

Warrior stone culture: Tracing Manipur's Hill Tribe Headhunters

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Abstract: *The warriors of the hill tribes are recalled for their bravery and achievements since time immemorial. The monoliths erected in their memory are the conduits to unravelling the outstanding history of the warriors. The warrior stone, carrying supernatural powers and meanings, may sound mythical and unreal, but oral tradition plays a vital role in validating these facts to society. The mute-lithic has a tremendous way to analyse the indigenous traditions and practices of the tribal people who lack a written record. The material remnants in the form of monoliths and wooden structures became a significant figure in understanding the socio-cultural ethos of the hill tribes. Various erected stones served as a storehouse of memories for Headhunters. The paper attempts to uncover the information embedded within the stones. The concept of the warrior stone would be non-existent without the tradition of headhunting. Therefore, this paper will analyse whether the warrior stone has any socio-political connotation with the headhunting culture. The warrior stone, standing in some villages of the Tangkhul, Poumai, Mao, Maram, Chakhesang and Kabui tribes will immensely enlighten the customs and traditions of the respective tribes of Manipur. The concept of war among the hilltribes, the practice of head hunting, the rituals involved in erecting the warrior's trophy, the role of memories, and the contributions of oral traditions will be discussed briefly and the paper will also endeavour to controvert the theory of depicting the headhunting culture as primitive and heathen post - colonialism. Qualitative and quantitative methods of research are used in materialising this paper.*

Keywords: *Warrior Stone, Head Hunting, Hilltribes, Tradition, Memories*

Introduction

Manipur, a state located in the northeastern region of India, is characterised

by its diverse landscape of hills and valleys, home to a rich cultural heritage and vibrant communities. The state is rich in social customs, traditions, and cultural practices that have been passed down through material culture, oral history, and folklore from one generation to another. Historically the Meitei's living in the valley does not adopt a headhunting culture although the headhunting tradition practiced by tribals from Myanmar, Philippines, Taiwan, Afghanistan prior pre-colonial era was widely practice by Hilltribes inhabiting the hills until the late 19th century. The term head hunters may sound very savage and primitive but resorting to these practices was the only means of protecting their village and clan at that point of time. The memories of the head hunters are well preserved in the warrior stone found in many of the Naga inhabited villages. Stones holding memories of warriors are of different shape and size denoting myriads of intentions. Some stones are known for their special magical power where the warriors get blessing from it as he prepares to go to the war. The headhunters also use a heap of stones to deposit the head of an enemy. The social and political recognition given to the brave warriors was manifested by erecting a memory stone in commemoration of their heroic deeds by some hill tribes, whereas others erected a wooden structure to remember the number of heads they had taken in their lifetime, which was usually placed on a sitting stone. The contributions made by the warriors necessitate further consciousness therefore there is a need to mainstream them by studying the material culture left in their memory albeit many of them were removed or dismantled in the name of inducing development to the region. Society without written records depend on the oral tradition in the form of folklore and material remnants such as monoliths and other artefacts in understanding the history in depth. This paper will appraise the correlation between the headhunting tradition and material remnants along with its significance and positive elements to the society. The methods to trace and preserve the forgotten tribal history with special reference to warriors with the help of memories will be brought to the light thus enhancing the history of the head hunters.

The megalithic tradition and the culture of head hunting has been research by some scholars, however the concept of warrior in relation with stones and memories is yet to be recognized. The practice of head hunting is mostly presented in negative perception by many scholars as the advent of Christianity, the pioneer missionaries considered the brutal practice as barbaric and heathen, therefore, it is high time to look at the positive aspects of the headhunting culture and the many reasons as to why they took up such a primitive method to sustain the lifeline of the village. The role of the memories in revisiting the long forgotten glorious past will be emphasized in understanding the headhunting culture. The distinguished achievements of the warriors required to be acknowledged and remembered by safeguarding the material residuum for future posterity. Qualitative and empirical methods of research are used in writing this paper. The primary data are collected by visiting the sites and by

taking interviews with the elders and knowledgeable figures of the concerned villages. Secondary sources are taken from books, articles, magazines and souvenirs in the related field.

