

The Eternal Nature Of Stone: Oral Narratives And Megalithic Traditions Among The Karbi Tribe Of Kamrup Metropolitan District Of Assam

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Abstract

This paper explores the oral narratives and belief systems surrounding the megalithic traditions of the Karbi people in the Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam. The Karbi tribe hold a deep-rooted belief in the eternal and unchanging nature of stone, viewing it as the most enduring element in the natural world. The study employs a qualitative ethnographic methodology, drawing upon fieldwork that includes interviews with Karbi elders and participation in local rituals. It aims to explore the Karbi belief in the eternal nature of stone through oral narratives, and to study how these oral beliefs and traditions shape and sustain their megalithic practices. A review of relevant literature highlights that while archaeological and historical studies have documented megalithic sites in Northeast India, few have examined the living oral traditions that continue to inform their meaning and function in contemporary indigenous life. The paper concludes that the Karbi megalithic tradition is best understood not only through its physical structures but through the rich oral narratives that surround and animate it. This study underscores the importance of integrating oral history and indigenous knowledge into anthropological approaches to material culture.

Keywords: Karbi tribe, oral narratives, indigenous beliefs, megalithic tradition and cultural continuity.

Introduction

The Karbi people of Assam, one of the prominent indigenous communities in Northeast India, uphold a unique megalithic tradition deeply rooted in spirituality and oral storytelling. At the heart of their belief system is the idea that stone, due to its enduring and unchanging nature is more than just a physical object, it represents permanence, memory, and a spiritual

connection to ancestors. In Karbi cosmology, stone is seen as the most lasting element in nature resistant to decay, weather, and time. This belief has led the Karbi tribe to use stone as a sacred medium to honour their ancestors by erecting megaliths as spiritual resting places after death. The tradition of building megalithic monuments is not exclusive to the Karbis but is found among various tribal communities worldwide. In Northeast India, these monuments are often part of elaborate rituals and carry deep symbolic meanings. Among the Karbi tribe, erection of megaliths especially during important ceremonies like the Chomangkan serves not just as a remembrance of the deceased, but as a way to ensure the presence of their spirits among the living. These stones act as bridges between generations, linking the past and present through ritual, belief, and storytelling. Among the Karbis, oral traditions are essential for understanding the meaning behind these stone monuments. Their stories often describe how stone outlasts all other materials making it the ideal symbol of permanence and the chosen home for ancestral spirits. Authors such as Bezbaruah (2003) documented megalithic practices among the Karbi of Karbi Anglong. Choudhary (2004) classified the types of megaliths found in Dimoria, including menhirs, dolmens, table stones, and stone seats. Marak (2012) studied megaliths in the Jaintia Hills and found diverse forms and purposes across different communities. Sharma (2014) argued that megaliths in Northeast India remain deeply embedded in ritual and community life. Bora and Bezbaruah (2018) explored megalithic traditions across Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, revealing their cultural richness and variety. Gogoi (2019) examined megalithic practices among the Wancho and Nocte tribes. Despite this extensive body of research, there remains a gap in scholarly attention to the oral traditions specifically associated with megaliths. While archaeological surveys offer valuable data, they often overlook how indigenous communities experience and interpret these stones in the present. For the Karbis, oral narratives are not just historical records they are performative acts that preserve identity, reinforce social values, and make sense of the spiritual world. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the oral narratives that surround megalithic practices among the Karbi people of Kamrup Metropolitan District, highlighting the ongoing cultural life of these ancient traditions. This study focuses on the oral stories of the Karbi people in Kamrup Metropolitan District that connect stone to the spirit world. It looks at how these beliefs have shaped their tradition of building megaliths and helped keep the practice alive over time. These oral narratives play an important role in maintaining a strong bond between the living and their ancestors. By exploring these beliefs, the paper also helps us understand how the Karbi people view time, memory, and the lasting nature of objects. Overall, the study adds to wider

anthropological discussions about how material things like stone hold meaning in culture and memory.

