



**SOCIETY, MEMORY AND STONE MONUMENTS OF THE ZEME
NAGAS**

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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**SOCIETY, MEMORY AND STONE MONUMENTS OF THE ZEME
NAGAS**

**By
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Submitted
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
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NAGALAND UNIVERSITY
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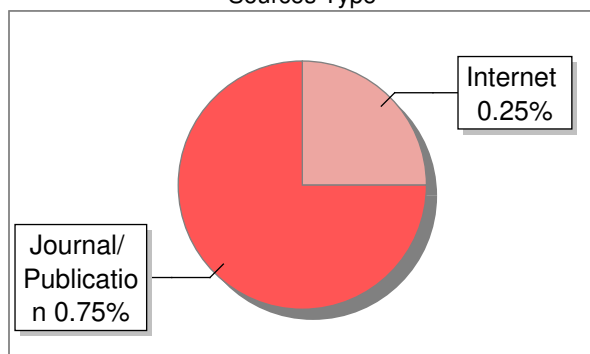
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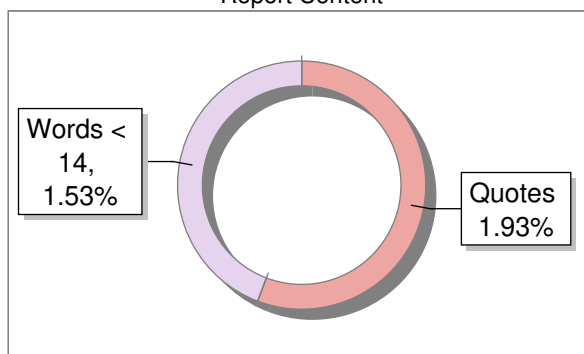
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This is to certify that the research data presented in this accompanying dissertation titled, *Society, Memory and Stone Monuments of the Zeme Nagas* has been carried out by Ms. Keyilam bearing Regd. No. PhD/ HAR/ 00062 under my guidance and supervision.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

The present research seeks to examine three key aspects of Naga stone monuments, with special emphasis on the monuments of Zeme Naga community, who currently inhabits the region of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. A total of twelve Zeme villages have been sampled for this research with four villages chosen from each of the three states under consideration. Scholarly engagement with megalithic research expanded significantly since the mid-1980s particularly following the publication of *Des dolmens pour les morts (Dolmens for the dead)* by Roger Joussaume, which marked a significant contribution to the global discourse on megalith. Late in the year 2003, the previous work was updated in a form of a book, *Les Charpentiers de la Pierre (Carpenters of Stone)*. Subsequent developments—most notably the 2003 international conference on megalithic cultures held in Nara, Japan—facilitated the synthesis of archaeological findings from diverse continental contexts, thereby fostering a more integrated, albeit still fragmented, understanding of megalithic phenomena (cited in Luc Laporte et al., 2002). Despite increased academic attention over the past two decades, research on megaliths remains unevenly distributed, particularly in geographically peripheral or previously overlooked regions. Differences in academic traditions, methodological frameworks, and epistemological orientations contribute to the disparate nature of megalithic studies across different regions.

While the term "megalith" is widely recognized, its interpretation diverges considerably depending on local context and scholarly perspective. It is now well established that megalithic monuments were erected across distinct temporal and spatial settings—often in remote areas and frequently by culturally unrelated groups. The same heterogeneity is observable among the scholars and archaeologists who

study these structures, further underscoring the complex, multifaceted nature of megalithic research (see Laporte et al., 2022).

Historically, the term was introduced by antiquarians to describe a distinct class of monuments in Western and Northern Europe, characterized by large, undressed stones, and often referred to in Celtic terminology as dolmens, cromlechs, and menhirs (Childe, 1947, p.5). There are others who further expanded the definition of megalithic to include any constructions involving large, roughly-dressed stone slabs (Daniel, 1962). However, the term is not exclusively associated with large stones, as smaller stones and even materials such as wood have, in some contexts also been classified as megalithic when used for specific purposes, such as the worship of ancestral spirits but associated with similar functions such as feasting (Marak, 2012; also see Jamir & Müller, 2022).

In India, research on the stone monuments and burials commonly known as ‘megaliths’ or *pandukals* or *pandukulis* was initiated in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Babington discovered a rock-cut burial chamber in Malabar, which marked the beginning of significant interest in megalithic sites (Babington, 1823). Since then, a number of megalithic sites have been reported from South and the Deccan and some few from North-western, central and the Eastern region (cited in Jamir, 2004). In South India, "megalithism" is attributed to a burial tradition that had its origin in the Iron Age and continued to be popular till the early historic period and perhaps survived even beyond (Joussaumme, 1985). While not all burial types are strictly "megalithic," other forms such as urn and pit burials are categorized as such due to the shared cultural context and material culture linked to these burial practices. In comparison, megalithic monuments in Europe can be traced back to the Neolithic period, while in Southeast Asia, and the Far East, use of such monuments emerged during the Bronze Age (Joussaumme, 1985).

In the context of Northeast India, “megalithism” occupies a position of considerable archaeological and anthropological significance, with a wide distribution of monuments across the region. This cultural phenomenon persisted as a living tradition in several areas until relatively recent historical periods. J.P. Mills (1933) emphasizes the prominence of Assam’s megalithic heritage, describing it as an archaeological feature of global relevance. Extensive investigations into the megalithic

traditions of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have been undertaken by a number of scholars, including Godwin-Austen (1872), Gurdon (1914), Mawlong (2004, 2009), and Mitri (2004, 2005, 2009, 2016, 2024). In Manipur, significant ethnoarchaeological contributions have been made by O.K. Singh (1985) and Binodini Devi (2004, 2011, 2019, 2020), whose research has focused extensively on the continuities of living megalithic traditions among indigenous communities such as the Anal, Mao, Maram, and Poumai Naga. More recent scholarship has built upon Devi's foundational work, extending the study of megalithic monuments through the application of diverse theoretical frameworks. These subsequent studies have provided a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the region's megalithic culture. Notable among these are the works of Maringmei Philip (2017a, 2017b, 2024), Oinam Premchand Singh (2023a, 2023b, 2024), and Jiangampou (2024), whose research collectively reflects a progressive shift in methodological approaches and interpretive paradigms within the domain of Manipur's megalithic research.

Similarly, in Nagaland, foundational ethnographic and archaeological studies were conducted by British colonial anthropologists. Notable among these are the works of Hutton (1922a, 1922b, 1926a, 1926b, 1927, 1965), Mills (1931, 1933), Mills and Hutton (1929), and Fürer-Haimendorf (1938, 1939, 1969, 1989). Their documentation on the ritual practices of stone pulling ceremony, feasts of merit, and the various types of monuments and their meanings, photo archives etc remains a critical archival source for understanding early twentieth-century megalithic traditions in the region. Following a period of relative scholarly dormancy, a resurgence in academic interest has emerged in recent decades. This contemporary phase is characterized by a methodological shift towards interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate both ethnographic inquiry and archaeological analysis. Recent scholarship moves beyond descriptive documentation to examine megalithic traditions from a socio-political, spatial, and landscape-based perspectives. This has led to more nuanced interpretations of monumentality and its role within indigenous epistemologies and cultural landscapes. Recent contributions reflecting these new approaches include the works of Dewar (1966), W. Jamir (1998, 2014), T. Jamir (2004, 2006, 2008, 2015, 2019, 2024), Z. Venuh (2005, 2008), Khongreiwo (2014), Wangjin (2014), and Wunderlich (2019, 2021, 2022). These studies collectively expand the

analytical scope of megalithic research in Nagaland, providing critical insights into its contemporary relevance and historical transformations. The recent excavation on the Konyak monuments along with a team from Kiel University and Nagaland University is expected to throw some interesting insights on the chronology and use of some monuments among the Konyaks of Mon District, Nagaland (T. Jamir, Personal Communication, September 9, 2025).

1.2. Origin Myth of the Zeme and Migration

This study examines the Zeme Nagas, a subgroup within the broader Zeliangrong community, residing across the northeastern Indian states of Nagaland, Assam (particularly in the North Cachar sub-division, now Dima Hasao Autonomous Council), and Manipur. Within Nagaland, members of this group commonly identify as Zeliang, whereas those in Assam and Manipur predominantly use the ethnonym 'Zeme'. In order to situate this study within a broader ethnohistorical framework, it is necessary to provide a concise overview of the Zeliangrong people's origins and the oral history of their early settlements.

The Zeliangrong constitute a major tribal confederation among the Naga communities and comprise three closely related groups: the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei. Similar to the other Naga groups, in the absence of written records, the early history is completely passed down orally from one generation to the next in the form of folklore, folksongs and tales. As Jan Vansina (1985) observes, "Oral tradition is historical evidence. It is a verbal message which is reported statement from the past beyond the present generation" (Vansina, 1985, p.27). According to the oral traditions prevalent among these communities, the three cultural groups are believed to have descended from three brothers, thus suggesting a shared ancestral origin. A foundational element of their mytho-historical narrative involves the emergence of their forebears from a cave known as 'Hecumle'. Numerous theories have been proposed regarding the migratory trajectories and settlement patterns of the Zeliangrong people. Among these, a widely cited oral tradition posits that the group traces its origins to a site identified as *Hecumle cave*, believed to be associated with Makhel village. Following this point of emergence, the community is believed to have successively occupied a series of locations, beginning with Makhel, followed by Kieza

(also known as Khezakeno), Nkuilongdi/Makuilongdi, Heriere, Ze, and subsequently Mnuire, prior to their eventual dispersion into other regions corresponding to present-day Assam and Nagaland and the western part of Manipur.

At Makuilongdi, oral accounts identify Nguibe as the progenitor of the Zeliangrong lineage, who fathered three sons: Namhegang (ancestral father of Zeme), Keding (ancestral father of Liangmai) and Nrembangbe (ancestral father of Rongmei). It is reported that the Rongmei ancestors departed from Makuilongdi with their respective groups in pursuit of agriculturally viable terrain. And the forefathers of the Zeme and Liangmai migrated to Mnuire, where they are believed to have established a substantial settlement consisting of approximately of a thousand households. The community is described as having flourished, with frequent feasting and socio-cultural activities, as evidenced by the presence of numerous standing stones across the surrounding landscape.

The settlement at Mnuire was ultimately abandoned. According to oral sources, the site is reported to have undergone cycles of abandonment and resettlement on seven separate occasions. Following the abandonment of Mnuire, the ancestral groups of the Zeme and Liangmai are said to have dispersed further into various other locations. Despite variations in the specific names and sequences of locations cited in different versions of the oral tradition, a consistent motif across the narratives is the identification of Makhel and Makuilongdi (Senapati district, Manipur), as a central ancestral settlement. From this site, various segments of the population are said to have dispersed in numerous directions, giving rise to the contemporary Zeliangrong communities across the region. Of particular note is the abandoned village of Mnuire situated above what is now Ze or Yangkhullen village, which is regarded by some narratives as a critical point of dispersal, particularly for those who eventually settled in present-day Nagaland, western part of Manipur and the Dima Hasao district of Assam.

1.3. Origin of Zeme Stone Monuments and Recent Practices

Similar to other Naga communities, the Zeme people uphold a longstanding tradition of erecting stone monuments. However, due to absence of written historical records, the precise origin of the stone monuments remains undocumented. In the absence of

written sources, the material evidence—such as standing stones and stone platforms—serves as the primary source of this cultural practice. The monuments that exhibit extraordinary weathering marks on the stone surfaces indicate that this area had been inhabited for a significant period, similar to other Naga villages where stone monuments remain have been reported (Devi, 2011; Philip, 2017). Supplementing the material record are oral narratives transmitted across generations, either through direct experiential accounts or intergenerational storytelling by village elders.

In this context, the village of Makhel emerges as a site of particular ethnographic and historical significance. While the duration of Zeme occupation in Makhel remains uncertain, the community traces its ancestral settlement to this location. The village and its surrounding regions hold considerable cultural and historical importance for the broader Tenyimi Naga group, which includes the Mao, Maram, Poumai, and Angami communities, among others. These groups are primarily located in the Indian states of Nagaland and Manipur, and they regard Makhel as an early settlement area (Nepuni, 2010).

These monuments are often scattered across the landscape, with some representing the remnants of ancient settlements, while others are associated with burial practices and commemorative rituals. The stones vary in size, with larger slabs typically reflecting the economic status of the family commissioning the monument (Bower, 1952). The process of erecting these stones often involves large communal efforts, particularly during stone-pulling ceremonies, which serve both practical and ritual purposes. Donors of these stones are traditionally obligated to provide feasts for the community, including meat and rice beer. The purposes of these monuments include village foundation, commemoration, and the marking of ritual spaces, as well as memorializing the dead.

Monoliths, dolmens, and cairns are commonly found in the Zeme area. At the same time, there are also reports of large megalithic jars in the North Cachar Hills, initially documented by Mills and Hutton (1932), Bower (1952), and later by Thakuria et al. (2015). Although these relics may not have direct historical connections to the Zeme of North Cachar, the study of these stone jars offers valuable insights into the broader cultural and technological practices of past communities that once inhabited

the region, potentially reflecting interactions between the Zeme and other technologically complex groups.

Construction of monuments encompasses a complex interplay of cultural practices, social interactions, and material processes, thereby embedding collective memories within their physical form. Unlike ephemeral structures, the durability of stone monuments facilitates the transmission of memory not only across generations but also through the continuum of cultural history. This enduring quality positions such monuments as critical repositories of both individual and communal historical narratives. Blackburn (2008), articulates this concept effectively in one of his articles, *The Stories Stones Tell: Naga Oral Stories and Culture*, noting that, “Naga stones tell, or told, many types of stories. Some stones mark the origin and dispersal of tribes and subgroups, while some are characteristics in legends of war and still others are associated with less dramatic historical events; then there are the magic stones that generate tales about those who use or abuse them. Social memory is also inscribed in the large memorial stones dragged and set up to mark the performance of a feast of merit, while smaller stones stand as memorials to characters in tales and legends” (Blackburn, 2008, p.265).

Monuments often serve as memorials that reflect personal and collective identities. For instance, the decision to erect a monument in honour of an individual or their ancestors frequently considers the daily routes traversed by the deceased, particularly everyday pathways commonly used by the community. This spatial consideration underscores the relationship between the monument’s location and the lived experiences of the individuals commemorated.

The Zeme’s feasting traditions further exemplify the social dynamics that underpin monument construction. Feasts, which require substantial resources such as livestock and rice beer, are predominantly borne by the host family. However, the broader community—including siblings, close relatives, clan members, and villagers—contributes significantly, both materially and offering labour. This practice reflects the principle of reciprocity, wherein individuals are indebted to one another for support during communal events. Such mutual assistance fosters enduring social bonds, with the expectation that support rendered during one feast will be reciprocated in future occasions. The labour and resources invested in these events not only

reinforce social cohesion but also generate shared memories, which are often recounted with enthusiasm by elders during interviews. These narratives frequently highlight the communal enjoyment of rice beer, the provision of meat, and the merrymaking that characterizes these gatherings elements that, in turn, influence the motivation for monument construction.

The structural composition of monuments extends beyond the mere arrangement of stones or river boulders within the landscape. Their construction involves extensive human labour, cultural rituals, and the collective experiences of the community, thereby cementing their significance within both personal and communal memory. As Jamir (2019) asserts, “It is the permanency of the megaliths that not only aids in inscribing people’s personal memories of their lifetime achievements but also carries a community’s shared memories of the past to the future” (Jamir, 2019, p.138). The process of monument erection—from the series of communal feasts to the arduous task of quarrying, the performance of rituals, and the final erection—constitutes a multifaceted endeavour. This process not only establishes a tangible identity for the individual commemorated but also strengthens social bonds within the community, thereby inscribing new memories into the collective consciousness of the Zeme community.

1.4. Previous Research

The existing body of literature concerning the Zeme Nagas and their megalithic traditions remains notably limited. Early accounts by both colonial ethnographers and indigenous scholars provide only fragmented references, with few works engaging in a sustained, systematic investigation of the Zeme megalithic tradition. Consequently, this review first outlines broader research on the megalithic traditions of the Nagas and other communities across Northeast India, followed by a focused discussion on works directly related to the Zeme Nagas.

The widespread occurrence of megaliths in Northeast India was first acknowledged in colonial literature. Mills (1933) observed that Assam’s wealth of megalithic structures constituted a unique archaeological feature of international significance. One of the earliest documented accounts comes from Henry Walters, a British magistrate in Dhaka, who in 1828 described hundreds of stone monuments in

the Khasi Hills, later identifying them as tombs (Walters 1832). Subsequent colonial authors, including Henry Yule (1844), Godwin-Austen (1872, 1874, 1876), C.B. Clarke (1874), and P.R.T. Gurdon (1914), made observations on the megaliths of the Khasi-Synteng.

In Manipur, early references to megaliths can be found in the works of Godwin-Austen (1872) who mentioned in his work about the standing stones among the Maram Nagas, while Watt (1887) described the practices of constructing memorial tombs with carved wooden pillars hung with the skulls of animal heads killed during the funeral feast of a rich man particularly among the Tangkhul Nagas. Comparable ethnographic data is also found in Stack and Lyall's (1908) documentation of Karbi funerary rites, which culminated in the erection of stone monuments. Playfair (1909) discussed the Garo people, noting the absence of stone monuments and the preference for wooden memorials being erected. Among the Mizo's, Lt. Col. John Shakespear (1912) and N.E. Parry (1932) provided early descriptions of stone monuments among the Lushai and Mara communities, respectively. Stocks (1927) added to this corpus by describing stone erections among the Lepchas of Sikkim as part of peace treaties.

Later scholarship has progressively moved beyond descriptive ethnography to engage with more analytical concerns, including typological classification, socio-political functions, symbolic and ritual significance of megalithic monuments (Bareh 1981; Syiemlieh 1981; Mawlong 1996; Mitri 1998, 2016; Bezbaruah 2003; Choudhary 2004; Malsawmliana 2011, 2019; Burke 2014; Marak 2013a, 2013b). These studies examine the megaliths within broader frameworks such as monumentality, village polity, and socio-economic transformation.

Significant archaeological excavations in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have yielded important chronological data. Excavations at Marakdola by S.N. Rao (1977) assigned a post-Neolithic date of calAD 1213-1442 (Rao 1977: 202), while sites such as Lawnongthroh and Myrkhan indicate dates ranging from the 5th century AD to the 1st century BC (Mitri et al. 2015; Mitri 2019b:15). Prokop and Suliga (2013) obtained calibrated radiocarbon dates of calAD 386-15 and calAD 882-1015 from iron smelting sites at Nongkrem and Raitkteng, respectively (All date calibrated using OxCal 4.4).

The initial references to megaliths among the Nagas date to the mid-19th century, coinciding with the colonial administrative presence in the region. Early

observations by Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen (1872–73), R. Brown (1874), R.G. Woodthorpe (1882), J. Johnstone (1896), J. Shakespear (1917), and L.W. Shakespear (1914) were largely descriptive accounts, embedded in travelogues and administrative records. However, T.C. Hodson's, in his monograph, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911) marks a departure from these earlier works through a more systematic classification of megalithic monuments among the Naga tribes of Manipur. Along with the important details presented, he gave details of the dimension of the eighteen standing stones at Uillong (Willong), the distance between each stone was measured and orientation of the monuments was noted (Hodson, 1911, p.187).

A more scholarly engagement with Naga megaliths began with J.H. Hutton, whose work throughout the 1920's (1921a-b, 1922a-b, 1923, 1926 a-b, 1928, 1929a-b, 1933) provided a detailed ethnographic and theoretical framework. Hutton emphasized the role of megaliths in social organization, particularly their association with the feast of merit—a mechanism for status acquisition, communal cooperation, and redistribution. Similarly, in Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf work (1938, 1939, 1969, 1976, 1989) though it was mainly on the Konyak Nagas, nonetheless he documented the social, ritual, and mnemonic functions of megaliths, later noting their transformation under the influence of Christianity and modernity.