The Concept of War

History of mankind is always accompanied by peace and war, conflicts, feuds and battle between different countries which usually ends up with war therefore, we have seen two great world wars in the last century. The hilltribes of northeast India, before the coming of Christianity were a closed society with the sole purpose of protecting their own country from outside intrusion and disturbances by using a brutal mechanism of head hunting. Violence is associated with peaceful relations between villages politically and economically thus it is more appropriate to call it feuding instead of warfare¹ on the other hand, it is more seasonable to call it a war rather than head hunting as the naga wars followed a certain pattern similar to international laws of war.² Winning a war was signified by the number of heads the naga warriors brought home, Without which the war meant nothing.³ War was a continual reality in Naga civilization, and the standards of honorable battle conduct were taught to the male counterparts from a young age. Ancient customs strictly governed war, and any raid carried out for reasons not acknowledged by the community brought disgrace to the warriors engaged.⁴ The Nagas followed different ways of fighting tactics: the Semas known for their brave warriors followed pitched battle, raid on the enemy's field, raids on villages and taking the head of a man met casually on the path.⁵

"Among the Tangkhul Nagas, war is classified into five types;

1. General war,
2. Secret war,
3. War of challenges,
4. Clan war and
5. War of hostages"⁶

Likewise, different hilltribes of Manipur adopt different methods of warfare tactics.

Head Hunting Tradition

The notion of warrior stone has its origin to the headhunting tradition that has been practiced by the Nagas since time immemorial. The act of killing someone with the goal of obtaining their head is known as "head hunting."⁷ Head hunting can be caused by a number of things, including abducting a woman or providing refuge to an unfaithful wife from an alien community, breaking vows, trapping animals in areas not owned by one's community, chopping grass or bamboo from territory not owned by oneself and exacting revenge for the death of a relative.⁸

Before the arrival of Christianity in the Naga country, head hunting was

widely practiced between different regions and villages. The inhabitants used to be fortified perfectly, with stone sangars, sentry boxes, spiked ditches, panjis (bamboo palisades) and other barriers all around the villages to impede unexpected and abrupt headhunting attacks. Morung residences are situated near the village gates in order to dispatch armed personnel in case of emergency promptly.⁹ The villagers living in the border areas lived under continual anxiety of attack.¹⁰ In a village riot, heads are never seized since honestly nobody would gain. They are not taken from family members for the same reason.¹¹

Inter village feuds and conflicts were very common leading to continual raids. Not every expedition was set out to capture heads, but every chance to bring heads back to the tribe were being seized.¹² The headhunting expeditions was a very common phenomenon in the naga country until the end of 19th century. The warriors gather intelligence on the enemy's defense, tactics and obstacles as part of their preparations for the raid. In accordance with local custom, ceremonies were held prior to the raid, during which animals were sacrificed. To determine if the omens were unfavorable, tests such as the killing of poultry, breaking of an egg, or performing other rites were performed. The raids were postponed for a better day if the outcomes were not favorable.¹³ In this manner invocation of a religious deity or diviner plays an important role at that point of time.

Every warrior who come home with enemies' head are recognized by the community and they were treated with great reverence. The warrior who had prevailed triumphantly made his way back home, hoping to make a reputation for himself and capture the hearts of the most attractive girls in the villages. Being the wife of someone who had amassed the greatest number of human heads was a source of pride for any young women.¹⁴ The idea of head hunting is link with the belief system that bringing a head from another village will increase the fertility of the land, especially if the head belongs to a woman. Thus, it has much to do with the spirit of the earth as well. Gaining social recognition can also be attained by bringing the enemy's skull. Nevertheless, men who return from battle empty handed are viewed as weak and not respected by society.¹⁵ The head of a woman, especially a young girl, was a highly valued item since, once it was obtained, the enemy's fertility was immediately decreased as the community lost one potential mother.¹⁶ TC Hodson suggested that the act of a man returning with the heads of women or children from a hostile village was considered a bravery because during ancient times, women were not allowed to leave the village, not even to go to the fields, without the protection of men. The killing of these women demonstrated that the courageous men had made it as close as possible to the enemy's stronghold.¹⁷

Memories and Stone Culture

Megalithic monuments are not only monuments, but immovable media that embody a deeper set of meanings linked to how the material itself is understood

and interpreted by the builders within a social system. Stones erected by individuals, family and clan signifies different connotations. Stones carrying the memories of the head hunters are found in some of the villages of the naga inhabited areas and can be elaborate in the following manner:

1. Rihai lung (oath taking stone) at Phungcham village, Ukhrul district- Phungcham village consist of six clans in which every clan have their own oath taking stone kept at the compound of the pipa's (head of the clan) house. Oath taking stone is surrounded by heap of stone which carries a memory of the warriors. Tuireising Horam, Headman of Phungcham village asserted that all the warriors who come home with enemies' head deposit the head over the heap of stone and dance around the oath taking stone with great jubilation.¹⁸ And the whole clan join in celebrating the victory of the warriors with feast. This narration has been passed down since time immemorial and the evidence of the Rihai lung is still standing there today. This stone brings memories of the brave warriors from the village.