Objectives

1. To understand the Karbi belief in the eternal nature of stone as expressed through oral narratives in Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam.
2. To understand how oral beliefs and traditions shape, transmit and sustain the Karbi megalithic traditions of Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative ethnographic approach, focusing on the oral narratives and cultural practices of the Karbi community related to megalithic traditions. Fieldwork was carried out in Karbi-inhabited regions of Assam, where the researcher engaged in quasi-participant observation during community events and rituals. Oral history collection formed the core of the methodology. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with Karbi elders, ritual specialists (kathar), and village head (banthe) to document narratives surrounding the spiritual significance of stone and its role in housing the souls of the deceased. These narratives were recorded, translated, and transcribed for analysis. The collected data were examined using interpretive and thematic analysis methods grounded in symbolic anthropology.

Secondary sources including ethnographies, archaeological reports, and anthropological studies on megalithic cultures and oral traditions were reviewed to contextualize the findings and draw comparisons with similar practices among other indigenous groups in Northeast India. This methodological framework enables a nuanced understanding of how oral beliefs and narratives shape, preserve, and transmit cultural meanings and practices associated with the Karbi megalithic tradition.

The Karbi Oral Narrative

During fieldwork among the Karbi people of Assam, the researcher had the opportunity to listen to oral narratives, observe community rituals, and speak with elders, ritual experts, and local villagers. These experiences gave the researcher a deep insight into how the Karbi community views megaliths not only as stones, but as sacred symbols of memory, identity, and connection with their ancestors. Their beliefs and practices surrounding megaliths are deeply rooted in oral tradition, and these stories continue to shape how the community relates to the past and to their spiritual world.

The most important that came up repeatedly in conversations was the Karbi belief that stone is eternal and unchanging. The village elders shared that stones do not decay,

burn, or fade like other materials. While houses fall apart, crops die, and rivers change course, the stone remains unmoved. One elder explained, "Stone is the only thing that survives everything—wind, rain, fire. Even after we are all gone, the stone will still be there." This belief has led the Karbis to see stone as the perfect medium to hold the memory and spirit of their ancestors.

The Karbi people believe that after a person dies, their spirit does not completely leave the world. Instead, it continues to exist in a different form and needs a proper space to rest. That space is created through the erection of a megalith a large stone placed as a memorial. This stone becomes the spiritual home of the departed soul. It is not just a grave marker, but a sacred vessel through which the living can feel the presence of their loved ones.

All of these beliefs are not written in any book or text. They are passed down orally through generations. Researcher observed that elders play a major role in preserving and teaching these oral stories. They speak about the origin of stone worship, the importance of remembering the dead, and the correct ways of performing rituals. These oral narratives are rich in symbolic meaning. There is a story about how the first stone was erected after the great flood in ancient times, to remember those who had died. This story, though mythical in nature, helps explain why stone is still used today to keep the memory of ancestors alive. The community uses stories, songs, and ritual speeches to share these beliefs, especially during the Chomangkan, a traditional mortuary ceremony that may take place months or years after someone's death. During this ceremony, the name of the deceased is chanted, offerings are made, and the megalith is erected in their honour. The entire process is filled with symbolic language and oral expressions that reflect the Karbi worldview. It is through these words that the memory of the dead is made alive and the bond between the living and the spirit world is strengthened.

The erection of a megalith is not a simple or private act, it is a collective community effort. Families often consult with ritual specialists and elders before choosing a site, selecting the stone, and preparing for the ritual. On the day of the ceremony, villagers gather, songs are sung, animals are sacrificed, and food is shared. Researcher witnessed that this event is not only about mourning, it is also a celebration of the life and legacy of the deceased. Children are taught to recognize the stone as a part of their family history. They are told, "This is the stone of your grandfather. He still watches over you." These practices show that megaliths are not separate from daily life. In many places, researcher saw megaliths standing near homes or in the centre of the village. People pass by them every day, and some even offer flowers or food occasionally. These acts show that the stone is not a dead object, it is seen as a living symbol of

the ancestors. The megalith serves as a bridge between the past and the present, between the seen and the unseen.