Stephen Dewar (1966) provided a detailed account of the erection of megaliths among the Angami Nagas, offering rich ethnographic descriptions of the various stages of the ceremonial process and its symbolic significance. Binodini Devi doctoral dissertation titled, *Studies on the Megalithic Remains of Manipur* (1993) further contributed to the understanding of the distribution and typological diversity of megaliths across multiple Naga and Kuki groups, proposing a structural classification of seven major megalithic forms. It provided comprehensive insights into the living and ancient megalithic culture of the region.

Subsequent studies by Watijungshi Jamir (1997, 1998, 2014) and Tiatoshi Jamir (2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2015, 2019, 2024) have advanced the field significantly. Watijungshi's typo-functional analysis among the Angami, Rengma, and Chakhesang Nagas explored their cultural affinities. Tiatoshi Jamir's work introduced new theoretical and methodological approaches, integrating archaeological evidence with ethnographic and historical data to argue for ideas relating mortuary practices,

monuments, monumentality and social structure among Naga groups. His collaborative research with national and international institutions positioned Nagaland in a significant locus of megalithic research in the global archaeological map.

Additional ethnographic and archaeological studies have focused on specific communities. Jonali Devi and Dhiraj Neog (2014) documented the megalithic practices of the Lotha Nagas, while Rammathot Khongreiwo (2014) examined the socio-religious significance of monuments among the Angamis and Chakhesangs. W. Wangjin (2014) conducted a comparative study of the Konyak and Angami megaliths, emphasizing the role of monuments as carriers of collective memory and cultural identity.

Jelle J.P. Wouters (2019) proposed a sociology of megaliths, arguing that these structures embody "social lives" and serve as essential sources for reconstructing pre-Christian Naga societies. Maringmei Philip's doctoral research (2017) involved extensive fieldwork among multiple Naga communities, with detailed documentation of live megalith-building events and their associated rituals, social organization, and material logistics.

The work of Maria Wunderlich (2019, 2020, 2021), especially her book *Megalithic Monuments and Social Structures: Comparative Studies on Recent and Funnel Beaker Societies* (2019) represents one of the most theoretically and methodologically rigorous contributions in recent times. Her studies introduced quantitative and comparative analyses of stone shapes, sizes, and village layouts among Angami and Chakhesang communities, drawing parallels with societies such as those in Sumba. Her study is a combination of both archaeological and ethnoarchaeological research. She characterized Naga social structure as an "anarchist form of social organization" and emphasized the complex interplay of economic inequality, cooperation, and symbolic capital in megalithic practices.

Inspired by Wunderlich methodology, Oinam Singh (2022) undertook a comprehensive archaeological and ethnographic study of the southern Naga Hills. His research provided reproducible datasets, spatial mapping, and quantitative analyses of megalithic monuments, underscoring the continued relevance of these structures in contemporary cultural identity and social memory.

The earliest reference to Zeme stone monuments can be traced back to Hutton's work, published in 1922 in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* under the title *The Meaning and Method of Erection of Monoliths by the Naga Tribes*. Hutton noted that the Zeme people considered it taboo to erect a monolith without its companion stone. He went on to say that unlike the Angami Nagas, the Zeme did not place the stones side by side; instead, the female stone was often erected in the form of a dolmen, marking a unique distinction in their megalithic practices.

Further contributions were made by Hutton in his 1926 work, *Dairies of the Two Tours of the Unadministered Areas of the Naga Hills*, where he described the menhirs, dolmens, and sitting platforms found in Zeme villages. He also observed that the menhirs and sitting platforms were sometimes associated with tanks excavated to hold water, indicating the multifunctional nature of these structures in the Zeme social and ritual landscape and their traditional worldview.

In 1930, J.P. Mills, a British civil servant and ethnographer, published an article titled *An Ancient Stone Image in Assam* in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. Mills reported the discovery of a water-worn stone slab in Peisa village in the North Cachar Hills, Assam. The slab was carved to represent a female figure, complete with features such as a face, breasts, and genitalia, along with curious natural holes. The stone was highly revered by the villagers, who believed it promoted fertility in both humans and animals, as well as the prosperity of crops. Mills also mentioned the presence of twelve monoliths in the same village. Although the villagers attributed the carved stone to a man who had created it in memory of his mistress, Mills speculate that it could be the work of a vanished race that once inhabited the region and left behind a sophisticated stone culture.

Another significant contribution came from Ursula Graham Bower, a pioneering anthropologist who worked extensively in the Naga Hills between 1937 and 1946. Bower's (1950) unpublished M.A. dissertation and her later work, *The Naga Path* (1952), provide detailed ethnographic accounts of the Zeme in Assam. Bower (1950) research highlighted the social organization of the Zeme, emphasizing the division into two exogamous moieties, *Nriami* and *Neomi*, each subdivided into *tsami*

or extended patrilineal families. She also noted that rice was the staple crop of the Zeme and described the unique practice of *cycle migration* among the Zeme, which set them apart from other Naga tribes. Bower documented the discovery of stone rows, monoliths, slabs, and stone platforms, observing that the size of these slabs varied according to the status of the donor's family. Wealthier individuals could afford larger slabs, some of which were up to 6 feet long, 5 feet wide, and 9 inches thick, requiring the labour of 80 to 90 men to move. These stone platforms were associated with the cult of the dead, serving not only as memorials but also as gathering places for the living, such as dance spaces or even fortifications in some cases (Bower 1950, p. 25).

Binodini Devi's (1993) doctoral dissertation, *Studies on the Megalithic Remains of Manipur*, provides cursory reference to the geographical context of Ze (Yangkhullen) village. She notes that the Zemi people inhabit high-altitude regions and are traditionally associated with mountainous terrains, specifically located in the northern and northwestern areas of Senapati district. Beyond this brief mention, however, the study offers no further ethnographic or geographical elaboration concerning the Zemi community.

Zokho Venuh (2005), in his thesis, *Megaliths and Megalithic Traditions of the Chakhesang Nagas: Myths, Facts, and Interpretations*, while his thesis mainly focused on the Chakhesang Naga, he also explored Zeme megalithic practices, particularly focusing on four Zeme villages in Peren district, Nagaland. Venuh made significant efforts by categorizing Zeme megaliths based on their utility, a unique approach in the study of Zeme monoliths. He also documented various beliefs associated with stones, such as the practice in Poilwa village, where villagers attempted to land a pebble stone on top of a ten-foot-high menhir. Success in this ritual was believed to guarantee success in war, hunting, or even romantic pursuits. Venuh also elaborated on the stone selection process and compared the construction of *Renei* (sitting platforms) among the Zeme with those found in Khonoma village, suggesting that the proximity of the two villages might explain the shared cultural practices.

Arkotong Longkumer's (2007) article titled, *Religious and Economic Reform: The Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka in the North Cachar Hills* examined the impact of religious reform movements, particularly the Gaidinliu movement, on traditional Zeme practices. This work highlighted the efforts to abolish many

traditional Zeme customs, including the *Feast of Merit* and animal sacrifices, and traced the shift in village organization from an egalitarian structure to a more hierarchical one. The reform movement, which was driven by the Heraka religion, emphasized the economic and social changes within Zeme society, particularly the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of fewer individuals.

N. Venuh's (2014) volume, *People, Heritage, and Oral History of the Nagas*, mentioned on the various aspects of Zeme society, migration and social culture. It also included references to Zeme traditions, including megalithic practices, migration legends, and social norms. His work provides a broad overview of Zeme culture, offering passing references to megalithic structures as part of the tribe's rich oral and material heritage.

Anungla Aier (2018), in her book titled, *Studies on Naga Oral Tradition, Volume 1: Memories and Telling of Origin Myth and Migration* although did not explicitly made reference to the stone monuments of Zeme people, however, her research, which encompasses several Naga tribes, includes significant data pertaining to Zeliang migration narratives. Ethnographic information was collected from four Zeme villages—Tening, Peren, Benrue (Benreu), and Poilwa. Aier reports that oral traditions across these villages consistently assert a common point of ancestral origin identified as Nkuilongdi (also called Makuilongdi), located within the present-day state of Manipur. According to these oral sources, the Zeme people are believed to have migrated from this ancestral location to their current settlements.

In the 2019 joint paper of Mepusangba and Yabangri Changkiri, titled *Megalithic Monuments of the Nagas: An Ethnographic Study*, they examined the megalithic traditions of the Zeme, specifically at Nsong and Nzauna villages under Peren district. The authors categorized different megaliths based on their types and functions, concluding that there were no fixed rules governing the erection of stones. Most monuments were found inside the villages, with flat slabs and raised platforms often erected in memory of individuals such as fathers, grandfathers, or wives. Some stones, however, were erected during the individual's lifetime.

Maringmei Philip (2019) published his thesis titled *A Study on the Megalithic Monuments of the Senapati District of Manipur*, which included a detailed analysis of Zeme megaliths of Ze/Yangkhillen village in Senapati district. Philip's work

categorized the megalithic structures based on their type and distribution, offering new insights into the regional patterns on the location of stone monuments placement and their cultural significance.

Several notable archaeological excavations have been conducted in Nagaland, yielding important chronological data. One of the earliest excavations was carried out by Neinu (1983) at the Rajbari site, which produced two radiocarbon dates derived from charcoal samples: calAD 122-886 and calAD 403-1155 (Hurst & Lawn 1984: 212, 240). More recent investigations have generated additional radiocarbon dates. At Jotsoma, a wood sample was dated to calAD 1643-1917 (Jamir 2005), while at Longtrok, two dates were obtained: calAD 997-1261 and calAD 776-1217 (Jamir 2014; Jamir et al. 2014a). Further sites—Khezakeno, Movolomi, Khusomi, and Phor—associated with stone monuments, yielded radiocarbon dates of calAD 1321-1478, calAD 1420-1637, calAD 1417-1448 and calAD 1499-1906 respectively (Jamir et al. 2014b) (All dates calibrated using OxCal 4.4).

1.5. Area of Study

Given the widespread distribution of the Zeme community across the states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, the present research concentrates on a representative selection of locations within these regions (Fig. 2). Due to the extensive number of Zeme-inhabited villages, it was not feasible to include all settlements within the scope of this study. Consequently, based on preliminary data regarding the presence of stone monuments and other cultural markers, four villages were selected from each of the following administrative districts: Peren District (Nagaland), Senapati District (Manipur), and North Cachar Hills—currently referred to as Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (Assam).

In total, twelve Zeme villages were selected for a more detailed investigation. The archaeological and ethnographic data gathered from these sites yielded substantive insights into various dimensions of Zeme material culture, socio-structural organization, community feasting practices, and the cultural construction of landscape and space.

1.6. Statement of the Problem

While the stone monument traditions of the Zeme Nagas have been acknowledged in several studies, there is still a significant gap in the understanding of their complex social, cultural, and economic ties to these monumental practices. The Zeme, like other Naga tribes, have a rich tradition of erecting monuments, which are found scattered across the villages in Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. However, despite their presence in these regions, there has been very little systematic research on the nature of Zeme stone monument structures.

Previous studies have largely concentrated on the social, cultural, and religious aspects of Zeme society but have not delved deeply into the archaeology of the stone monuments, neither have they conducted comprehensive surveys to document these stone structures. Therefore, much remains to be studied in terms of an understanding of the Zeme stone monument traditions, especially their relations to the social organization, economy, feasting rituals, and land/labour relations. This research thus aims to address this gap by systematically exploring the social, economic, and ritual functions of the monuments and their role in Zeme village organization, land use, and labour distribution.

1.7. Significance of Study

Scholarly engagement with Zeme stone monuments has remained limited, with existing references largely confined to sporadic observations by colonial ethnographers and a small number of local scholars. Comprehensive and systematic research on these cultural artifacts is notably lacking. In this context, the present study seeks to make a significant contribution in the following areas:

- i). Enhanced understanding of pre-colonial Zeme society and economy through the analysis of stone monuments, thereby offering insights into sociocultural practices, belief systems, and material culture.
- ii). The research constitutes the first extensive and systematic documentation of Zeme stone monuments across the contemporary political boundaries of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, thereby filling a critical gap in the archaeological and ethnographic record of the region beyond borders.

1.8. Objectives of Study

- i). Investigate the socio-economic formation of the Zeme pre-colonial society from the stone monuments associated with Zeme oral tradition and other migration stories.
- ii). Examine the idea of monumentality, feasting activities, social hierarchies, and their association with the various types of Zeme stone monuments, meanings, and functions, and their archaeological relevance.
- iii). Ascertain the nature of monumentality, social memory, and the location of Zeme stone monuments with reference to the landscape and other popular folk beliefs.

1.9. Hypotheses

- i). The idea of megalithic tradition bears a direct relationship to the nature of the sociopolitical organizations of the Zeme Nagas.
- ii). Local landscape and its constituent features exert an influence on the locational pattern of the Zeme monuments.
- iii). The size of the monuments is linked to power, competition, labour mobilization and social networks through various layers of kinship relations.

1.10. Methodology

The research employs a combination of archaeological and ethnographic methods to explore the stone monument practices of the Zeme Nagas (Fig. 1). The conventional methods utilized are:

i). Archaeological field methods:

- **Pedestrian Surveys:** Both extensive and intensive field surveys were conducted in areas identified as potential sites for surveys following consultations with village elders. The survey areas covered twelve Zeme villages in Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, with four villages selected from each state.
- **Monument Documentation:** The size, form, orientation, and specific location of each monument were meticulously recorded. GPS (Global Positioning System) coordinates of each monument were recorded

using handheld devices to accurately map the distribution pattern of monuments within a given landscape setting. Reference to important landscape features such as rivers, streams, hilltops, valleys, wet rice terrace fields, ponds, mythical stories associated with toponyms etc were taken into consideration while examining monument locations and landscape.

- **Photo documentation:** Each monument was labelled and photographed, and recorded in an attribute sheet to document observed characteristics and other notable features of stone monument structures.

ii). Ethnographic Methods:

- **Community engagement and interviews:** Before visiting the monument sites or meeting elderly informants, permission was sought from the village council. In cases where the Council head was unavailable, permission was granted by a council member in consultation with the Head of the Council. Interviews were conducted primarily with elderly informants, both men and women, to gather insights into the oral history, social functions, and rituals associated with stone monuments. In almost all of the study site, interviews were simultaneously held with two elders at a time however, in Laisong village (Assam), a group interview of about 15 elders was organised with the assistance of a translator to overcome linguistic barriers, as the Zeme dialect can differ across regions. During fieldwork, several logistical and community-related challenges were encountered. In certain cases, council members were unresponsive to communication attempts, resulting in postponed visits. Scheduling also had to be adjusted to avoid coincides with village events, such as *genna* (ritual or festival days), during which external visitors are generally not welcomed.

Additionally, initial hesitation from some Village Councils was observed. This reluctance was rooted in prior experiences, where earlier researchers had failed to return ethnographic data collected from the community, despite assurances to do so. Moreover, instances of

misrepresentation of village culture on digital platforms such as YouTube further contributed to community mistrust. To address these concerns, assurances were provided to the Councils that any data collected would be shared with the concerned community ahead of the final submission of the research. In keeping with this commitment, the relevant portions of the research concerning their village were duly submitted prior to finalization of the thesis, allowing for community review and feedback.

Field conditions also presented considerable challenges. Poor road condition and inaccessibility of certain sites—such as the abandoned village locations of Mnuire and Pungsi (Tamphung) necessitated extensive foot trekking, often through dense vegetation and difficult terrain. Local resistance to accompany the researcher to these sites was occasionally encountered due to the physical demands of the trek and the overgrown vegetations on the pathways. These obstacles constituted some of the more significant practical difficulties experienced during the course of fieldwork.

- **Data Analysis:** In the post-fieldwork, data gathered from the interviews were analysed. In situations of any ambiguity or confusion in the oral historical and ethnographic data, follow-up phone calls were initiated to further authenticate and personal visits undertaken to confirm the nature of such traditional accounts.

iii). Archival Research:

In addition to fieldwork, relevant archival data of colonial accounts, books, journals, monographs, and vernacular records maintained by the respective villages such as souvenirs and pamphlets, were also reviewed to supplement and contextualize the field data.

iv). Use of Geographic Information System (GIS):

During fieldwork, geographic coordinates of all research sites were systematically recorded using handheld Garmin GPS devices. These coordinates facilitated the spatial documentation of each monument and served as foundational data for subsequent geospatial analyses. High-resolution

satellite imagery sourced from Google Earth was employed to identify and verify the precise locations of the monument sites. Additionally, data from ASTER Global Digital Elevation Model (GDEM) with a spatial resolution of 30m was utilized to conduct topographic assessments and analyse land- use patterns. Geographic Information System (GIS) tools, particularly *ArcGIS*, were employed to integrate field data, GPS-derived coordinates, and remote sensing outputs. This integration enabled the generation of thematic maps highlighting various spatial parameters, including elevation, settlement distribution, and land use transformation.

Furthermore, the study employed a combination of remote sensing and GIS-based methodologies to examine the spatial and ecological context of both the currently inhabited villages and the abandoned sites. These geospatial technologies provided a comprehensive framework for understanding landscape dynamics and anthropogenic influences over time.

1.11. Theoretical Framework

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of Zeme stone monuments, focusing on typology, spatial distribution, associated landscape referents, ritual practices, and the socio-cultural dynamics underlying their construction. To elucidate these dimensions, the research is structured around three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Firstly, the idea of monumentality through the lens of phenomenology (Tilley, 1994, 2004); secondly, to examine the nature of Zeme pre-colonial society, the research explores two distinct forms of social organization: segmented egalitarian ('acephalous') societies and stratified hierarchical structures (Wunderlich, 2019; Jeunesse, 2019, 2022). These comparative analyses draw upon empirical case studies drawn from the Indonesian island of Sumba, alongside ethnographic data from the Angami and Chakhesang societies of Nagaland. Finally, the work engages with Scott's theoretical framework regarding political, social, and cultural institutions designed to resist state incorporation, assessing its applicability within the context of Zeme precolonial society.

The first framework is grounded in the phenomenological approach articulated by Christopher Tilley in *Places, Paths and Monuments: A Phenomenology of*

Landscape (1994). Tilley emphasizes that phenomenology seeks to understand the manner in which individuals perceive, experience, and interpret their environment through bodily and sensory engagement. This methodological stance involves the reflexive description of spaces and material objects as they are apprehended by human subjects, with the aim of elucidating the dynamic interrelationship between people and their material surroundings. In the context of this research, Tilley's phenomenological model incorporates to analyse the spatial organisation and topographical placement of Zeme megalithic monuments. Particular attention is given to the physical and symbolic affordances of the landscape in shaping both the selection for the location of the monument sites, and the social practices associated with their construction. The objective is to investigate the rationale behind the placement of these structures, assessing how the natural environment may have shaped both the material practice of monument construction and the social meanings attributed to such underlying actions/behaviours.