Horam Rihai at Phungcham Village, Ukhrul District.

2. Rihai lung from Chingjaroi village, Ukhrul district – Rihailung, a mass of stones that piled up is found Infront of the headman house. In the chief's yard which is just near the house, there is a big wooden pillar.

According to the narration of Solomon, chief of the village, the warrior with head trophy throws the head to the wooden pillar until it faces towards the house after which the head was deposited at the Rihailung but if the head continues to face towards him, the warrior will continue to try until it faces towards the house.¹⁹ Thus, the heap of stone surrounding the Rihailung bring

light to the memories of the head hunters.



Rihailung found in front of Headmen's House,
chingjaroi village, Ukhurul district.

3. Rihai lung for woman at Chingjaroi village, Ukhurul district: According to the narration of Kavo, women's Rihailung trace its origin to a woman named Achino who took the head of a strong warrior from the neighbouring village, as she tries to keep the head in the village Rihailung, the headmen refuses saying that the head brought by man and woman should not be mixed up. Therefore, Achino requested for an appropriate area, and the chief gave her a new location for keeping the warrior's head. From that day the rihai for woman became very important. Whenever there is a dispute between women, they usually go to that place and make a vow.²⁰

4. Willong village, Senapati district

a. Anthony Kaba of Willong village share a story of a warrior called Kazhu (name of a person) whose size is lower than normal human height yet known for his valor. When the Angamis attacked the Willong villages, the villagers escaped, but Kazhu made a deceptive appearance by jumping and crossing from one stone to another which surprised the Angamis on the other hand, being a strong warrior Kazhu name has been well known. so, to confirm again, they asked if he is Kazhu, as he accept himself as Kazhu, the Angamis ran away realizing that many more warriors might be hiding beneath the stone gearing up to attack the Angamis. consequently, the orally passed down narration brought the memories of the warrior in linkage with the stone culture to the younger generation.

b. Again, Anthony Kaba mentioned about a small piece of stone which is of great value to the warriors, located 1km away from the main village vicinity. According to the belief system, the warriors before going out go for war must stamp this piece of stone which is a kind of oath taking, affirming unity where no one will abandon each other. A vow that they will fight together till the end, wherefore this piece of stone served as a storehouse of memories for the warrior.

c. Willong village have a cluster of stone located near the national highway 2. Anthony said that this cluster of stone serve as a platform to remember the achievements make by warrior as the warriors used to hide behind the stone during the times of war.²¹



Cluster of stones at Willong village, Senapati District.

5. Jessami village, Ukhrul district: Dr. Weyepe Mekrisuh, Headman of Jessami village stated that a resting stone on the way to Boneh field has been used to arrange the carved wooden structures to represent the number of heads the warriors' hunted at the height of the headhunting era. This erected structure commemorates the valor and bravery of the headhunting warriors of the olden days. This is typically erected in a prominent spot to encourage other Native folks to follow the valiant footsteps. The inhabitants used chuheh locally known woods as they are naturally resistant to rot and decay.²² Nirulo Wezah, a retired government Teacher gives a narration that Head-hunting in those times was carried out for multiple purposes. For some, it was viewed almost like a competitive activity, while for others it served as a way to prove courage and bravery. It was also practiced during land disputes between villages as a sign of territorial claim. In addition, head-hunting acted as a display of personal strength and authority. Communities felt proud when they had a renowned

warrior among them, and nearby villages often avoided attacking such places, knowing that a powerful fighter was part of the village.²³ Nephalu Lasuh , opines that In many villages, it was customary to keep the heads of enemies in the village headman's house. However, Jessami village followed a different practice—they would simply throw the enemy's head outside the village gate. Because of this, warriors from nearby villages dreaded being killed by Jessami fighters, knowing their heads would not be treated with respect. There are even stories of warriors who, when unexpectedly meeting a Jessami warrior, requested that their head be properly kept if they happened to be killed. Most of Jessami's conflicts were with the Somrah and Meluri people.²⁴ Hikemu Wezah , an oldest person of the village who is running 104 years recalls ,When a warrior returned home carrying the head of an enemy, the entire village held a feast in celebration. Since the warrior himself was expected to sponsor the feast, many ended up selling their land and property, eventually becoming paupers. Wezah further mentions the significance of the village gate in the days of head hunters. The village gate, constructed by the community, served as a vital line of protection against enemy attacks during the headhunting days. It was the only passageway used by the villagers to reach their fields, and everyone was strictly required to pass through it. The gate remained closed at night for security and was opened during the day to allow movement. Using any other route was strictly prohibited, as doing so exposed villagers to a high risk of ambush by enemies. Today, the gate has completely disappeared, and no visible remains of its structure can be found.²⁵



