

Stone: A medium to elucidate the traditional belief system of the Rem villages of Kamjong District

Shinngamla Zimik

Research Scholar, Department of History

Manipur University, 797003

Abstract - This paper attempts to unveil the relationship between stone and belief system of the Rem villages. Stone as a source of power and life associating with origins and ancestors of the region will be elaborated. The placing of stone, its embodiment of status and becoming a significant ancestor through the erection of stone with special references to 'Mivali' a Paddy Goddess is studied and unravel to some extent. The lore and its magnificence to the hill tribes as a whole and to the people of the rem villages in particular will be brought to the limelight. The amalgamation of the lore and stones in bringing out the history of the people with no written record will be emphasized. The dependence on oral tradition with the help of folklore that is embedded within the stone necessitate to laud and preserve the evidences in the form of written record and human intervention. The rich traditions and practices prevalent at the backdrop of the induction of Christianity to the region has so much to speak about the belief systems and lustrous culture of the ancient past. The tapestry of the glossy cultural heritage of the rem villages though neglected for many years will be unveil in this paper whereby giving chance to the mainstream citizens to understand the folklore of the other poles of the state.

Keywords: Stone, Lore, Belief system, Tradition, Heritage.

Introduction

Manipur, a state of northeast is known for his rich cultural history and myriads of ethnic communities. The historical state of Manipur is divided in to sixteen districts whereby kamjong district is one of them. The district is inhabited mostly by Tangkhul communities. The eastern region of the district bordering the Myanmar is called rem/ram area comprising of 7 villages. These villages are closely knitted to one another culturally, religiously and socially. They speak a common dialect with a little difference in tune and tone of the words. The region literally is known for its backwardness as the Government fail to look into the welfare of the concerned region. The transport bottleneck is one of the main causes for being neglected by the Government. However, the fact Is that this region is gifted with rich natural resources and rich cultural heritage. The traditional practices of the ancestors were still remembered by many of the elders freshly as it was recently that they abandon certain belief system and practices with the coming of the Christianity to the region. The region is very rich in traditional lore with special connection to stones. Stone, as old as human civilization has accompanied the society in the form of lore. many stories common to the native citizens may sound like a myth and unrealistic, but for the natives, they grew up hearing such types of lore and is deeply connected to them emotionally and is part of their history. The oral tradition is so rich that many of the stones have a story to tell to the society. The lack of written records makes it necessary for the native people to embraced the importance of the orally passed down narration in order to remember the traditional knowledge system of the concerned region.

The importance of stone has been undermined in many ways however analyzing the stone into a deeper perspective give a new meaning to every stone that has been erected by the erectors and naturally occurring stone yet greatly revered and respected by the ancient of days. History of the people are strongly attached to the stone as stones were used in many ways for instance, a boundary between two villages is usually demarcated by using stones and in some

case, the status or wealth of a rich man is manifested by erecting a stone as he gives a feast to merit to all his fellow villagers. Some stones carry a magical power whereby it is mainly used by sorcerers and stones were also worship as it embodies the structure of the Gods and Goddesses. This doesn't mean that all kind of stone have certain stories to tell. Only the selected ones have certain thing to speak and convey message to the younger generation. The stone may not speak literally but have an important history embedded within them. The nature of the society, the cultural interaction and the traditional belief system of the ancestors were deeply embedded within the stone. The story of the brave warriors of all warring villages was also trace back to the stone as certain tribes of nagas erected a monolith for the brave warriors when they come home with head trophy to commemorate their braveries and success in the war. Such Is the extent of the importance of stone to the tribal people of Manipur.

Aims and objective

1. To study the belief system of the rem region with the help of the stone
2. To display the narration that is embedded within the stone
3. To explore the rich culture and practices passed down orally through the medium of stone
4. To enrich the cultural heritage of the kamjong district and for Tangkhul people as a whole

Statement of the problem

Rem region is the most neglected area of kamjong district due to the harsh topography leading to transport bottleneck. So far none of the researcher has explore this region in detail. The orally passed down traditions are still intact and fresh in the minds of the guardians of the region but to dismay none has recorded in written form. The need of the hour is to preserve and record the rich traditions in a scholarly manner for future posterity. There is a need to rescue the arrested unique belief system of the region and streamline them to the society. The stone carrying a strong meaning will turn into simple stone if the present generation fails to record their importance as the older generation who knows the significance of certain stone will diminish with the passage of time.

Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative method of research is used in fulfilling the aims and objective of paper. This paper is mainly based on primary data as Observing and analyzing the data in person is needed in understanding the nature of the stone and its purposes. Apart from site visitation, meeting and conversing with the elders of the villages about the various Myths and narrations encircling the stones bring light to the paper.