The second theoretical orientation is drawn from two of Christian Jeunesse's (2019, 2022) ethnoarchaeological study on his interpretation of late prehistoric European societies drawing parallels from the Sumba context. Jeunesse (2019) distinguishes between egalitarian and stratified societies in their respective approaches to megalithic construction. In egalitarian communities, funerary dolmens tend to be modest in scale, accessible to multiple lineages, and serve as collective burial sites spanning several generations. In contrast, stratified societies produce large, ornately decorated monuments—often royal dolmens—dedicated to a limited number of elite individuals. Jeunesse (2022) argues that while variability in monument size and architectural form exists in egalitarian contexts, such variability is constrained by the normative limits imposed by egalitarian social relations. As he notes, "...the aptitude of the gap between extremes is severely limited by the egalitarian ethos that governs social relations in segmented societies" (Jeunesse, 2022, p. 354). Such conceptual framework is employed to interrogate the degree of social differentiation within Zeme society, as manifested through monumentality. It facilitates a comparative analysis of whether the Zeme megalithic tradition aligns more closely with egalitarian principles or exhibits signs of emerging stratification. In addition to this conceptual model is the work of Wunderlich (2019) on her research on the megalithic monuments, their social

structure, Funnel Beaker societies and her ethnoarchaeological studies in Southern Nagaland and the Sumba Island. She examined the acephalous nature of certain Naga societies specifically the Angami and Chakhesang villages. Wunderlich identifies three key features of acephalous societies: i) decentralized governance without a centralized leader; ii) non-hereditary, achievement-based status system; and iii) a fundamentally cooperative and collective ethos, particularly evident in communal labour and ritual.

The third theoretical framework for the present study draws upon James C. Scott's concept of state evasion, developed in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). Scott posits that many upland societies in Southeast Asia—including what he terms “Zomia”—have historically developed political, social, and cultural institutions oriented toward the avoidance of state incorporation. He suggests that such societies exhibit forms of agricultural practice, social organisation, and cultural expression that are adaptive responses to the threat of external domination. According to Scott (2009), these societies are not simply pre-state or state-less, but actively anti-state: “Hilliness instead becomes largely a state effect...such a view of hill peoples as state-repelling societies or even anti-state societies makes far more sense of agricultural practices, cultural values and social structure in the hills” (Scott, 2009, p. 128).

Scott contrasts hierarchical and egalitarian models through examples such as the Lua/Lawa and Lisu communities. In the former, elite control over land and ritual domains is maintained through hereditary privilege and public feasting, whereas the Lisu are characterised by more horizontal social structures, in which access to ritual status is mediated through competitive feasting, independent of ascribed rank. Scott's analysis is particularly instructive for this study in evaluating whether the Zeme exhibit similar socio-political strategies of decentralisation or resistance to hierarchy. Moreover, it raises the possibility that Zeme material culture, including megalithic constructions, might serve not merely as expressions of cosmological or funerary intent, but also as performative assertions of autonomy and social cohesion in the absence—or rejection—of formal state structures.

The study seeks to determine whether Zeme megalithic practices are best conceptualised as expressions of an egalitarian social ethos, as mechanisms of intra-community competition, or as material articulations of a broader strategy of political disengagement aligned with Scott's model of Zomia. Through this integrated theoretical framework, the research aims to situate Zeme monumentality within both localized and regional socio-political frameworks.

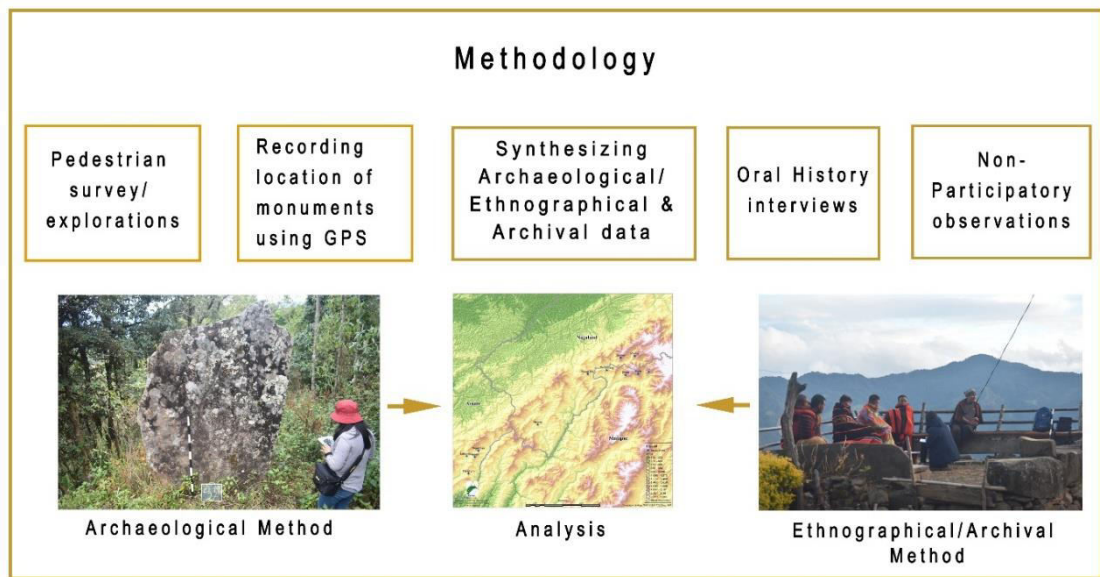


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the research methodology employed in the present study.

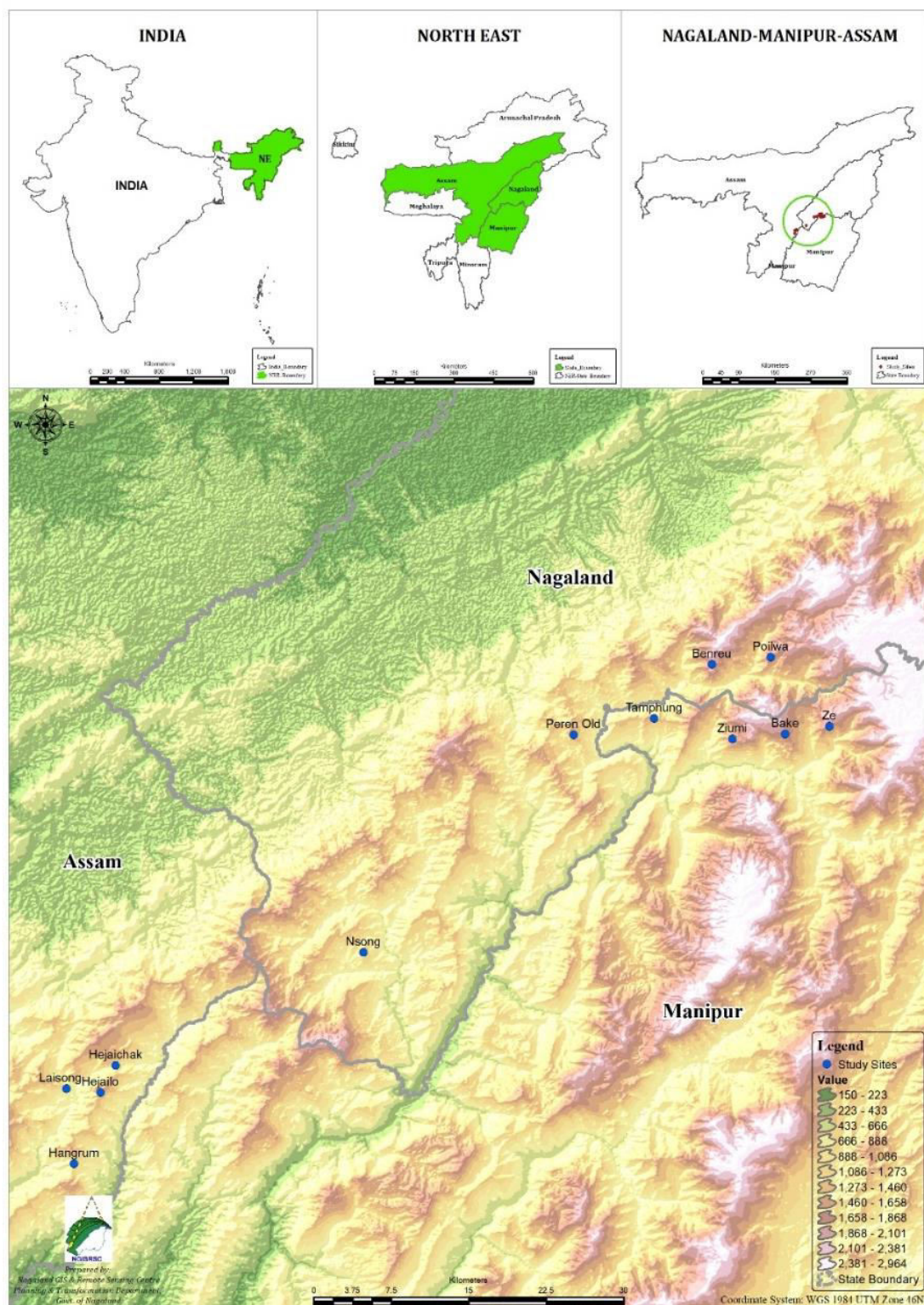


Figure 2: Map showing the study area sites covering the three states of Northeast India.

CHAPTER 2

Stone Monuments of Zeme Nagas of Nagaland

This chapter presents a systematic analysis of data pertaining to various social dimensions of stone monuments among the Zeme Nagas of Nagaland, with specific reference to four villages—Poilwa, Peren, Benreu, and Nsong—located within Peren District. The respective distances of these villages from the state capital, Kohima, are approximately 52 km, 148 km, 66 km, and 174 km. The analysis encompasses the typology and frequency of monuments, patterns of socio-economic organization, ritualized feasting practices, criteria for stone selection, associated markers of social status and accrued benefits, vernacular domestic architecture, and the spatial and mnemonic dimensions of the landscape shaped by the presence of stone monuments.

2.1. Typology of Monuments: Structural Forms and Functional Classifications

This section presents a detailed classification of monuments among the Zeme Nagas, based on their structural characteristics and functional attributions. The classification encompasses commemorative and memorial structures, pledging and ritualistic installations, and other culturally significant stone features observed in the selected villages of Peren district, Nagaland.

2.1.1. Commemorative and Memorial Stone Structures

a). *Tsusum/Menhir (Standing stones)* (Plate 1 – 6):

The term *Tsusum* is etymologically derived from two words *tsu*, signifying "stone," and *sum*, meaning "erecting." Thus, the composite term may be interpreted as "erected stone or stone erected." In local contexts, *Tsusum* refers to vertically erected monoliths, which are typically positioned either individually or in pairs. Which represent monument Type 1(A) – Type 3. Informants commonly interpret the larger stone as representing the male entity, while, the smaller signifies the female counterpart. Notably, the male stone is consistently placed on the right and the female on the left,

a spatial orientation that may be read as an embodiment of patrilineal ideology within Zeme social structure.

These monuments primarily serve commemorative functions and, in some contexts, memorial purposes. They are often linked to the completion of *feasts of merit*. For instance, in Poilwa, individuals who have completed the full sequence of such feasts erect their stones on a prepared stone platform. Conversely, those who have undertaken only partial rites but still wish to erect monuments do so with a mud platform (Plate 1), thus signifying a distinction in ritual status. And by looking at the platform it can be distinguished by the passerby that the particular platform has been built by completing the full series and the other not.

Standing stones may also commemorate individual accomplishments unrelated to feasting, such as prowess in hunting (e.g., killing wild animals including tigers) or sexual exploits. In Peren village, wooden posts were also observed to serve similar commemorative purposes. These wooden monoliths often include carved steps, each denoting a specific achievement; the number of steps thereby reflects the extent of the individual's accomplishments (Fig. 11).

Another, interesting finding which was found in the ethnographic fieldwork was the stone cluster in Peren village. In the cluster there are 422 standing stones and the largest stone within this cluster is attributed to *Kwetrie Herie*, while an adjacent stone is believed to represent his wife. Smaller stones within the same cluster are traditionally interpreted as commemorating orphans and destitute individuals raised by the couple (Plate 6).

Size variations among standing stones are considerable. The largest recorded example measures 389 cm in height, 157 cm in breadth, and 50 cm in thickness, while the smallest stands at 11 cm in height, 59 cm in breadth, and 34 cm in thickness.

b). *Stone platform* (Plate 9 – 10):

Stone platforms, locally termed *Renei* and *Neigwa* occur in geometric configurations such as circular, rectangular, and trapezoidal. The round structure is known as *Neigwa* and the other shapes are known as *Renei*. In Poilwa, these platforms are directly associated with feasting rites and may serve both commemorative and memorial purposes. In contrast, their primary use in Peren is memorial.

The informants from all the villages, claims that the circular platforms are constructed following strict ritual procedures, which also apply during subsequent repairs. Since the round structure are constructed with strict rituals, even during repairing, *hekaune pepi ketu* (translation: four legged animals e.g. like mithuns, cows) are butchered and repairing is done. These structures can be built individually or collectively by specific *clans/khel*. Average measurements include a circumference of approximately 600 cm, a diameter of 495 cm, and a height of 208 cm.

c). *Hedwa/Stone circle* (Plate 7):

Locally referred to as *Hedwa*, the term is etymologically rooted in the word denoting a “rice barn,” and specifically designates traditional local structures used for rice storage. These circular stone arrangements resemble the structural form of enlarged rice barns. They are constructed by individuals recognized for achieving the unusual rich harvest in a given agricultural season. Such monuments have been documented primarily in Peren, where five structures are identified. Their average dimensions are 914 cm in diameter and 2871 cm in circumference.

d). *Raukap/Tsukwa/Slab graves* (Plate 11):

The term is derived etymologically from two lexical words *rau*, meaning "grave," and *kap*, meaning "cover," thus conveying the notion of a grave covering. In Nsong village, the flat slab upon the burial sometimes bears engravings such as circles representing rice barns and cupules symbolizing prosperity. These structures are constructed posthumously in honour of deceased kin. The average dimension includes, 150 cm length, 120 cm breath and 15 cm thickness. In Peren village it consists of a horizontal capstone supported by small stones platform below, locally known as *Meuriele tsukwa* (Plate 20), named after the wife of a feast donor, the huge slab stone breaks into two from the middle the next day of the construction. The stone slab measures about 200 cm length, 170 cm breath and 20 cm thickness, 120 cm in vertical height of the platform.

e). *Rausam/Stone slab or Boulder* (Plate 12):

Etymologically, *Rausam* combines *rau* "grave" and *nsam* "in place of", indicating a symbolic grave. While no interment occurs beneath the stone, it serves as a representational marker, expressing the individual's desire for it to signify their grave. In Poilwa, a stone slab referred to as *Luigwamlie rausam* is situated outside the

traditional *morung Rehangki*. Although unrelated to the formal feast cycle, this stone is involved in post-feast communal rituals wherein villagers ceremonially pull the stone. During *Mileingyi* festival, young men perform feats of strength over the stone, thereby reinforcing values of unity, physical endurance, and cultural continuity. Despite being colloquially referred to as a ‘gravestone’, no human remains are interred beneath this structure. Similarly, in Benreu, a stone boulder known as *Namgumpeung Rausam* placed outside *Nsarangbe Rehangki* functions as a commemorative monument rather than a burial marker.

In Nsong village, a structurally similar but differently designated stone monument is identified as *Hezie tsu*, which translates to “achievement stone.” These stones are traditionally erected during an individual's lifetime and are exclusively associated with male members. The installation of *Hezie tsu* is typically contingent upon the individual's attainment of notable accomplishments, such as a successful agricultural yield, prowess in warfare, prominence in athletic endeavours, or, in some cases, social recognition through multiple romantic relationships. A total of five such structures were documented during fieldwork (Plate 32). One particular stone exhibited engravings of *hebau* and a series of straight lines. These markings are understood to represent the number of rice barns possessed by the individual, while the straight lines denote the number of mithuns slaughtered during ceremonial feasting events.

2.1.2. Oath-taking and Ritualistic Structures

a). *Hereupeutsu/Skull repository* (Plate 13):

The name of the boulder is etymologically derived from the terms *Hereu* “war”, *peu* meaning “head,” and *tsu*, meaning “stone.” Together, these components form the meaning *warhead stone*. It is placed outside specific traditional *Lungalang Rehangki*, which was central to ceremonial head-taking practices. It served as a repository for human trophies including skulls, ears, or tufts of hair deposited in accordance with established ritual protocols. Plate 13 depicts a boulder that has since become dislodged from its original location.

b). *Miniature stone circle* (Plate 8):

A miniature stone circle outside the *Thou Rehangki* in Benreu functions analogously to the *Hereupeutsu*, also serving as a receptacle for ritualized interment of body parts collected during head-taking times.

c). *Resu/Reset tsu/Oath* stone (Plate 16):

This oath-taking monument consists of a slab resting atop smaller stones, generally located along village footpaths in Peren. The structure is used in the context of severe disputes (e.g., theft or land disputes), wherein disputants take solemn oaths—either by striking the stone with a stick or by breaking an egg over it. The invocations accompanying these acts are:

- *Stick Oath*: “*Ih mau liecai, tsingtie kekau nzwa peuh kaulu lo*” (Translation: “If I am wrong, may I fall like this stick”).
- *Egg Oath*: “*Ih mau liecai, mruibum kepang nzwa peuh panglu lo*” (Translation: “If I am guilty, may I break like this egg”).

The average dimensions of the *Resu tsu* are 30 cm in height, 70 cm in breadth, and 68 cm in length.

2.1.3. Assorted Stone Structures

a). *Teisie/Stone receptacle* (Plate 17) The term *Teisie* is derive etymologically from *tei*, meaning "wild game," and *sie*, meaning "to notify." This linguistic composition may indicate a historical association with the announcement or ceremonial notification of meat, potentially within ritualistic, communal, or ceremonial contexts. Specifically, they are used by hunters who deposit small portions of their game perched upon the *Tambui* stem (plant species identified as having ritual significance). It displays a fragment of animal remains placed within the receptacle, indicative of its ritualistic use.

b). *Zoomorphic stones* (Plate 19 & 22): In Poilwa and Peren, natural stones resembling pig and tortoise are linked to local legends and regarded as metamorphosed beings or omens.

c). *Fetish stones* (Plate 15): Stones such as *Choloine* in Poilwa are imbued with spiritual potency. Touching these stones is considered taboo, with associated beliefs in misfortune or death. Another stone, *Hetum ga*, previously associated with fertility and prosperity, was relocated following a decline in livestock attributed to its

desecration. The *Choloine* stone is so sacred and because of its past history, it is buried below the stone boulders besides the gate.

d). *Disease-repellent stone* (Plate 28): In Benreu, a standing stone is believed to prevent the entry of diseases into the village.

e). *Engraved stones* (Plate 14 & 30): In Nsong, large stones are named or claimed by individuals and often bear engraved footprints. These stones frequently overlook fields or valleys. This natural stone served as a sitting place for the passerby and as such, it serves as a memorial structure to be remembered along with the person's name. Also seen at Peren village is an engraved footprint on a natural boulder known as *Taheung pa*.

f). *Stone water receptacle* (Plate 27): In pre-Christian times, the Zeme created water storage basins carved from natural boulders. Examples such as *Zudau* and *Swalung Peulikwak* in Benreu village are believed to be personal wash basins for the legendary figures.

g). *Kirie/Fortified village gates* (Plate 18): While they are in the strict sense not stone structures, they are nevertheless large monumental structures that are built to provide security to the settlement area. Constructed using a combination of stone boulders, pebbles, and massive timber planks, these gates provided both physical defence and spiritual protection during the headhunting era. Typically carved from a single tree, some gates measure up to 213 cm in height and 122 cm in breadth. Decorative carvings include motifs of celestial bodies, animals, and anthropomorphic figures. During periods of *genna* (ritual taboos), these gates are closed, barring all passage. Poilwa village is distinguished by the presence of five traditional gates, each corresponding to one of the village's five khels (clans or administrative units). In contrast, villages such as Peren, Benreu, and Nsong have only two gates each. Historically, the number of gates in a village such as Poilwa reflected the number of khels present; however, this correlation is not consistently observed in other villages, where the number of gates does not necessarily correspond to khel divisions.