Carved wooden structure, Jessami village,
Ukhrul District photograph by JP.Mills



Remnants of the carved wood structure, Jessami Village, Ukhrul District.
(photographed on 13th march 2025)



Village gate, Jessami village (photographed on 12th December 2022)

6. Longpi village, Ukhrul District

Yangshi Kamkara, an elder of Longpi khullen village narrated that in the earlier days, when a warrior returned home carrying the head of an enemy, the entire village celebrated the victory with a large feast. Whenever a warrior brought back an enemy's head, he kept it in his own home instead of handing it over to the headman. Longpi village produced many renowned warriors, among whom Maringthei is especially well known; his memorial stone now stands in Shokvao village. Because Rachai, Maremphung, and Namrei are offshoots of Longpi, these villages also have stones erected in honour of their warriors. It is said that there were once about five heads taken from Theiva village, but they were all destroyed when a house in the village caught fire.²⁶ Mahai Kamkara, 81 years old mentioned about an account that tells of a Longpi warrior who brought back the head of a pregnant woman from Halang village when he encountered her while she was fetching water. The Halang villagers planned to take revenge, but the people of Longpi intervened, stating that the act was carried out as retribution for the warrior's grandfather. Hearing this, the Halang villagers abandoned their plan. Thus, Mahai Kamkara gives a conclusion that headhunting was closely tied to the custom of avenging past wrongs.²⁷

7. Lunghar village, Ukhrul District

Thari Thumrah, 93 years old, a local inhabitant of Lunghar village opines that the warriors, especially those from the Kazingmei clan, are remembered for their exceptional bravery. They frequently engaged in battles with neighbouring villages such as Halang and Shirui. Among them, a warrior named Sirapu is regarded as a legendary hero of that time. It is said that neighbouring villages hesitated to go to war once they learned that Sirapu was taking part in the fight. According to oral traditions, he was capable of taking three to four enemy heads in a single encounter. Thumrah further asserts that before warriors left for battle, the headmen offered prayers and bestowed blessings upon them. When a warrior returned with an enemy's head, a pig was slaughtered to mark the victory. If he brought back two heads, the celebration continued for two days.²⁸

Recognition Given to the Warriors

The hilltribes who practiced the headhunting tradition have a different way of celebrating the brave warriors. Head hunters from Tangkhul would carry the heads into the village, where they would first deposit the head on a pile of stones (Rihailung) and have a merrymaking with the communities.²⁹ The warriors' desire to be well-known and happy both during their lifetime and after death led to the construction of many stone monuments over their tombs, each one symbolizing the number of heads they had killed.³⁰ A bamboo pole with wickerwork pieces attached, signifying the number of heads taken, is said

to have been placed in front of the Tangkhul chief's residence so that everyone might see it.³¹ The Para (Burma Naga Tribe) people also known as Para Naga used to build unique monuments unique to their tribe to commemorate the triumph of valiant warriors following a head hunt. This monument, known as walehle, signifies the ultimate victory and was made of phu, a long bamboo.³² For Ao Nagas, head hunting is crucial to his own fortune as well as the prosperity of his tribe and clan. It was an honor for them to take an enemy's head as they were the only ones with the right to add certain decorative elements.³³ The Angami head hunters are permitted to wear skirts with four rows of cowries. Similarly, a konyak head hunter shows off his bounty by displaying brass heads for each real head he has harvested.³⁴ At one-point, headhunting success was seen as a sign of transitioning from adolescence to maturity, if not a prerequisite for marriage.³⁵