Discussion/Findings

The relevance of folklore to the tribal society

Folklore is the oral literature that is passed down from generation to generation. Oral tradition is the fundamental folklore that includes folktales, myths, legends, superstitions, proverbs, riddles, and so on.¹ Each culture has its own oral tradition. The importance of oral tradition for every culture is enormous. For many indigenous communities of Manipur, as is the case with many indigenous communities in India's Northeastern region, oral tradition is often the only means for tracing the indigenous culture. Thus, in today's evolving world, oral tradition is therefore nearly incalculably important to the culture impacted by assimilation and transculturation.² In addition to helping to pass on the knowledge of ancestors, origins, and cultural customs from one generation to the next, folklore is an essential component of tribal cultural identity, social cohesiveness, and continuity. Apart from offering a wealth of information for comprehending the ritual use of things, folklore opens up new perspectives on the landscape, poses fresh queries regarding time and memory, and highlights issues with the local and archeological significance of the past.³

Belief system and rituals of the Rem region

Rem region consists of 7 villages namely, Roni, Madoyah, Chamu, Hangoukaphung, Khayang, Phungtha and Kachouphung which falls under the eastern flank of kamjong district with Sahamphung as its block. The region shares a boundary with Myanmar in the eastern side, towards the west, the region shares a boundary with Sahamphung, Langcha and Langkhe villages, towards the north, Zingsui and Khamasom village shares a boundary with rem region, and towards south, Chatrik and Maokot village shares a boundary with the region.⁴

The people belonged to Tangkhul tribe with Tangkhul as its common dialect at the same time have their own village dialect with some difference in tone having the same meaning. It is a sparsely populated area with a closely knitted social practices and unified culture. Each village have its own story of origin. The culture, traditions and belief system of the region have a close relation with the stone prior to the onset of the gospel to the area. A society with no written record always carries a problem in tracing their various customs and traditions. But the material remains after many years has passed by somehow have story to tell about certain culture. every society especially the tribals have a codified belief system and rituals to be follow which open a big door in understanding the various practices followed by the ancient people

Evidence of Mivali – Goddess of Paddy



Mivali, a stone goddess of paddy, is located in Chamu village's Shaya Lo paddy field. It is approximately 4 meters tall and 2 meters wide, resembling a female deity. According to local legend, Mivali was transported from Shirui Village by an enchanted flat stone known as shurulu.

According to the lore, before retrieving the Goddess Mivali from the Phungtha River, the owner of the Shaya Lo had unusual dreams every night about a stone asking for help⁵. Mivali, with tears in his dream, pleading to take her home, stating that she is a paddy goddess because she has nowhere to reside. As the dream lasted every night, the field owner became curious and went to the spot where Mivali was crying in his dream. As he looked around the river, he saw a rare sparkling stone shaped like a female deity named Mivali whereby he took Mivali and offered a sacrifice before transporting him to his field, he has kept the stone near the cabin. The family believes that the introduction of the Mivali boosts their crop yields. Outsiders may regard Mivali as a common stone, but it is adored and

revered by the family, making it a goddess.⁶

Before Christianity arrived in the region, the locals practiced an animistic religion in which they worshipped the Gods and offered sacrifices to them in hopes of receiving blessings and protection from evil forces. Additionally, Mivali entered the animistic society in the shape of stone, which was revered and adored by those who provided sacrifices. The region's previous belief system, which saw pagans as barbarians, was totally superseded by Christianity when it arrived. As a result, the entire population abandoned the old belief system and embraced the new religious forces.⁷ Although the Mivali story is from the past, the shaya lo still bears proof. In Chamu village, the paddy field owner's descendants still live. The family has chosen Christianity; thus, the Goddess of Paddy is no longer essential to them. However, the fact that the stone is still standing surrounded by thorns and shrubs due to neglect gives us an idea of the importance of lore in the area. The relationship between mythology and material culture of stone enables people to learn about the culture and belief system of the location at some point in time. The tale continues by stating that Mivali is the reason the family never goes without food and that the number of clan members never grows because, up until the coming of Christianity, just a son is born to the family each generation. Maintaining the Goddess of Paddy has benefits and drawbacks for the entire family and tribe.⁸

Conclusion

Stone becomes the connecting point to reconstruct the history of a region with no written record. The orality of the region becomes a history after interpreting with the help of a stone. It may just be a mute stone; however, it has a big role in understanding the various practices followed by the people since time immemorial therefore there is a great need to preserve and protect the many stones lying in the thick forest. When a person removes a rock from its natural position and uses it functionally, ceremonially, or otherwise, it is transformed from a natural item to a cultural artefact with contextual meaning and value. A study of social life using stone can provide a window into the past, giving light on a history that has mostly gone unwritten and undocumented.⁹ JH Hutton, then deputy commissioner in the colonial naga hills, 1926, recognized the significance of stones in naga cosmology, social organization, rituals, besides their economic usages. He then classified the use of stones by the Naga into three categories: ceremonial/memorative, magical, and utilitarian.¹⁰ The belief system of the Rem region will be incomplete without studying the stones laying in specific place. It is true that not all the stone is worth analyzing but there are some stone in situ carrying a history of certain clan in the region. The evidence of a significant stone like Mivali play an important role is establishing the belief system of the region at specific point of time. Mivali may not be recognized as Goddess by the whole rem region but it surely is important to the owner of the paddy field therefore the story has been passed down from generation to generation to remember the aged old traditional practices of the family. The importance of the stone can be elucidated with the help of the traditional lore that is widely alive within the region. The narration is streamline by analyzing the stone that is standing the paddy field. The fact that the owner of the paddy field offers a sacrifice to paddy Goddess before he starts his work shows that the worship of stone was slightly practice by the family in return showing the rich culture of the region. The unique culture of worshipping the stone to increase the paddy harvest is also a part of religious obligation as rice cultivation was the main source of livelihood. The linkages between traditional belief system and stone are also a part of cultural heritage of the region. The rich culture of the region is out in the limelight after analyzing the evidence found in the form of stone. there are many other lore that have a special connection with the stone therefore there is a urgent need for academic discourse so as the bring out the history of the place and region with the help of stone.

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