2.1.4. Assorted Types

Tekwa/Commemorative water tanks:

Although not lithic structures in the strict sense, commemorative water tanks—locally referred to as *Tekwa* or *Rezai*—are constructed by the Zeme of Nagaland. These features function both as commemorative monuments and as mechanisms for the perpetuation of individual memory within the community. Notably, these structures are erected in honour of both male and female individuals who have successfully attained the highest levels of feasting, specifically the *Nkai Zaulu*. However ethnographic variability exists across different villages; in some context the *Tekwa/Rezai* is not explicitly linked to the formal sequence of feast. Instead, this commemorative water tanks maybe dug following communal feasting events held with close relatives and family members indicating localised interpretations and practices surrounding memorialization.

Ethnographic accounts from the village of Poilwa indicate the existence of four such *Rezai*, each representing a conjugal pair. The associated oral histories suggest that ponds were dug to commemorate both the male host and his wife, thereby recognising their joint participation in the feast of merit. Upon completion of the series of feasting, the individual responsible would convene members from both the paternal and affinal kin groups to collectively undertake the construction of the pond, a process that typically included the slaughtering of *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*). The construction of these memorial water tanks is also constructed in the name of individuals who perished in accidental fire incidents. These acts are underpinned by a belief that such commemorative efforts facilitate the spiritual liberation of the deceased (S. Rau, Personal communication, February 20, 2021).

Informants from Benreu village recount the construction of a commemorative water tank by an individual named *Idiheing*, who undertook the project following the completion of a series of feast of merit. The tank was named as *Idiheing buizai*, intended both as a watering source for mithuns (*Bos frontalis*) and as a tangible symbol of the persons legacy. According to the informants, although they did not participate directly in the construction, they recalled that the host enlisted the help of close friends and family members. The construction was marked by the slaughter of a mithun, and the tank was completed in a single day. These commemorative water tanks are occasionally constructed in memory of a deceased spouse. For instance, *Ikiale tekwa* in Benreu village was reportedly commissioned by the husband in honor of his late

wife (H. Nsarangbe & V. Meru, Personal communication, September 5, 2025). Notably, during field interviews, no specific ritual practices associated with the construction or consecration of such tanks were documented. Moreover, due to the current state of neglect, measurements and physical assessments of the structures could not be conducted.

2.2. Monument Types

For the four Zeme villages of Nagaland, the following monument types are identified in the surveyed villages:

- Type 1(A): Single standing stone (with platform) (Plate 1)
- Type 1(B): Single standing stone (without platform) (Plate 2)
- Type 1(C): Fallen menhirs (Plate 3)
- Type 2(A): Twin standing stones (with platform) (Plate 4)
- Type 2(B): Twin standing stones (without platform) (Plate 5)
- Type 3: Stone cluster (Plate 6)
- Type 4(A): *Hedwa*/Stone circle (without platform) (Plate 7)
- Type 4(B): Miniature stone circle (ritual stone) (Plate 8)
- Type 5(A): *Renei*/Stone platform (rectangular, circular, square, oval shaped structures) (Plate 9 & 10)
- Type 5(B): *Rausam*/Stone slabs on platform (Commemorative) (Plate 12)
- Type 6: *Raukap*/Slab graves (Plate 11)
- Type 7(A): Assorted Type A: *Hereupeutsu*/Skull repository (Plate 13)
- Type 7(B): Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual) (Plate 14)
- Type 7(C): Assorted Type C: Fetish stones (Monolith or flat stone slabs, or any stone structure considered sacred) (Plate 15)
- Type 7(D): Assorted Type D: *Resu tsu/Reset tsu*/Oath stone (Plate 16)
- Type 7(E): Assorted Type E: *Teisie*/Stone receptacle (Plate 17)
- Type 7(F): Assorted Type F: *Tekwa/Tekoa*/Commemorative water tanks
- Type 8: *Kirie*/Fortified village gates (Plate 18)

2.3. Overview of Monument Types

A total of 186 monuments were documented during the field investigation, encompassing 18 distinct typological categories, along with several notable features.

Types	Description of Types of Monuments	Remarks	Frequency	Percentage
Type 1(A)	Single standing stone (with platform)	Observed	9	4.84%
Type 1(B)	Single standing stone (without platform)	Observed	16	8.60%
Type 1(C)	Fallen menhirs	Observed	6	3.23%
Type 2(A)	Twin standing stones (with platform)	Observed	10	5.38%
Type 2(B)	Twin standing stones (without platform)	Observed	18	9.68%
Type 2(C)	Alignment/Stone rows	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 3	Stone cluster	Observed	1	0.54%
Type 4(A)	<i>Hedwa</i> /Stone circle (without platform)	Observed	5	2.69%
Type 4(B)	Miniature stone circle(rituals)	Observed	1	0.54%
Type 5(A)	<i>Renei</i> /Stone platform (rectangular, circular, square, oval shaped structures)	Observed	54	29.03%
Type 5(B)	<i>Rausam</i> /Stone slabs on platform (Commemorative)	Observed	7	3.76%
Type 6	<i>Raukap</i> / <i>Herautsu</i> /Slab graves	Observed	31	16.67%
Type 7(A)	Assorted Type A: <i>Hereupeutsu</i> /Skull repository	Observed	1	0.54%

Type 7(B)	Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual)	Observed	4	2.15%
Type 7(C)	Assorted Type C: Fetish stones (Monolith or flat stone slabs, or any stone structure considered sacred)	Observed	1	0.54%
Type 7(D)	Assorted Type D: <i>Resu tsu/Reset tsu</i> /Oath stone	Observed	1	0.54%
Type 7(E)	Assorted Type E: <i>Teisie</i> /Stone receptacle	Observed	4	2.15%
Type 7(F)	Assorted Type F: <i>Tekwa/Tekoa</i> /Commemorative water tank	Observed	7	3.76%
Type 8	<i>Kirie</i> /Fortified village gates	Observed	10	5.38%
Type 9	<i>Tsubau</i> /Cairn	Not observed	Nil	Nil

Table 1: Showing Types, numbers & percentage of Monuments observed in the surveyed villages of Nagaland.

Among the types of monuments, Type 3(stone cluster), comprises 422 standing monuments and is notable for its association with local oral traditions. The largest menhir within this cluster is attributed to *Kwetrie Herie*, while an adjacent stone is believed to represent his wife. Smaller menhirs within the same cluster are traditionally interpreted as commemorating followers and destitute individuals raised by the couple. Among all identified categories, Type 5 *Renei* (n=54), constitutes the most frequently occurring monument type. These platforms are circular, rectangular, square, or oval in shape and are constructed using small stones and flat stone slabs, sometimes elevated several metres above the ground surface. However, in term of numbers of monuments Type 1(A) – Type 3(n=60) which consist of the standing stones are in largest number though they are in different typology.

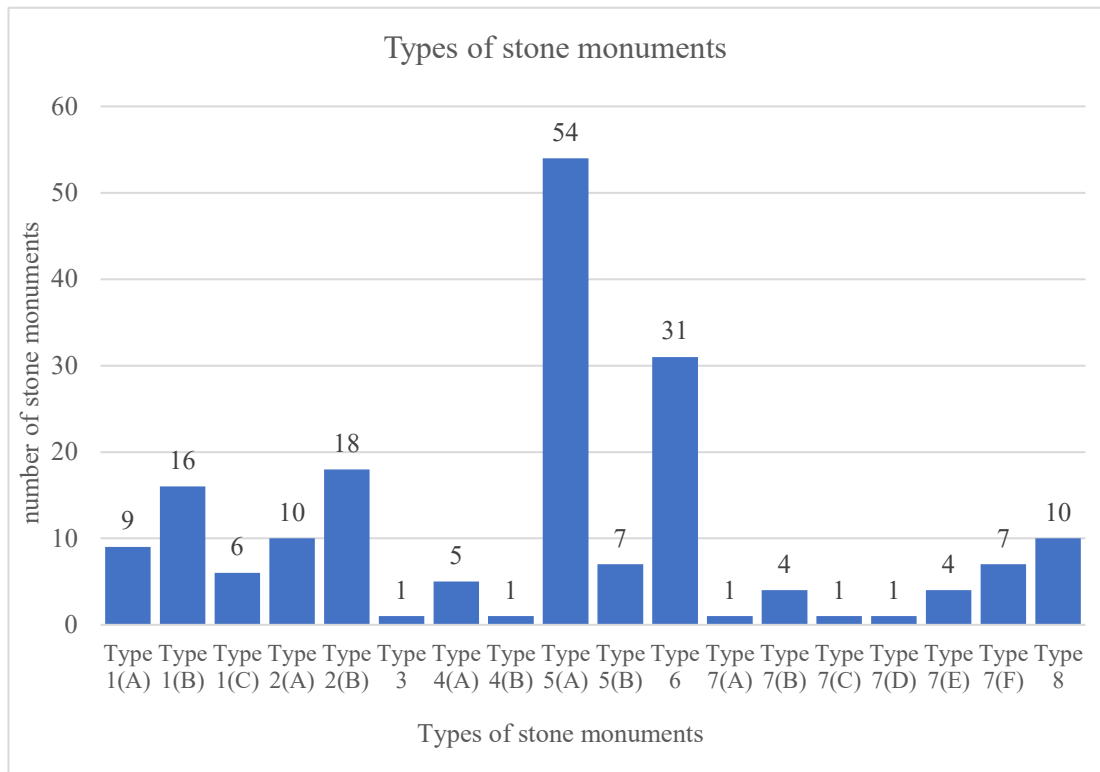


Figure 3: Graph showing types of monuments

Out of a total of 88 standing stones documented ($n = 88$), the majority exhibit a northeast (NE) orientation ($n = 41$), followed by north(N) ($n = 10$), south(S) ($n = 9$), northwest (NW) ($n = 8$), with a smaller number recorded as fallen ($n = 6$). Monuments

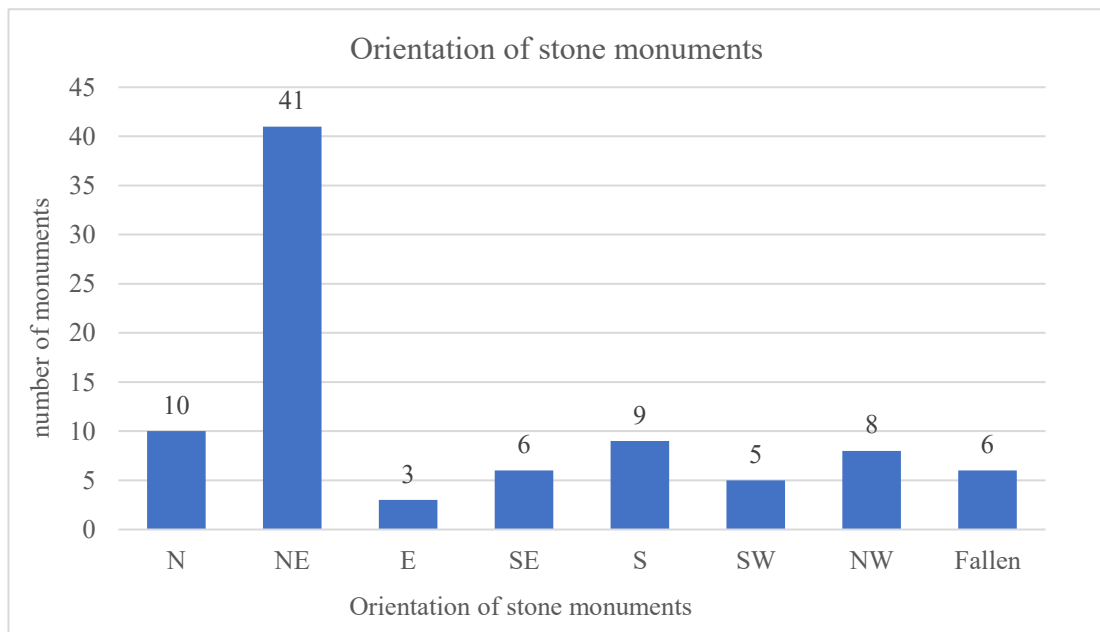


Figure 4: Graph showing the types of orientation of standing monuments

oriented towards the southeast (SE) (n=6) and southwest (SW) (n=5), while the east(E) orientation was the least represented (n = 3). These findings indicate a predominant preference for northeast orientation among the standing stones, whereas eastward alignment appears to be the least favoured, based on data collected from the three surveyed villages (Fig. 4). It is noteworthy, however, that according to local informants, the orientation of the monuments is traditionally determined by the direction of the adjacent footpath, rather than any fixed cardinal orientation. This suggests that socio-cultural or practical considerations may override strict directional preferences in the placement of these stone features.

A total of 88 standing stones has been documented (n=88) with the majority of the monoliths fall within a volume range of 0–0.5 m³ (Fig. 5), with the smallest measuring 0.02 m³ (*pepam*) and the largest reaching a volume of 6.566 m³, both documented from Poilwa village. Analysis of the data reveals that the volume distribution of the monoliths is non-normal and highly variable. No two monoliths were found to possess identical volumes, suggesting a high degree of variation in the material and labour investment involved in their erection. Field observations further confirm that each monument is unique in shape and size, underscoring the individualized character of these structures.

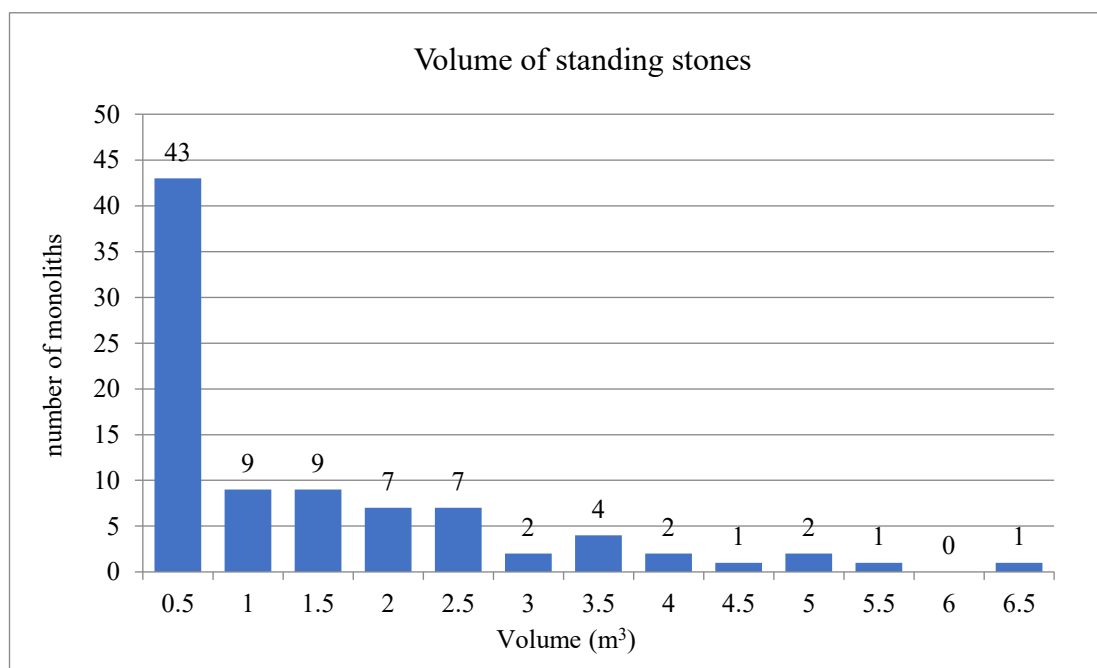


Figure 5: Graph showing the volume of standing stones

A total of 54 stone platforms ($n = 54$) were recorded across the three surveyed villages, with only one case noted as disturbed. Among these, the largest platform was documented from Benreu village with a volume of 94 m^3 , while the smallest platform was documented from Peren village measuring 5.16 m^3 . The majority of platforms fall within a volume range of $10\text{--}20 \text{ m}^3$ (Fig. 6). The absence of uniformity in platform volume further supports the interpretation that these constructions are highly individualized.

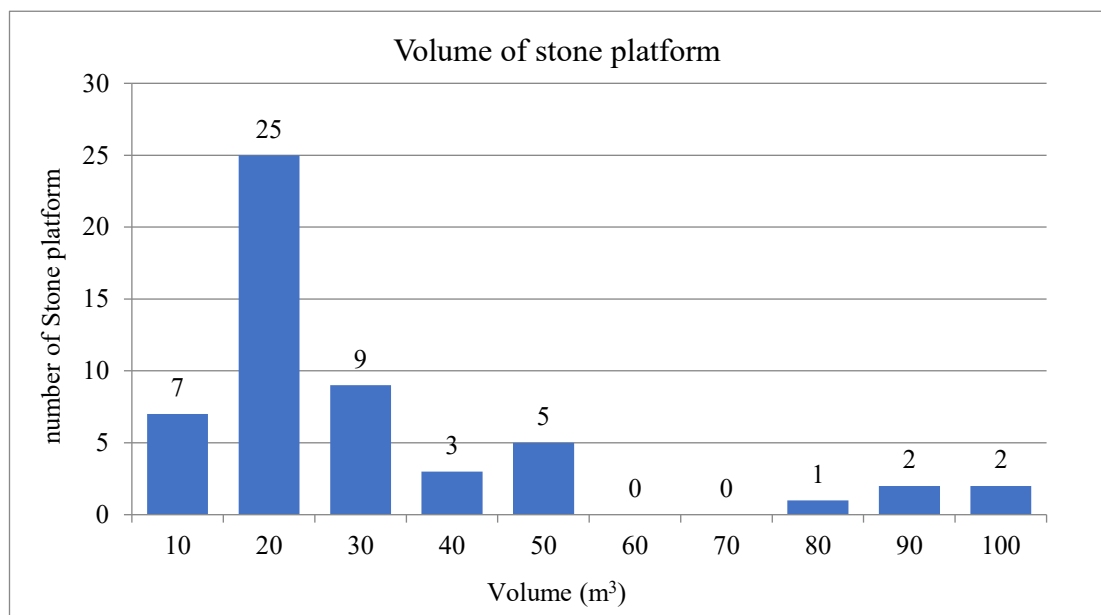


Figure 6: Graph showing the variation in volume of stone platform

2.4. Socio-Economic Organization

The Zeme tribe of Nagaland has traditionally been identified with a predominantly peaceful and agrarian mode of existence. Majority of Zeme settlements are situated at elevated altitudes, a spatial configuration historically associated with strategic oversight, particularly during periods when headhunting was a prevalent inter-tribal practice—a phenomenon also observed among neighbouring Naga tribes (Figs. 7-10).

The social structure of the Zeme community is primarily organized around the nuclear family, though instances of joint family systems do occur. Marital alliances are governed by a principle of clan exogamy, which prohibits marriage within the same clan. Conversely, village endogamy is typically preferred, although exogamous marriages beyond the village boundaries are neither uncommon nor socially proscribed. Zeme society is further stratified into two overarching moieties *Heu/Hoi*

and *Hau* which constitute fundamental units of social and ritual organization. The dual moiety system is integral to Zeme social organization, particularly in ritual contexts such as the establishment of new villages, where the presence and participation of both moieties are deemed essential for ritual legitimacy.

Among these two, *Hau* is traditionally regarded as the elder moiety, while *Heu* is considered the younger one. This hierarchical distinction is manifested in various ritual practices. For instance, during sacrificial ceremonies involving livestock, a member of the *Hau* moiety is customarily accorded the honour of making the initial incision, followed subsequently by a representative from the *Heu* group. Each moiety encompasses a number of consanguineous clans, which are later aggregated into functional socio-political units known as *khels*. These *khels* comprise multiple *paucana*, or lineage-based clan segments, and are collectively referred to as *Hepui hedung*.