Socio Economic and Political Cannotation

Shimray R.R. has rightly pointed out that the headhunting practice by the naga society in the past has religious purpose, economic importance, political agenda and most importantly, social gain.³⁶ Esther keishing asserts head hunting was partially religious because the Tangkhul's believed that the head of an opponent who wasn't from their village increased the village's wealth by enhancing the soil's fertility.³⁷ We can notice that the bringing of the head offers not only a chance for feasting which boost the societal relationship among the villagers but it also stimulates the local economy.³⁸ Feud also denotes the social relationship between the neighboring villages as there are instances of feuds arising between villages that are acquainted or connected in some other way.³⁹ Among the Konyak Naga's, If a head is brought in, the men and boys are privileged to sing and dance when they go to the fields throughout the year. The feasts that follow demand large amounts of extra food, which must be obtained through trade. Additionally, the ceremonial dress and ornaments appropriate for the men participating must be either bartered or made for the occasion.⁴⁰ The headhunting tradition has special connection with political strategy. Feuds can be sparked by a number of political processes, such as a formal friend's failure to honor his partner with a feast, a wife receiving clan's failure to honor bride price obligations, an insult, or an intrusion during village 'genna'. Politically In order to effectively prevent a feud from resurfacing, it is customary to insist on the return of heads when two villages are reconciled.⁴¹ The two hostile villages sent messages to one another so as peace will prevail between them. The political status of the warriors who come home with head were upgraded and earned respect from the society.

The brutality of headhunting culture has brought to the attention of many colonial political agents who were posted at the head hunters' territory. The act of revenge, retaliation and counter attack by the victimized villages or clan, change the scenario of the relationship between two neighboring villages.

Everyone have the right to perceived the headhunting ceremonies in negative way as the act is very brutal for the sake of earning political and social recognition from the society. However, assessing from the victim's lens, we can draw out some positive affirmation for resorting into such a drastic measure at that point of time. The belief system of the hilltribes were very strict, they follow all the Genna religiously and holistically. In connection with this, it was the duty of the warrior to protect their territory from the attack of the enemies. At times of war, the women and children are well protected by the warrior if need arises to go to field. Practically the warriors are the guardian of the village, well prepared to reinforce anytime. The political structure of the village is well maintained because of the heroic contribution of the head hunters. Socially, the society get to celebrate within their group as the warriors bring the enemy's head. The weaker section of the society feels protected and safe because of the presence of the warriors.

Stones and its Momentous to the Headhunting Warriors

The significance of stone among the hill tribe of Manipur doesn't only confine to the feast of merit where the feast giver shows off his wealth and upgrade his status in the society by giving a feast. Rather stones were also used to inscribed a pictograph in some remote region of the hills. for instance, we have petroglyphs in Champhai town in Mizoram and Tharon cave (Tharon village in Tamenglong district) of Manipur. Some Specific Stone serves as a source of divine force for warriors as they sharpen their weapons before venturing out to combat their opponents. Stones were used to keep the head of the enemy.

According to TC Hodson, there are mounds of stones in most of the Tangkhul villages and a strong enigmatic force whereby the heads collected during the raid were kept for five days as the warriors observed Genna and these places are sacred. An oath made on this pile of stones is thought to be the most legally binding.⁴² Stones found in villages of Mao, Poumai and Maram Nagas are so divine to the warriors that women and children were not allow to touch and also prohibits from going near the site of the stone. Stones of big size were used by the warriors to hide themselves at times of war. Therefore, stone carries much meaning if it is observed and analyzed in depth.

Conclusion

The advent of Christianity along with stringent warning by the colonial Political agent led to the complete abolition of the headhunting tradition in the late 19th century. Despite the elimination, the history of the region can never be complete without mentioning the role played by the head hunters in consolidating the hilltribes into republican society. Nothing is known to them about the term democracy and republican, besides the practices and traditions that the ancient society follow is equivalent to it. The headhunting warriors has a special connection with stones which is termed as warrior stones. Stones serve

as magical power to them as in some region, a heap of stones which is necessary for all the warriors to stamp on in order to give them luck in head hunting raid. The belief system is very strong that no warrior goes out without sharpening their daos on specific stone which is usually placed in the yard of the headman's house in some villages. Stones that have a special attachment with the head hunters deserves to be brought to light so that the legacy will be recorded for future posterity. Memories served as a connecting point between the warriors and stone culture which in turn help in consolidating the achievements of the warriors and enhancing the history of the hill tribes. The hierarchical understanding of the colonial administrators regarding the headhunting culture led them to interpret that the head hunters were barbaric and savage, yet the role that the head hunters played in guarding and protecting the weaker sections of the community and the villages deserves a big respect and appraisal in the indigenous history. Despite the negative civilization discourse of colonial ethnographers, the exuberance and pride that were brought to the villages needs to be recognized by preserving the various material existing till date. The memories of the warriors in the form of folklores needs to rethink in our academic milieu as we can see the stones and wood structures erected to commemorate their achievements in many of the hilltribe villages of Manipur.

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