its deep-rooted historicity. The findings of polished and chipped stone artefacts from the *jhum* fields in the Umswai Valley can be considered as evidence of incipient agricultural activities in the past. However, further systematic archaeological excavations are required in these areas to ascertain the absolute chronology of shifting cultivation as well as the Neolithic tradition in this area.

The megalithic tradition among the Tiwas has been practised for a long period of time. In the Tiwa dominated areas, a variety of megalithic structures are observed which can be categorized as both commemorative and utilitarian. The present study has shed light on the enduring living megalithic traditions among the Tiwas and revealed the close association of megaliths with their agricultural practices. This is perhaps the only example in an Indian context where the erection of megaliths is an annual activity associated with an agricultural ritual. This highlights the diversity of meaning, function and ideology within megalithic traditions and opens avenues for comparative studies with other megalithic cultures worldwide. This study also hints at the intangible cultures attached with early farming practices during remote prehistory.

Northeast India is a hub of various ethnic groups and traditional cultures. Many of the ethnic communities continue to practise some age-old traditions, which provides scope for archaeologists to draw parallels for generating insights for many archaeological problems. The Chongkhong Phuja is one such archaic tradition which leads us to rethink the association of megaliths beyond burial or commemoration.

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