The Zeme adhere to a patriarchal kinship model, wherein the father serves as the primary head of the household. In cases of paternal demise, the mother may assume this role on a temporary basis until the male offspring attain the requisite age of social and ritual maturity. Despite the overarching patriarchal framework, the society demonstrates elements of egalitarianism, particularly in the ritual and political spheres. All individuals possessing the necessary criteria and economic resources are permitted to engage in communal decision-making processes and to host feasts of merit, events that are often commemorated by the erection of stone monuments.

Feasting constitutes a central mechanism for social reproduction and prestige accumulation among the Zeme. Although the individual initiating the feast bears the principal share of the expenses, substantial contributions—both in terms of livestock and labour—are often mobilized through kin-based networks, especially from extended family members referred to as *Pehaime*, as well as from friends and siblings. The *Pehaime* group plays a critical role in an individual's social life, offering support in both celebratory and adverse circumstances. Reciprocity underpins this system, wherein participation in or contribution to a feast entails an implicit expectation of future reciprocation, thus reinforcing social bonds and communal solidarity.

Economically, the Zeme are predominantly agrarian. While evidence of terrace cultivation exists, shifting cultivation—locally known as *jhum*—remains the primary

agricultural method. Rice serves as the staple crop, supplemented by the cultivation of millet, maize, taro, yam, chili, pumpkin, cucumber, etc. Animal husbandry also forms an essential component of subsistence practices, with domesticated and semi-domesticated species including dogs, cats, cows, chickens, ducks, goats, *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*), etc. In addition to agriculture, hunting and fishing provide important supplementary resources. Informants from Poilwa village reported that agricultural surplus—particularly rice—is often exchanged with neighbouring communities for pulses and chilies, indicating the continued relevance of barter-based exchange systems (K. Diswang, Personal communication, February 20, 2021).

A notable example of communal activity is the annual fishing event known as *Npumzwa/Pumzwa*, in which all able-bodied villagers participate. Elders or infirm individuals, unable to join the fishing expeditions, are nonetheless provided with a share of the catch, often in quantities exceeding that of the participants, thereby reflecting a strong ethics of care and redistribution. The primary unit of agricultural labour remains the family; however, cooperative work groups, known as *Hegwet* (field companion), are also employed to rotate labour assistance among households. During periods of hardship, wider clan networks—or even the village as a whole—may mobilize labour resources to support vulnerable families. Nevertheless, such communal labour arrangements have witnessed a gradual decline in contemporary times.

2.5. Feasting

Feasting, particularly the *feasts of merit*, occupies a central position within the pre-colonial social and ritual organization of the Zeme. These highly ritualized events are closely associated with the accumulation of social status and symbolic wealth. Eligibility to host such feasts is restricted to married men whose spouses are still living, reflecting the Zeme cultural ethos that perceives the marital couple as a single ritual unit. As such, essential agricultural and ritual activities—such as the first sowing or harvesting of the year—are to be jointly undertaken by the couple. The absence of one partner renders the ritual incomplete, underscoring the indispensable role of the wife in both productive and ceremonial life.

The feast of merit unfolds across a series of increasingly elaborate stages, each marked by greater expenditure and social complexity than the previous. Among the four Zeme villages located in present-day Nagaland, the structural features of feasting and stone commemorations remain broadly consistent, with the exception of Nsong village. Unlike other villages where standing stones and stone platforms are customary, Nsong is characterized by the presence of *Raukap*/slab graves and *Hezie tsu*/stone slabs on platform. Their practice of erecting stone monuments is more aligned with the Zeme of Assam, which may be attributed to their geographical proximity.

Based on ethnographic data from Poilwa village, the feasts of merit are composed of five sequential stages. Advancement to a higher stage is contingent upon the successful completion of the preceding one. The ritual series typically begins during the *Mileingyi* festival, observed in January. It is during this time that an intending couple announces their plans in the *Rehangki*/clan dormitory. Following this, the approval and blessings of the clan elders and fellow clans' people are sought. Upon receiving endorsement, and beginning with the second stage, the couple ceases all productive labour, refrains from sexual activity and bathing until the completion of the final day of the feast, referred to as *Tak hetip*.

i) *Stage One: Teila*

The initial stage, known as *Teila*, is a one-day event during which the couple initiates the feast by distributing meat to all households in the village. Any animal, including those killed by wild predators (e.g., cows or mithuns), may be used for this purpose. If domesticated animals such as pigs, cows, or mithuns are to be slaughtered specifically for the feast, they are first released early in the morning and subsequently chased and captured by the male villagers. This ritual chase, locally termed *dwak*, precedes the slaughter. The raw meat is then distributed by the clansmen to every household, after which the distributors collect their own shares and return home. The *Teila* stage is a prerequisite for subsequent stages and may be conducted on any day that does not coincide with a village *genna* (ritual prohibition day).

ii) *Stage Two: Kerei Zau*

The second stage takes place in January and extends over four days (Fig. 12). It involves the slaughter of two pigs, one of which must be physically unblemished and possess an ideal pigmentation. The host couple typically selects and rears the pig in advance for this occasion. Twenty-five households, referred to as *Pehaime* (extended kin), are formally invited to the feast. These households reciprocate by contributing animals, rice beer, and monetary resources.

- Day One: *Zaulu Ting*

On this day, meat from the slaughtered animals (typically prepared the day prior) is apportioned and distributed to the selected 25 households. Each household of 25 families receives 30 pieces of meat, and a special portion known as *hedi* is set aside for the host's daughters and sisters. Recipients then redistribute their share among family, friends, and neighbours.

- Day Two: *Herah*

The invited households gather at the host's residence to collectively consume rice beer and meat, joined by other village members in a communal celebration.

- Day Three: *Herah Mnakam*

This day is primarily reserved for the male members of the host's clan. It includes the performance of *Herui kai* howling and ululation, sings traditional song, along with communal consumption of rice beer and meat. While some participants from the 25 households may also attend, the focus remains on clansmen.

- Day Four: *Tak Hetip*

The feast concludes with the *Tak hetip*, during which time the invited households return to consume spleen (*hebak pi*), followed by general merrymaking. Any remaining meat is then redistributed.

iii) Stage Three: *Hetui Zau*

This stage, usually held in August (Fig. 12), replicates the structure and duration of the second stage. However, following its completion, a distinction emerges between the two moieties *Hauna* and *Heuna*. As the *Hauna* are regarded as the elder moiety, their members are permitted to proceed directly to the fifth stage without

undergoing the fourth. In contrast, members of the *Heuna* moiety must complete the fourth stage before attaining eligibility for the final stage.

iv) Stage Four: Haina Zau

The fourth stage extends over four days similar to the second stage and requires the slaughter of two pigs, though contributions from invitees are not obligatory. Nevertheless, it is uncommon for guests to attend without providing offerings, typically a pig or a mithun. Thirty households are invited, each receiving 50 pieces of meat, which are then further redistributed within their networks. As with previous stages, special *hedi* portions are designated for the host's daughters and sisters. Upon completion, the couple gains the right to adorn their residence with decorative house horns, marking their elevated social standing.

v) Stage Five: Nkai Zau

The fifth and final stage, *Nkai Zau* held in the month of November (Fig. 12), is the culmination of the feast of merit series. Its structure closely mirrors that of *Haina Zau*. Upon its completion, the couple acquires the right to erect standing stones and stone platforms bearing their names. These commemorative structures typically feature two stones, the larger representing the husband and the smaller representing the wife. It is noteworthy that standing stones may also be erected without completing the final stage, but in such instances, they are placed without an accompanying stone platform—visibly distinguishing them from those erected by individuals who have fulfilled the full ritual sequences.

2.6. Stone Selection and Stone-pulling Process

Following the completion of the requisite feasting stages, and once a couple has fulfilled the necessary ritual and social obligations, they become eligible to erect a commemorative monument in their name. Accompanied by a ritual specialist, the couple proceeds to a designated quarry site to select a suitable stone for the purpose.

Upon selection of a potential stone, the couple returns home. The decision to retain the chosen stone is contingent upon the host's dream on the subsequent night. An unfavourable dream necessitates the selection of an alternative stone, whereas a favourable one confirms the suitability of the original selection. Additionally, if animal

or bird faeces are found on the stone prior to the designated pulling period, the stone is deemed ritually impure and is rejected in favour of another.

Assuming no such omens occur, the stone is retained for the pulling ritual. During this interim period, the host couple adheres to strict ritual prohibitions, including abstention from bathing and sexual activity. These taboos are indicative of the liminal status of the individuals involved in the monument-erection process.

The criteria for selecting a stone are informed by ritual protocols. The ritual specialist identifies the desired shape by breaking an egg over the stone surface, a symbolic act believed to indicate divine approval. If deemed suitable, the egg is buried beneath the stone, which is then subjected to a process known as *nɔwak*. In this procedure, firewood is used to heat the stone, a practice believed to facilitate the emergence of the intended shape and render the stone spiritually and physically prepared for subsequent stages.

Once the stone has been selected and extracted, a day is allocated for the communal clearing of the path to ensure unobstructed transportation. Due to the historical discontinuity of the practice informants claimed that the last stone erection occurred approximately 200-300 years ago, specifics regarding the ritual pronouncements made by the priest immediately prior to the pulling remain uncertain (S. Rau, personal communication, February 20, 2021).

The act of pulling the stone involves the collective labour of all able-bodied men in the village, who coordinate their efforts while chanting “*Hui...*” as they transport the stone to its designated location. The women accompany the procession, providing rice beer to the participants along the route. Upon successful transportation, the stone is erected by the host couple the following day.

2.7. Social Status

The couple who sponsors the various stages of the feast of merit is entitled to social recognition and material benefits within the community. For example, when an individual hosts a subsequent feast of merit, previous sponsors may receive a portion of the meat distributed during the event, contingent upon their inclusion within the social network referred to as the *Pehaime* circle of the current host. The act of hosting a feast also signals wealth and social prestige, leading to increased respect and honour

from fellow villagers. In Poilwa village, couples who complete the fourth stage of the feast of merit, known as *Haina zau*, are granted not only to erect or construct stone monuments, but also the privilege of decorating their home with animal horns slaughtered during the feast. Furthermore, the children of feast hosts are regarded as desirable marriage partners, further reinforcing the social advantages conferred by successful participation in the feasting system. Above all, individuals who host feast in their lifetime are remembered through generations because of the monuments which still stand today and the person who completes the series of feasts dig a pond in their name. This symbolize the prosperity being full as like the water which remains in the pond for a long time. On the day designated for the demolition of the host's old house all members of the village observe a customary day of rest known as *Reu*. During this day, villagers refrain from agricultural labour and other physically demanding activities, marking their respect for the feast achiever. Furthermore, upon the death of the individual, the village collectively observes a mourning period referred to as *Pecit Reu*, during which all non-essential work is suspended, and only basic household tasks are permitted. It is here that his grave is decorated not only with the skulls of the animals butchered but also a wood carved in the shape of a banana flower stalk and placed over his grave.

2.8. Domestic Architecture

The Zeme Nagas, akin to other Naga tribes, traditionally prefer to establish settlements on hilltops. This settlement pattern is informed by a combination of ecological, defensive, and socio-cultural considerations. Upon entering a Zeme village, one observes the dispersion of dwellings across the undulating terrain, integrated into the natural topography.

A distinctive feature of traditional Zeme architecture is the construction of roofs, with thatched *tanggai* and designed such that both sides extend close to the ground (Plate 21). Dwellings are generally composed of two rooms and an open porch; the dimensions of the house vary depending on the available plot size. A consistent element across households is the presence of an adjoining kitchen garden, usually situated at the rear of the structure. Building materials are primarily sourced from the

surrounding forest and include thatched *tanggai* for roofing, timber for posts, bamboo for wall panels, and stone for the foundation.

The internal spatial organization of a traditional Zeme house reflects both functional and cultural imperatives. The entrance, known as *kigu*, serves as an open porch. It is utilized for morning and evening sunbathing by household members and functions as a storage space for firewood. The next room is termed *kitangnungsung*, is a multifunctional area accommodating the rice barn *hebau*, a pigsty situated in one corner, and an elevated platform designated for chickens. This room also stores essential agricultural and domestic tools such as spades, mortars and pestles, and machetes. The innermost room *kilung* is the primary living and cooking space and holds the highest significance in daily domestic life. It contains the family hearth and is where most time is spent. Suspended above the hearth is a wooden structure designed for drying and storing meat, chillies, grains, and firewood. This storage unit is vertically stratified: the lower tiers are used for items required for immediate use—such as firewood—while upper sections accommodate grains and preserved meat. This room also contains two separate beds, typically one for the husband and one for the wife and a storage basket known as *Langsung* is also kept at a side (Plate 31). Architecturally, the house features two doorways. The primary entrance facilitates access from the open porch into the first interior space, which functions as a transitional zone leading to the second room. The latter accommodates both sleeping and cooking activities, reflecting the multifunctional spatial organization typical of traditional domestic layouts. Traditional Zeme houses do not include formal windows; instead, small openings are incorporated into the thatch to permit minimal natural light penetration.

Upon marriage, it is customary for a male child to reside with his parents for a year. During this transitional period, the parents vacate second room *kilung*, relocating to the first room to accommodate the newly married couple. Following this period, the parents assist the son in identifying a suitable location for the construction of a new dwelling. This practice reflects the embedded value of extended family living and the continuity of intergenerational support within Zeme society.

A notable distinction between ordinary dwellings and those of feast donors' individuals who have hosted community feasts as a mark of wealth and social standing

is the presence of animal skulls displayed on the central post of the *kigu*. These trophies serve as symbolic markers of the household head's achievements and economic capability within the community.

2.9. Landscape, Social Memory and Stone Monuments

The stone monuments of the Zeme Naga communities in Nagaland exhibit a deliberate spatial logic, strategically positioned within the landscape to facilitate visibility and integration into daily practices. These monuments are frequently situated along footpaths, adjacent to household compounds, or atop ridges that offer panoramic views of villages and terrace fields. (Figs. 7, 8, 9 & 10). Such locational choices are neither arbitrary nor merely aesthetic but serve to embed the monuments within the social and physical routines of the community. According to ethnographic accounts, commemorative monuments erected in honour of deceased kin, particularly parents, are often placed in locations frequented by individuals during their lifetimes, such as regularly used pathways or fields. This spatial alignment underscores the intention to maintain and continued symbolic presence within the social landscape.

Field data gathered from four Zeme villages in Nagaland reinforce the patterned distribution of stone monuments. In Poilwa and Benreu, for instance, 71 out of 115 documented monuments (approximately 62%) are located *enroute* agricultural fields (Figs. 7 & 8). Given the agrarian basis of the pre-colonial Zeme economy, such placement reflects a confluence of practical visibility and ritualized remembrance. These pathways, used frequently due to their connection to subsistence activities, provide a context in which monuments are both encountered and socially reinforced on a daily basis (Plate 25 & 26). Jamir (2019), observes that "Given the mountainous terrain, these platforms provide ideal resting points for individuals who have just completed an arduous climb from the terrace fields or are descending into the field". (Jamir 2019, p.15). In this regard, the monuments function not only as mnemonic devices but also as utilitarian spaces that support social interaction, rest, and reflection.

Within village confines, monuments are frequently located adjacent to central communal spaces such as paths, the *morung* (male dormitory), and traditional playgrounds (Plate 23 & 24). One example involves a monument whose current inconspicuous location was determined by an accidental incident during its transport,

where the breaking of the rope resulted in its premature deposition. Such incidents offer insights into both the agency of material culture and the contingent nature of spatial decision-making.

A prevalent typology of monument, particularly in Peren village, is the raised stone platform, locally termed *Renei* and *Bam*. These structures, which vary in form—rectangular, square, semicircular and circle—are typically positioned along village paths or in central locations (Plate 26). A noteworthy ethnographic observation recorded during fieldwork is the association of these platforms with clan burials. Informants reported that multiple members of a clan are interred together beneath or around a single platform, motivated by a belief to maintain continued clan unity beyond death (S. Ndang, personal communication, February 18, 2021). These structures thereby function simultaneously as funerary monuments and communal gathering sites. Their placement outside *morungs* often affords panoramic visibility, and they serve as loci for social congregation, particularly in the early morning before agricultural work and again in the evening. Although not all such platforms are associated with feasting cycles, many serve as commemorative functions and are integral to the community's socio-cultural fabric.

Another distinct monument form found exclusively in Peren village is the *Hedwa*—a circular stone structure resembling a rice barn. Constructed by individuals recognized for achieving exceptional agricultural yields, these monuments operate as both personal accolades and communal acknowledgements of agrarian success. Like other monument types, *Hedwa* structures are typically placed along footpaths and inter-village routes (Fig. 9), ensuring high visibility and ongoing engagement with passersby (Plate 7).

In Nsong village, stone slabs associated with burials, referred to locally as *Raukap*, are commonly placed within household compounds (Fig. 10). Raised stone slabs found in Nsong, Poilwa, and Benreu that lack funerary associations tend to be located in or around habitation areas. Of particular note is a cluster of four raised slabs at Nsong, including the largest—known as the "widow stone"—situated besides *Hezwa kie*, the traditional village playground (Plate 24). This location serves as an annual gathering site for long-jump competitions, thereby reinforcing the socio-ritual

significance of the stone cluster and its continued integration into the community's collective memory.

Overall, the landscape-embedded placement of stone monuments among the Zeme Naga constitutes more than spatial marking; it serves as a durable medium through which social memory, identity, and communal values are materially expressed and ritually sustained. Each monument's location corresponds to a specific narrative, individual, or communal experience, embedding memory into the topography itself. As Wangjin (2014) aptly states, "Monuments within the landscape provide memory, identity, and social order," (Wangjin, 2014, p .325). With the events they commemorate materially inscribed and socially remembered through place-based interaction. The inherent durability of stone contributes to the long-term preservation of these memories, with oral traditions and performative recollections ensuring their continued salience.

In the context of Nagaland's mountainous terrain, the strategic placement of platforms and other monuments along pathways fulfils dual functional and mnemonic roles. These sites offer vantage points for viewing agricultural fields and serve as rest stops during strenuous climbs, while simultaneously facilitating intergenerational transmission of memory. Their persistent visibility and routine incorporation into village life ensure that the social memories they encapsulate remain embedded in both individual and collective consciousness (Fig. 7).