Through fieldwork investigation, it became clear that oral narratives are essential to how the Karbi tribe preserve and transmit their cultural knowledge. Since many Karbis rely more on oral memory than written texts, these stories carry deep value. The words of the elders are considered wise and sacred. Children learn not only history, but also moral values, family lineages, and spiritual beliefs through these stories. The stories surrounding stone are especially powerful because they carry multiple meanings. They teach about respect for ancestors, belief in the unseen world, and the importance of cultural continuity. Through these stories, the younger generation learns to respect the rituals and understand why the megaliths matter. They come to see the stones not just as part of the landscape, but as part of who they are.

Discussion

The oral narratives and megalithic traditions of the Karbi people offer a valuable lens through which we can understand how indigenous communities construct memory, spirituality, and identity through material culture. As observed during fieldwork, the Karbi belief in the eternal nature of stone is not merely a practical observation about its physical durability, but a deeply symbolic idea that forms the foundation of their ancestral rites and worldview. What stands out in the Karbi tradition is the intimate link between oral belief and physical practice. The stories told by the elders are not abstract myths but living guides that shape how people relate to the dead, perform rituals, and interact with their environment. In this way, oral narratives serve both as cultural memory and spiritual instruction. The erection of a megalith is thus not just a ritual duty but a meaningful act that expresses the community's belief in continuity between the past and present.

The Karbis' use of stone as a dwelling place for the spirits of the deceased echoes broader anthropological understandings of how material objects serve as mediators between the living and the spiritual world. Among them, the megalith is more than a sign, it is seen as a living presence, a site of memory, and a source of guidance and protection. This belief also reveals the holistic worldview of the Karbi people, in which nature, ancestors, and human beings are interconnected. The stone, though inanimate, is seen as a vessel for the soul, a permanent home that keeps the memory of the dead rooted in the landscape. This stands in contrast to modern, often impersonal methods of memorialization, highlighting the unique and enduring role of indigenous knowledge systems in shaping identity and belonging.

Furthermore, the role of oral tradition in maintaining this belief system cannot be overstated. In the absence of written records, the Karbi rely on storytelling, ritual chants, and intergenerational teaching to preserve their customs. The emphasis on the importance of oral history in sustaining cultural identity among indigenous communities. Through these stories, values are passed on, identities are shaped, and the cultural meaning of the megaliths is kept alive.

The communal aspect of the megalithic tradition also reinforces social cohesion and collective memory. Rituals like the Chomangkan not only honour the dead but bring together the community to celebrate shared values, histories, and relationships. Such gatherings strengthen the bonds between families and reaffirm the importance of ancestral respect in Karbi society. The Karbi practice of megalith erection is a powerful example of how oral tradition, ritual performance, and material culture come together to sustain indigenous worldviews. The belief in the permanence of stone is not just about the stone itself, it is about the enduring presence of the ancestors, the strength of communal memory, and the resilience of cultural identity in the face of change.

Conclusion

The oral narratives surrounding megaliths among the Karbi people reflect a profound cultural understanding of memory and ancestral connection. This study has shown that the Karbis do not view stone merely as a material object, but as a sacred medium that holds the presence and spirit of the departed. The belief in the eternal nature of stone passed down through generations through oral tradition has shaped a living practice in which megaliths serve as spiritual homes for ancestors, linking the past with the present.

Through fieldwork became evident that these traditions are still actively practiced and deeply respected within the community. Death Rituals and the communal act of erecting megaliths reaffirm the Karbis' connection to their ancestors and strengthen social bonds. Oral narratives play a central role in preserving and transmitting these beliefs, presents treasured insight into how indigenous knowledge systems continue to thrive without written records. By analysing these beliefs and practices through an anthropological lens, it is clear that the Karbi megalithic tradition is not just a remnant of the past, but a vibrant expression of cultural identity, spiritual continuity, and communal memory. This study emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing oral traditions as key sources of indigenous knowledge and highlights the need for further research that bridges material culture with living belief systems.

PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1: Royal megalithic site at Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam.



Figure 2: Megalithic site in one of the villages of the study area.

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