POILWA

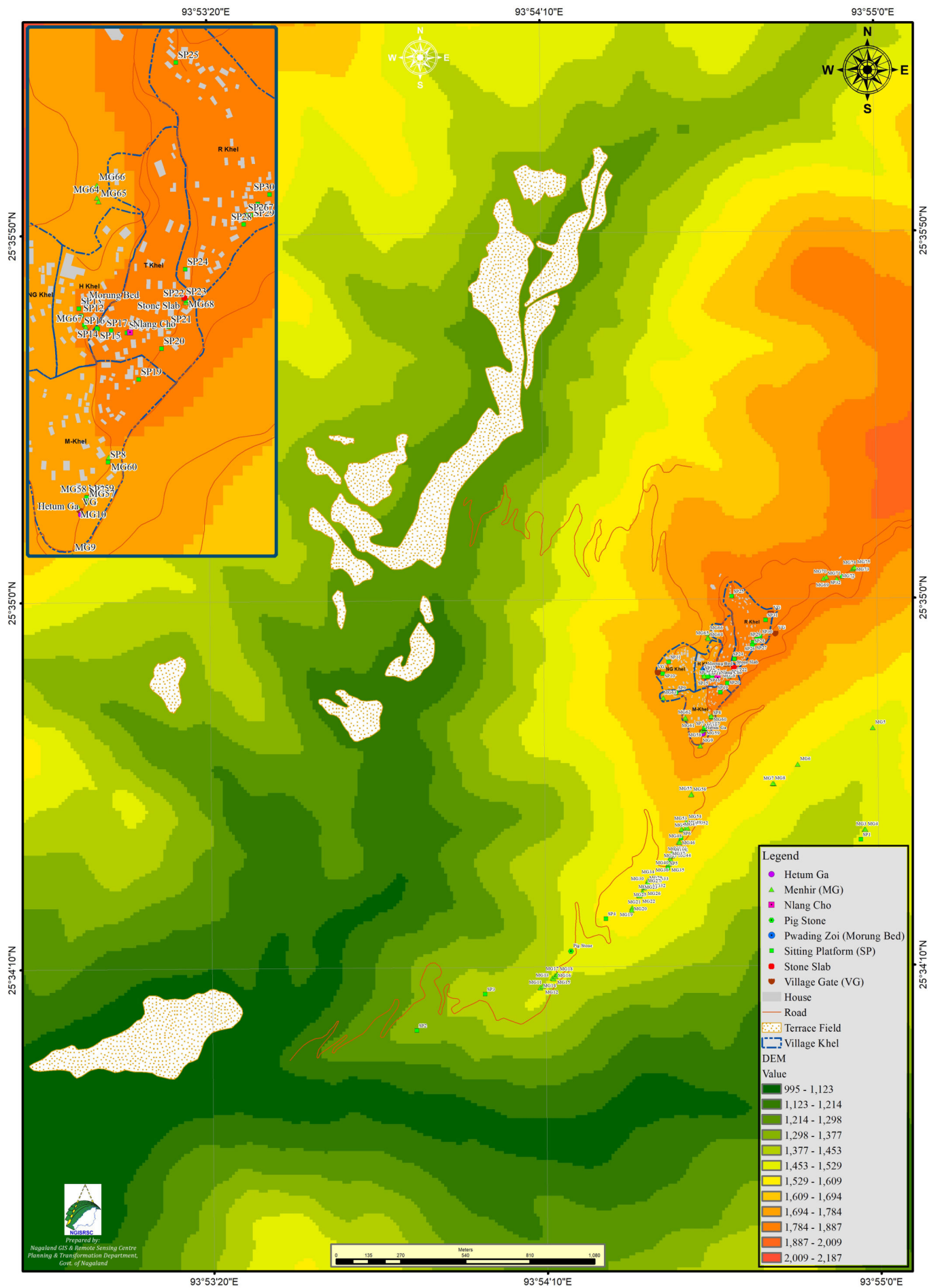


Figure 7: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Poilwa village.

BENREU

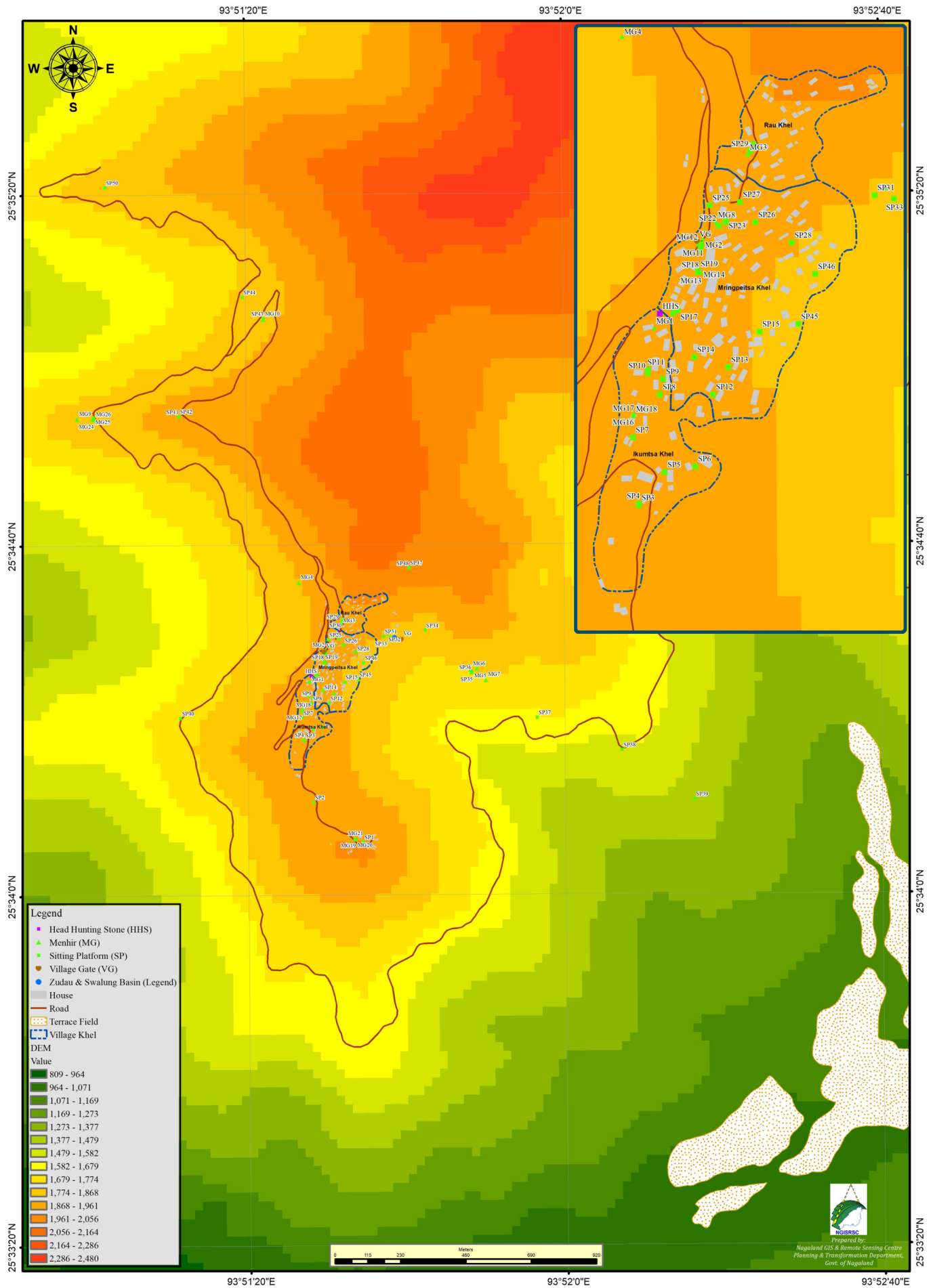


Figure 8: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Benreu village.

PEREN

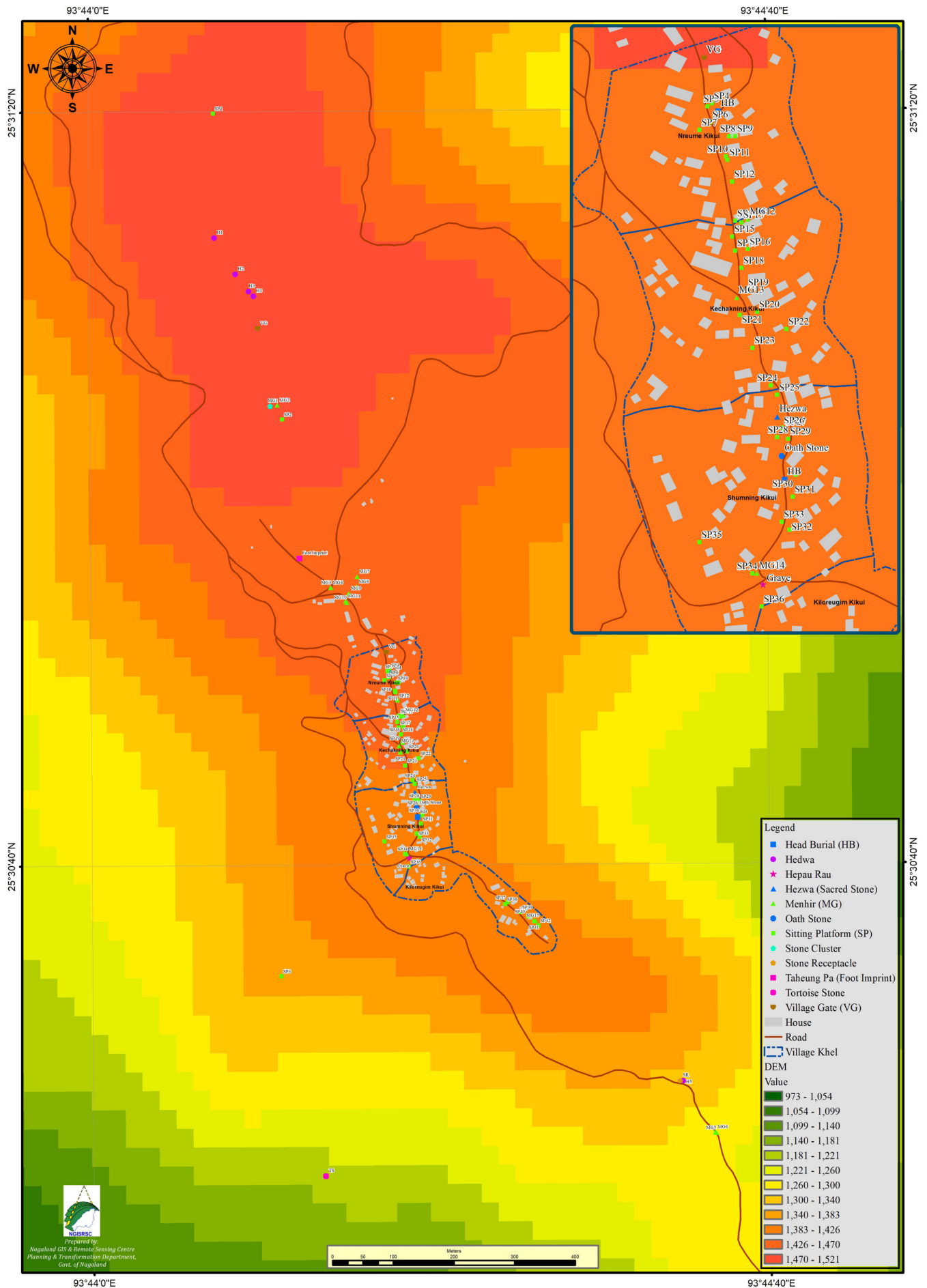


Figure 9: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Peren village.

NSONG

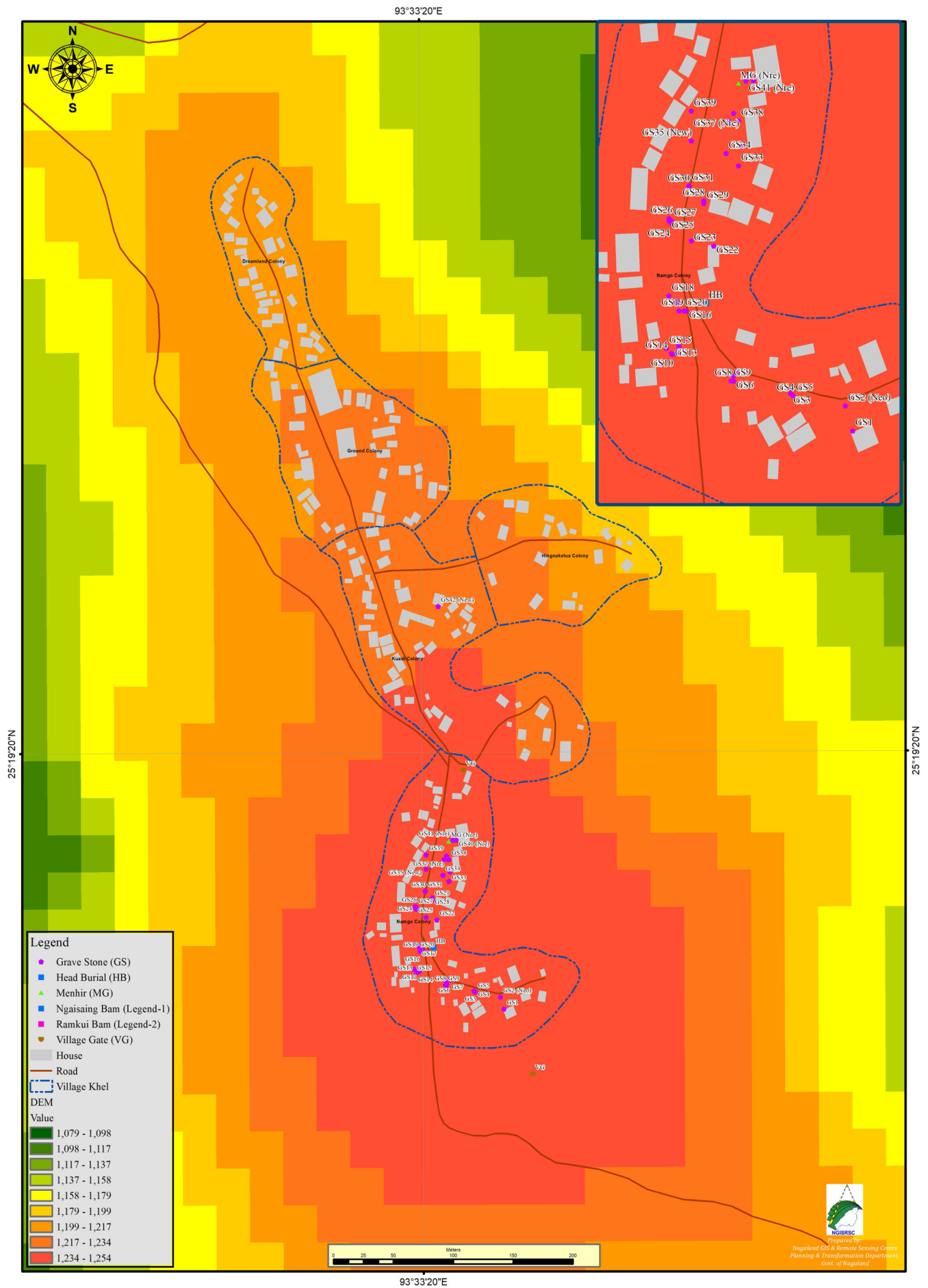


Figure 10: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Nsong village.



Plate 1: Single standing stone (with platform), Poilwa village



Plate 2: Single standing stone without platform, Poilwa village



Plate 3: Fallen menhir, Poilwa village



Plate 4: Twin standing stones (with platform), Peren village

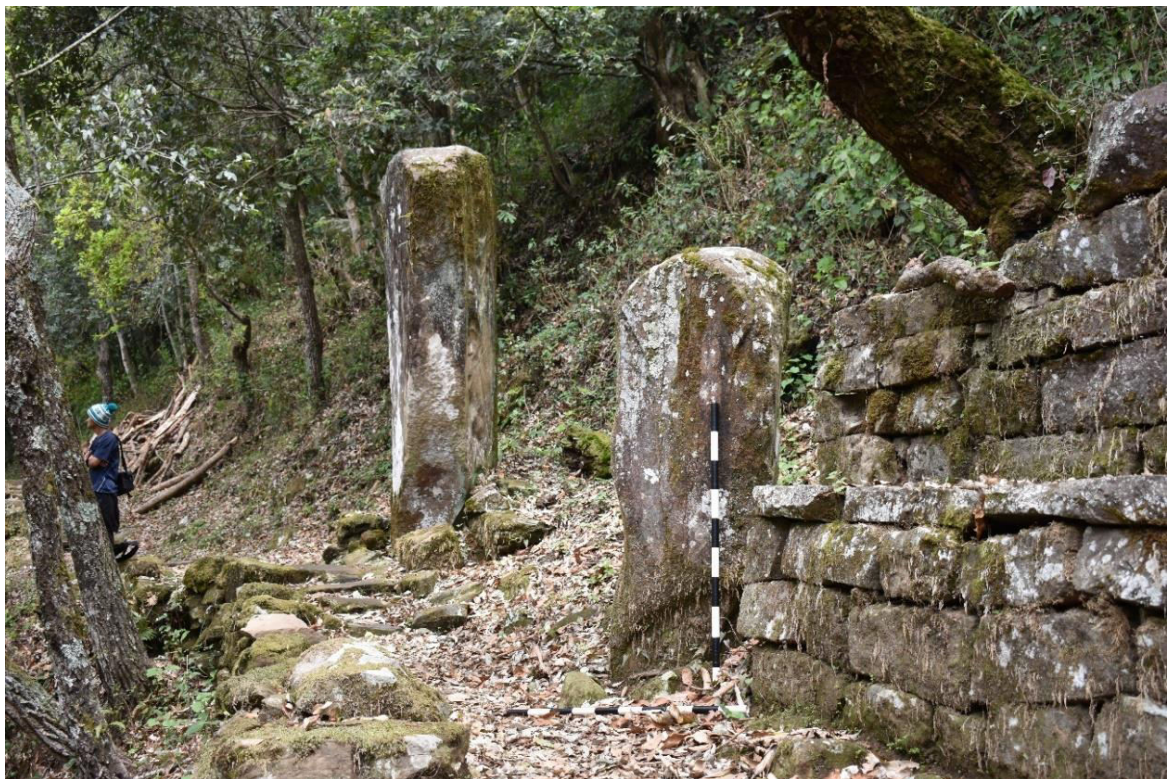


Plate 5: Twin standing stone without platform, Benreu village



Plate 6: Stone cluster, Peren village



Plate 7: *Hedwa*/Stone circle without platform constructed along the way to the neighbouring village, Peren village



Plate 8: Small stone circle (ritual stone), Benreu village



Plate 9: *Neigwa*/Circular stone platform, Peren village



Plate 10: *Renei*/Rectangular Stone platform, Peren village



Plate 11: *Raukap*/Slab graves (burial), Nsong village



Plate 12: *Luigwamlie rausam*/Stone slab, Poilwa village



Plate 13: A partially displaced *Hereupeitsu*/Natural stone boulder for head taking rites, Benreu village



Plate 14: *Ngaisiang bam*/Natural boulders (named after an individual), Nsong village



Plate 15: *Choloine*/Fetish stone buried besides the village gate, Poilwa village



Plate 16: *Resu tsu/Reset tsu/Oath stone*, Peren village



Plate 17: *Teisie/Stone receptacle*, Peren village



Plate 18: *Kirie*/Fortified village gate, Benreu village



Plate 19: Tortoise stone, Peren village



Plate 20: *Meuriele tsukwa*/Stone slab on a platform, Peren village



Plate 21: A traditional Zeme house, Benreu village



Plate 22: Pig stone, Poilwa village



Plate 23: A monolith erected near *Hezwa kie* (traditional playground), Benreu village



Plate 24: Cluster of Slab graves placed near the *Hezwa kie* (traditional playground), Nsong village



Plate 25: Twin standing stones erected on the way to the field, Poilwa village



Plate 26: A stone platform constructed beside the village path, Peren village



Plate 27: *Zudau and Swalung Peulikwak* (wash basin), Benreu village



Plate 28: Standing stone believed to possess disease repelling ability, Benreu village



Plate 29: *Kwadi Tekwa*/Ritual Pond, Benreu village



Plate 30: *Taheung pa*/Footprint engraved on a stone, Peren village



Plate 31: *Langsung*/Traditional handcrafted storage unit

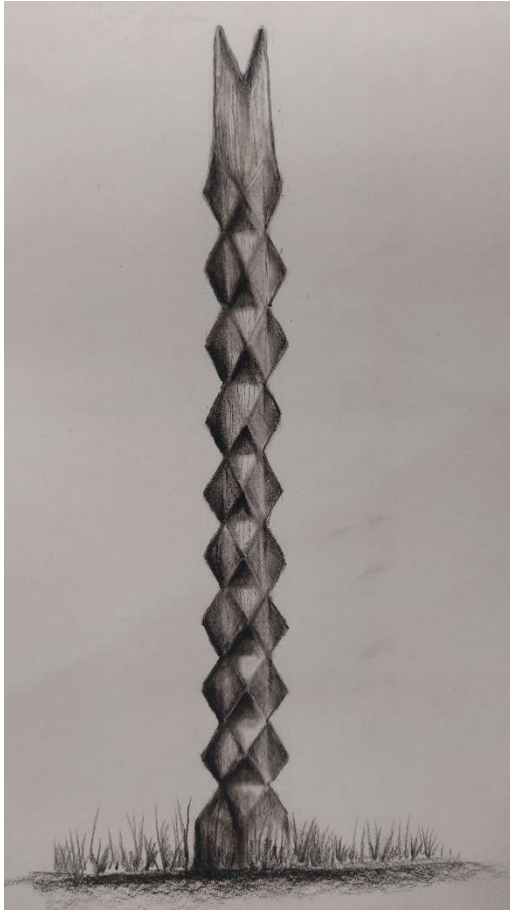


Plate 32: *Hezie tsu*/Stone slab, Nsong village

Figure 11: A sketch representation of a commemorative wooden structure.

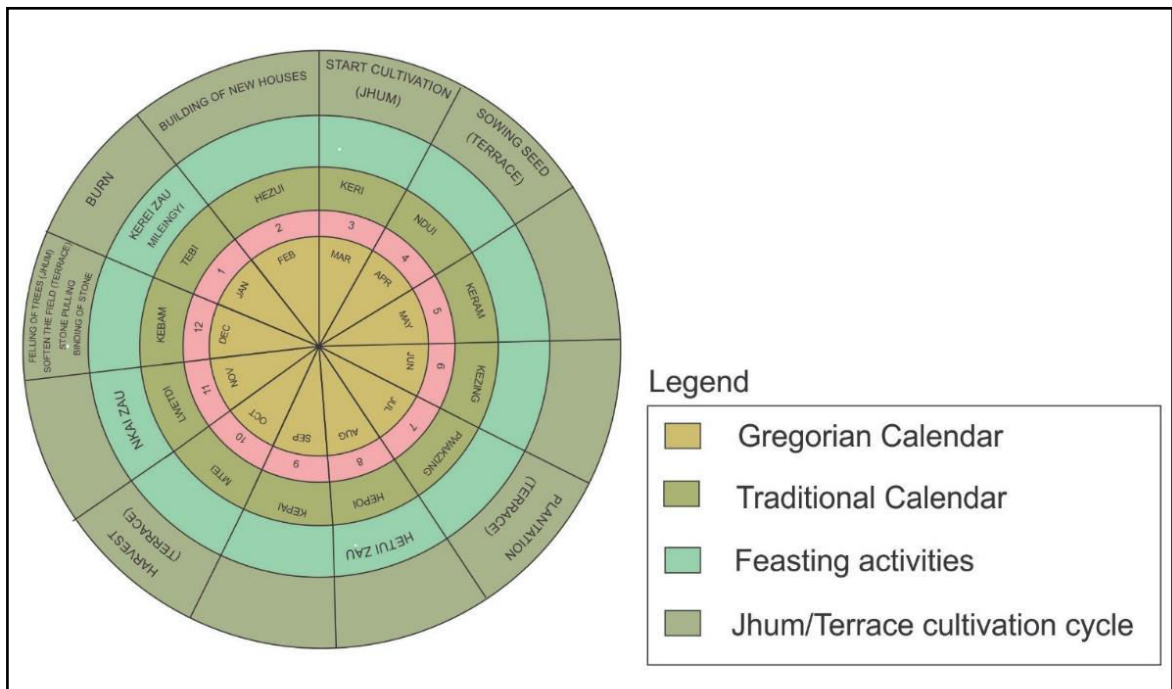


Figure 12: Calendrical cycle chart showing different month in local dialogue, important ritual months relating to feasting and agricultural cycle of Zeme Nagaland.

CHAPTER 3

Stone Monuments of Zeme Nagas of Manipur

This chapter examines the various social dimensions of stone monuments as practiced in four Zeme villages in the Senapati District of Manipur: Ze (Yangkhullen), Bakie (Yangkhunou), Ziumi, and Tamphung. These villages are located at varying distances from Imphal, the state capital—approximately 135 km, 150 km, 164 km, and 182 km respectively.

Ze (Yangkhullen), situated at an elevation of approximately 1,652 metres (5,419.95 feet) above mean sea level, reported a total population of 4,166 according to the 2011 Census of India, comprising 2,258 males and 1,908 females. The village of Bakie recorded 178 households and a population of 1,101, including approximately 569 males and 533 females. Ziumi, positioned at an elevation of about 727 metres above sea level, a total population of about 980, contained 98 households and a population of 460 female and 520 males. Tamphung located at the Manipur–Nagaland border adjacent to Peren District, had a total population of 653 as per the 2011 Census, including approximately 348 males and 305 females. In addition to the four aforementioned villages, data were also collected from Mnuire, a now-abandoned settlement. Oral historical accounts indicate that Mnuire once comprised approximately one thousand households. However, a combination of factors including inter-village conflict, external raids, and internal socio-political disputes led to its repeated abandonment. Notably, the village was reportedly deserted and resettled on seven distinct occasions. According to Zeme cultural norms, a village that has been abandoned seven times is considered permanently uninhabitable, thereby precluding any further resettlement efforts.

Material evidence of prior habitation remains visible in the form of stone platforms and numerous standing stones, which are characteristic of ancestral settlement sites in the region. Furthermore, oral testimonies suggest a pattern of out-migration following the final abandonment of Mnuire, with significant portions of the

population relocating to areas within present-day Assam and Nagaland, while a smaller number are reported to have resettled in Ze village.

The main focus of this chapter encompasses the typology of stone monuments, socio-economic structures, feasting customs, processes of stone selection and transportation, domestic architectural forms, and the associated landscapes and social memories. The primary source of data is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the aforementioned villages. While documentation and interviews were conducted across all four sites, particular emphasis was placed on Ze (Yangkhullen). This emphasis is justified by the village's cultural and historical significance within the Zeme community of Senapati District, where it is widely regarded as the oldest known settlement following their departure from Makuilongdi, a site of ancestral origin.

3.1. Typology of Monuments: Structural Forms and Functional Classifications

This section presents a detailed classification of monuments among the Zeme Nagas, based on their structural characteristics and functional attributions. The classification encompasses commemorative and memorial structures, ritualistic installations, and other culturally significant stone features observed in select villages of Senapati District, Manipur.

3.1.1 Commemorative and Memorial Stone Structures

a). *Tsusum/Menhir (Standing stones)* (Plate 33-38)

The *Tsusum*, also referred to as a standing stone or menhir, is a vertically positioned monolithic structure commonly erected within the context of ritualistic and commemorative practices. Typically, its installation is associated with the culmination of specific ceremonial stages, most notably feasts hosted by individuals seeking to affirm social status or fulfil ritual obligations. However, ethnographic accounts indicate considerable variation in the motivations underlying such installations. In some instances, the erection of a *tsusum* is not directly linked to ritual milestones. For example, childless couples or bereaved parents may commission such stones as commemorative markers for personal losses—such as the death of a young child—or

as symbolic acts of communal benevolence following the hosting of a village-wide event.

Additionally, in the context of head-taking practices—referred to locally as *Hereu tsu*—a *tsusum* may serve as a mnemonic device signifying martial success. In such cases, individuals who have obtained enemy heads erect these stones to publicly inscribe their names, thereby asserting their social and warrior identity.

Functionally, the *tsusum* operates primarily as a commemorative medium, materializing both personal and communal achievements within a socially recognized framework of memory and status. Adjacent to the *tsusum* is a smaller monolith known as the *pepam*, which is frequently interpreted as a symbolic representation of the host's spouse. According to local informants, the erection of a *tsusum* without an accompanying *pepam* is considered *genna* (taboo), reflecting culturally embedded gendered norms that emphasize the indispensability of the woman's role in domestic and ritual life (L. Hau, Personal Communication, February 12, 2025).

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ze village reveals a consistent ritualized pairing of *tsusum* and *pepam*, which reinforces a symbolic dualism aligned with broader sociocultural constructions of gender complementarity. This dualistic symbolism appears to extend beyond abstract representation, manifesting in physical forms and spatial arrangements. Notably, during field observations, some *pepam* were also found positioned horizontally beneath a larger standing stone. Upon inquiry, local informants explained that the horizontally placed stone functions symbolically as the 'partner' of the vertically erected monolith, reinforcing the relational logic embedded in megalithic symbolism (H. Hau, Personal Communication, July 28, 2025). Documented dimensions of the *pepam* vary substantially. One example measures approximately 100 cm in height, 110 cm in breadth, and 10 cm in thickness. Among the four surveyed villages, the largest recorded standing stone reaches 380 cm in height, 172 cm in breadth, and 72 cm in thickness, demonstrating considerable variability in scale and material representation across different ritual and commemorative contexts.

b). *Renei/Stone platforms* (Plate 40, 41 & 49)

Renei are stone platforms constructed in a range of geometric forms circular, rectangular, or oblong and are typically erected following the completion of a sequence of feasts of merit. Among these, circular platforms are particularly associated with high-status feasting, signifying elevated ritual and social standing.

In the village of Ze, local informants distinguish *Renei* from structurally similar platforms such as the *Bamdwa*, primarily based on their ritual and ceremonial associations. The construction of a *Renei* is contingent upon the successful completion of the third stage in the merit-feasting sequence, locally termed '*Herei/Kerei Zau*'. This process includes a series of prescribed ritual acts, most notably the ceremonial slaughter of a mithun (*Bos frontalis*), during which the animal's stomach contents are ritually smeared onto the stone structure as a form of symbolic consecration. By contrast, although *Bamdwa* platforms may also be constructed in the context of feasting, they do not involve such elaborate ritual procedures, and are thus differentiated both functionally and symbolically from *Renei*. Historically, *Renei* were constructed primarily in memory of deceased parents and were typically located adjacent to village footpaths or along routes leading to agricultural fields. In contemporary contexts, however, their commemorative function has broadened; they are now frequently constructed as general memorials and are commonly situated within the residential compounds. The average dimension of a *Renei* is approximately 1230 cm in length, 200 cm in height, and 250 cm in breadth.

Another similar structure in circular shape is known as *Neigwa/Neiliem* (Plate 40) characterized by a raised stone platform. According to oral testimonies collected from members of the Zeme community in Manipur, the construction of the *neigwa* is traditionally undertaken upon the completion of an extensive series of feasts and associated rituals. These rituals are reportedly rigorous and are considered a significant milestone within the community's socio-cultural framework.

The *neigwa* is also observed within the compounds of clan-based men's dormitories, locally referred to as *Rehangki (morung)*. Its construction is a collective effort involving the entire clan, and this communal participation extends to subsequent repairs and maintenance of the structure.

Functionally, the *neigwa* serves multiple purposes. Primarily, it acts as a seating platform. In the context of the clan, it serves an additional function as a designated site

for clan meetings. Furthermore, during periods of heightened alert or conflict, the structure is reportedly used as a lookout post to monitor potential threats or enemy movements. Empirical measurements of the documented *neigwa* measures height of the platform approximately 70 cm, with a diameter measuring around 600 cm.

c). *Hedwa/Stone circle* (Plate 39)

Hedwa is a circular stone structure found exclusively in Tamphung village. Constructed in the likeness of a traditional rice barn, the *hedwa* is built by affluent individuals and located in low-lying areas to facilitate the accumulation of mud during rain. They believed that the earlier the mud adheres to the structure, the greater the anticipated prosperity for the associated family. A standing stone, representing the owner, typically accompanies the main structure. The stone circle measures approximately 700 cm in circumference and 20 cm in height, while the associated standing stone is 120 cm tall, 70 cm broad, and 15 cm thick.

d). *Tsubau/Cairn* (Plate 46)

Tsubau consists of a large cairn formed by heaping stones into a tower-like formation, culminating in a small seating platform capable of accommodating 10 to 12 adult males. Notably, one of the platforms bears an inscription associated with a traditional game. In Tamphung village, three such structures have been documented; however, two exhibit varying degrees of structural damage, leaving only one in relatively well-preserved condition. All attributed to wealthy individuals who had hosted the villagers. The largest *tsubau* measures 270 cm in height and 300 cm in diameter. Another similar structure though a much smaller one, typically around 1m in height, variation do exist. They are constructed along field paths to commemorate incidence of childbirth occurring en route to or from agricultural fields. They comprise of naturally occurring stones arranged in a raised configuration. No specific ritual is associated with their construction. Such structures have been recorded in Ze and Bakie villages.

3.1.2. Ritualistic Structures

a). *Fetish stones* (Plate 45)

Certain lithic elements are ascribed spiritual significance and are believed to possess supernatural attributes. For instance, in Ze village, the appearance of a prominent line on the flat stone located near the old village footpath is regarded as a prophetic sign

preceding the *Teila* feast. Similarly, in the case of the *Ninne tsu*, an undressed stone boulder positioned at the village path is believed to house a spirit capable of inducing inclement weather conditions if disturbed. In Tamphung village, a stone engraved with a circular groove is believed to have been marked by a spirit and is interpreted as a sign of agricultural abundance and prosperity.

b). *Rausam/Stone slab on platform* (Plate 42 & 50)

Rausam is a large flat slab placed upon a platform. The stone structure is located in Tamphung and Ze village, where it has been placed upon a stone platform adjacent to the village footpath. According to ethnographic accounts from local informants, *rausam* platforms are constructed to preserve the memory of individuals who have hosted significant communal feasts (L. Hau, Personal Communication, February 12, 2025). Comparable structures have also been documented in Bakie village. The largest slab recorded measures approximately 110 cm in length, 100 cm in breadth, and 200 cm in height.

In Ze village, such similar slabs are found whereas the purpose is different generally located in proximity to the *Hereing Rehangki*. These monuments are collectively constructed by community members and serve specific ritualistic functions, particularly during feasting ceremonies conducted in conjunction with *Heramsam ngyi* the annual festival. During these events, animals are butchered and placed on the stone slab for communal distribution. Access to this food is frequently restricted to individuals who have strictly observed prevailing customary norms and ritual taboos.

c). *Hereupeutsu/Tangpoirau/Skull repository* (Plate 43)

Reflective of the historical practice of head-taking, certain boulders were designated for the placement of enemy skulls. One such example, documented in Bakie village, consists of a large natural stone beneath which skulls are interred. The site remains preserved as a cultural and historical relic. In Ziumi village, the heads are not deposited on a stone repository unlike the other Zeme villages, however they are placed in a pond locally known as *Rezaikam*. Some even have a history of burying the skulls in a pit. Examples of such practices are found in Tamphung village.

3.1.3. Assorted Stone Structures

a). *Boundary stones* (Plate 52)

Standing stones ranging from 150 cm to 200 cm in height are employed to demarcate residential boundaries, *jhum* cultivation fields, or forest areas. These markers serve both practical and symbolic functions in land tenure systems.

b). *Kirie/Fortified village gates* (Plate 47)

Among Zeme communities, fortified village gates (*Kirie* or *Herieki*) remain an integral architectural and symbolic feature. Historically, these gates served as defensive structures during periods of inter-village conflict and head-taking. Typically constructed with stone boulders and supplemented with wooden planks, the gates are closed during periods of *genna* (ritual restrictions) or periods of social unrest. In particular, they were shut in anticipation of potential threats, such as when tensions between villages escalated or when reports of imminent enemy intrusion were received. The number and configuration of gates vary by village: Ze has four, Bakie two, Ziumi two, and Tamphung one. Historically, the number of gates in a village corresponded to the number of *khels* (clan-based or territorial subdivisions), with each *khel* maintaining its own gate for purposes of defence, identity, and ritual function. In contrast, newly resettled villages such as Bakie typically feature two gates, symbolically representing the upper and lower divisions of the settlement rather than distinct *khel* affiliations. The wooden planks forming the main passages of these gates often bear carvings of human heads, mithun heads, weapons, and anthropomorphic figures, signifying martial prowess. The stone gates in Ze village are particularly well preserved, with some measuring 250 cm in height and 200 cm in breadth.

c). *Natural boulders name after an individual* (Plate 44)

In Bakie village, two large natural boulders located beside the village pathway are named after two individuals—one after a man named *Nsebekie*, and the other after his wife, whose name is lost to history.

d). *Teisie/Stone receptacle*

Similar to other Zeme in Nagaland, the Zeme of Manipur also observe the practice known as *Teisie*, wherein a hunter places a portion of the ear of the hunted animal on a stick at a designated location. However, a notable variation observed in Ze village, Manipur, is the absence of a permanent stone structure associated with this practice; instead, a specific site is informally designated for its performance. This ritual serves

a dual purpose: it functions as a communicative marker to inform others that a successful hunt has taken place, and it is also believed to act as a deterrent to the spirit of the hunted animal.

3.2. Monument Types

For the four Zeme villages of Manipur, the following monument types are identified in the surveyed villages:

- Type 1(A): Single standing stone (with platform) (Plate 33)
- Type 1(B): Single standing stone (without platform) (Plate 34)
- Type 1(C): Fallen Menhirs (Plate 35)
- Type 2(A): Twin standing stones (with platform) (Plate 36)
- Type 2(B): Twin standing stones (without platform) (Plate 37)
- Type 2(C): Alignment/Stone rows (Plate 38)
- Type 3: Not observed in the case of Zeme Nagas of Manipur
- Type 4(A): *Hedwa*/Stone circle (without platform) (Plate 39)
- Type 4(B): Not observed in the case of Zeme Nagas of Manipur
- Type 5(A): *Renei*/Stone platform (Rectangular, circular, square, oval shaped structures) (Plate 40, 41 & 49)
- Type 5(B): *Rausam*/Stone slab on platform (Commemorative) (plate 50)
- Type 6: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Manipur
- Type 7(A): Assorted Type A: *Hereupeutsu*/Skull repository (Plate 43)
- Type 7(B): Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual) (Plate 44)
- Type 7(C): Assorted Type C: Fetish stones (monolith or flat stone slabs, or any stone structure considered sacred) (Plate 45)
- Type 7(D): Assorted Type D: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Manipur
- Type 7(E): Assorted Type E: *Teisie* (no such receptacle type observed)
- Type 7(F): Assorted Type F: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Manipur
- Type 8: *Kirie*/Fortified village gates (Plate 47)

- Type 9: *Tsubau*/Cairn (Plate 46)

3.3. Overview of Monument Types

A total of 133 stone monuments has been documented during the field investigation and 14 distinct typological categories along with some interesting features. The distribution of the monument types are as follows:

Types	Description of Types of Monuments	Remarks	Frequency	Percentage
Type 1(A)	Single standing stone (with platform)	Observed	7	5.26%
Type 1(B)	Single standing stone (without platform)	Observed	18	13.53%
Type 1(C)	Fallen menhirs	Observed	6	4.51%
Type 2(A)	Twin standing stones (with platform)	Observed	5	3.76%
Type 2(B)	Twin standing stones (without platform)	Observed	3	2.26%
Type 2(C)	Alignment/Stone rows	Observed	2	1.50%
Type 3	Stone cluster	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 4(A)	<i>Hedwa</i> /Stone circle (without platform)	Observed	2	1.50%
Type 4(B)	Miniature stone circle (rituals)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 5(A)	<i>Renei</i> /Stone platform (rectangular, circular, square, oval shaped structures)	Observed	54	40.60%
Type 5(B)	<i>Rausam</i> /Stone slabs on platform (Commemorative)	Observed	17	12.78%

Type 6	Slab graves	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(A)	Assorted Type A: <i>Hereupeutsu</i> /Skull repository	Observed	1	0.75%
Type 7(B)	Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual)	Observed	3	2.26%
Type 7(C)	Assorted Type C: Fetish stones (Monolith or flat stone slabs, or any stone structure considered sacred)	Observed	1	0.75%
Type 7(D)	Assorted Type D: <i>Resu tsu/Reset tsu</i> /Oath stone	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(E)	Assorted Type E: <i>Teisie</i> /Stone receptacle	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(F)	Assorted Type F: <i>Tekwa/Tekoa</i> Commemorative water tanks	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 8	<i>Kirie</i> /Fortified village gates	Observed	10	7.52%
Type 9	<i>Tsubau</i> /Cairn	Observed	4	3.01%

Table 2: Showing Types, numbers & percentage of Monuments observed in the surveyed villages of Manipur.

Analysis of the typological dataset reveals that among the documented monument categories, Type 5(A) — classified as stone platforms — represents the most frequently occurring type, with a total of 54 recorded instances ($n = 54$). These platforms exhibit varied morphological configurations, including circular, rectangular, square, and oval forms. They are typically constructed from small stones and flat stone slabs and are occasionally elevated several metres above the ground surface. The next most prevalent group comprises the standing stone Types 1(A) through 2(C), with 41 documented examples ($n = 41$). Other identified monument types include *Rausam*

Type 5(B) (n = 17), village stone gates Type 8(n = 10), *Tsubau*/Cairn Type 9(n=4), *Hedwa* Type 4(A) (n=2), and with only a single recorded instance each, the natural boulder used for head-taking rites *Hereupeutsu* Type 7(A) and fetish stone Type 7(C).

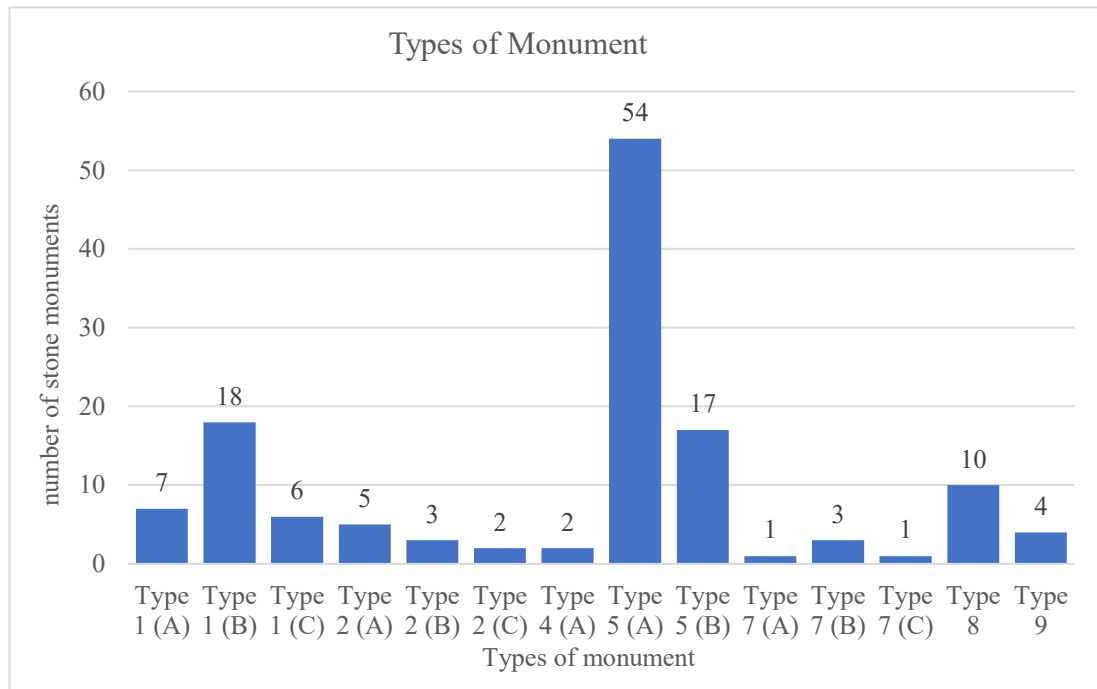


Figure 13: Graph showing types of monuments

A spatial analysis of the 64 standing monuments reveals discernible patterns in their orientation (Fig. 14). The distribution is as follows: northeast (NE) (n = 34), east (n = 11), indeterminate or fallen (n = 6), southeast (SE) (n = 4), north(N) (n = 4), west(W) (n = 4), and southwest (SW) (n = 1). These data suggest a marked preferential orientation towards the northeast, with decreasing frequencies in the directions of east, southeast, north, and west. The southwest orientation is minimally represented, indicating it was the least favoured among the observed orientations.

Ethnographic evidence supports these quantitative findings, suggesting that the preferred orientation—particularly toward the east—correlates with symbolic associations related to the rising sun. Informants frequently emphasized the importance of situating monuments along the village path leading to agricultural fields, with the monument facing the path. This orientation is believed to facilitate visibility and symbolic engagement with communal movement and the life-giving direction of the sunrise. Such practices underscore the interplay between spatial symbolism, ritual

intention, and everyday lived symbolism, ritual intention, and everyday lived geography in Zeme monumental traditions.

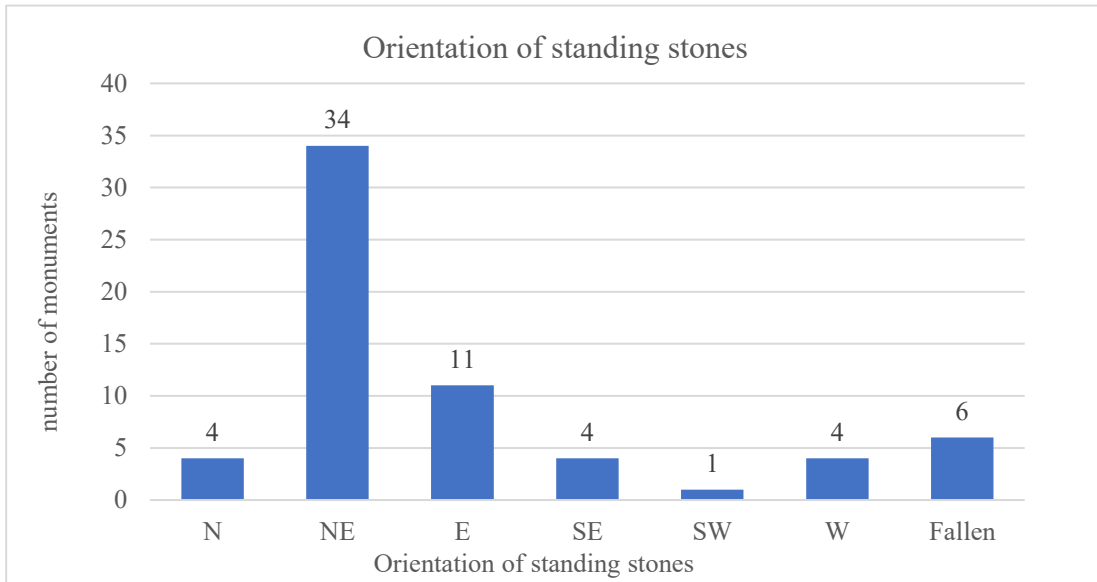


Figure 14: Graph showing the types of orientation of standing monuments

Out of 64 monuments documented, the majority of the documented monoliths falls within a volume range of 1- 1.5m³ (Figure 15). The biggest one being 5.14m³ and the smallest one among them 0.084m³ (*pepam*), both of which was documented in Ze village. According to the data, it shows that the volume distribution is highly variable.

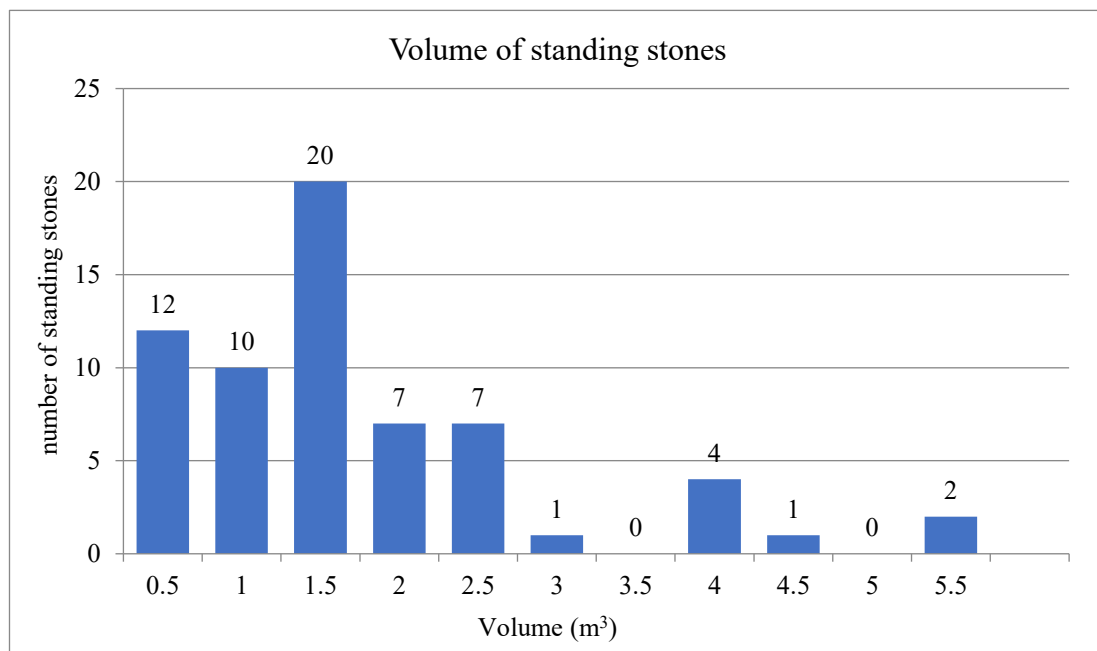


Figure 15: Graph showing the volume of monuments

Suggesting a high variation in the labour investment involved in the entire process of quarrying, pulling and erection. Field observation confirm that each monument is unique in its shape, size, showing unique individualized character.

A total of 54 stone platforms type 5(A)*Renei*, were recorded across the four surveyed villages in Manipur (Figure 16). Of these, 13 platforms have been either partially or fully disturbed. This disruption is primarily attributed to their original placement along pathways leading to agricultural fields. Subsequent changes in footpath routes, bypassing of certain tracks, overgrowth of vegetation, and minor landslides have contributed to the current state of inaccessibility and data loss for these structures.

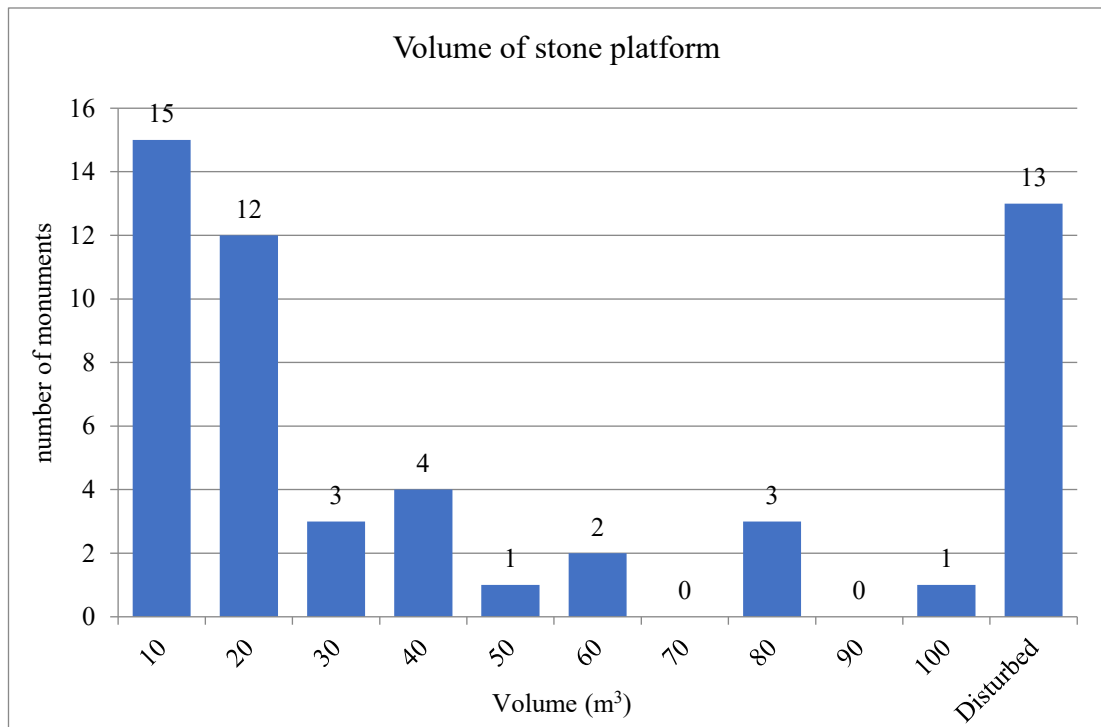


Figure 16: Graph showing volume of stone platforms

The volumetric analysis reveals significant variation, with platform sizes ranging from 1 m³ to 90.4 m³. The majority of platforms fall within the 0–10 m³ range, as indicated in the corresponding histogram. The largest recorded volume of a stone platform is found in Ze village, measuring approximately 90.4 cubic metres (m³). Notably, no two platforms exhibit identical volumetric measurements, underscoring a high degree of individuality in their construction. Ethnographic data further support this observation, emphasizing that each platform is considered unique, often reflecting

personal or familial attributes. This variability also suggests differential levels of labour investment, likely influenced by social status, available resources, and ritual or commemorative intentions.

3.4. Socio-Economic Organization

The Zeme communities of Manipur exhibit a predominantly egalitarian socio-political structure, akin to the other two counterparts, the Zeme of Assam and Nagaland. Social stratification is notably absent; all individuals within a village are regarded as equals, and communal life is organized along kinship and clan affiliations rather than formal hierarchies.

The Zeme practice an exogamous marriage system, requiring individuals to marry outside their clan. Kinship is structured around two principal moiety groups—*Heu/Hoi* and *Hau*—to which all clans are affiliated. The dual moiety system serves as a foundational element in both social organization and ritual practice. The formation of new settlements mandates representation from both moiety groups, reflecting their ritual interdependence. Ritual performances frequently require the participation of representatives from both *Heu/Hoi* and *Hau*, underscoring their centrality in ceremonial life. While intra-clan marriage is strictly prohibited, intra-village marriage is encouraged, and inter-village marriage is also permissible without cultural restriction.

Descent and inheritance follow a patrilineal system, as is common among Naga groups. Lineage is traced through the male line, and property, including land and ancestral rights, is transmitted from father to son. The Zeme family structure is patriarchal, with the father functioning as the head of the household. Major domestic decisions are typically made by the father; upon his death, leadership responsibilities pass to the eldest son. In cases where the eldest son is still a minor, the mother assumes the role of caretaker until the son reaches maturity. Although the nuclear family—comprising parents and their unmarried children—is the predominant domestic unit, instances of joint family living arrangements are also observed.

Upon marriage, it is customary for the couple to reside with the husband's family for a period of one year. After this transitional phase, the parents allocate a plot of land to the couple, enabling them to establish an independent household.

An integral institution within Zeme socio-cultural life is the *morung* system, which historically served both defensive and educational purposes. While the *morung* system originated as a mechanism for community defence during periods of head-taking, it also functioned as a primary site for transmitting cultural knowledge, social norms, and ethical behaviour. The male dormitory, known as *Rehangki*, is typically a distinct structure in the village, while the girls' equivalent, referred to as *Releiki*, lacks a dedicated building. Instead, young girls are hosted in the home of an elderly couple belonging to the same clan.

A notable observation arising from ethnographic interviews and participant observation is the existence of the *Laksi* (divorcee or women without her husband) dormitory—a social institution for divorced women. Unlike the *Rehangki*, the *Laksi* dormitory does not have a formal structure; instead, these women gather informally in the evening at the residence of a designated elderly couple. This practice reflects the Zeme community's nuanced approach to social reintegration and gender roles, particularly in accommodating individuals who do not conform to conventional household arrangements.

Agriculture constitutes the primary economic activity among the Zeme communities of Manipur. The dominant form of cultivation is shifting agriculture, locally referred to as *jhum*, although instances of terrace cultivation are also documented in certain areas. Rice serves as the staple crop and is cultivated alongside a range of secondary crops, including pulses locally known as *heraa*, chillies, taro, pumpkin, yam, mustard, etc. Fieldwork data revealed that during periods of food scarcity, the community relies on alternative subsistence strategies, resorting to the collection and consumption of *rechang* plants, taro, pumpkin, wild roots, and taro leaves.

In addition to crop cultivation, the Zeme engage in animal husbandry, primarily for subsistence. Domesticated and semi-domesticated livestock includes pigs, cows, mithun (*Bos frontalis*), dogs, chickens, etc. These animals serve dietary, ritual, and economic functions within the household economy.

Historically, the Zeme economy operated on a barter system. Agricultural produce such as rice and pulses was exchanged with neighbouring villages for salt and other essential goods. Prior to the widespread use of currency, bride price transactions

were conducted through the exchange of items including spades, spears, cowrie shells known as *hechen*, and other locally valued commodities, reflecting a non-monetized but highly structured economic system.

Labour in agricultural activities is typically distributed across members of the household. Men are primarily responsible for clearing forested areas and felling trees during the initial phases of *jhum* cultivation, while women take on critical roles in sowing, weeding, and harvesting. The *morung* system, encompassing the male dormitory *Rehangki* and the girls' dormitory *Releiki*, also plays a significant role in organizing agricultural labour. During peak periods such as planting season—when timing is critical for successful yields—members of the *morung* form cooperative work groups to assist one another with fieldwork, thereby reinforcing community solidarity and agricultural efficiency.

This collectivist ethic is further reflected in responses to social crises. In instances where a household is impacted by illness or other disruptions, members of the extended clan contribute labour to ensure that agricultural activities continue uninterrupted. Similar practices are observed in house construction, where the extended clan assists in the transport and placement of major structural components, such as the wooden posts. Once the foundational elements are in place, broader community participation is mobilized to complete the construction, underscoring the highly cooperative and interdependent nature of Zeme economic life.

3.5. Feasting

The Zeme villages in the Senapati District of Manipur, particularly Ze village, provide extensive insight into the feasting traditions practiced by the community. Ze village is considered the oldest among the Zeme settlements in the region, and much of the information regarding feasting practices has been derived from this village.

The Zeme observe a five-stage feasting cycle, consisting of the following stages: *Pepei Gala*, *Pepui Gala*, *Herei/Kerei Zau*, *Hetui Zau*, and *Nkai Zau*. According to an informant, in order to host a feast, a person must begin with marriage. This process is not simply about eloping or marrying someone of personal choice, but rather involves adhering to the wishes of the individual's parents and conforming to societal norms (P. Hau, personal communication, February 12, 2025). The marriage serves as

the foundation for beginning the cycle of feasting, marking the start of the host's journey through these stages.

i). *Pepei Gala*

Pepei Gala represents the first stage of feasting and lasts for one day. During this feast, the host slaughters animals such as pigs, cows, or mithuns (*Bos frontalis*), and invites the entire village to partake in the feast. There is no specific animal designated for slaughter, and the feast is open to all villagers. Notably, the wife and the husband of the family do not participate in the communal feast, they slaughter a chicken to partake privately in a new earthen pot. *Gala* is basically held to seek blessings from their ancestors. An informant from the village emphasized the customary initiation of the feast in the name of the host father, reflecting the community's embedded patriarchal structure (H. Hau, personal communication, July 28, 2025).

ii). *Pepui Gala*

The second stage, *Pepui Gala*, follows a similar structure to the *Pepei Gala*. The same procedures are followed, including the slaughtering of animals and the hosting of the village, though the specific details of animal selection or feast organization are not differentiated from the first stage. Upon completing the second stage, the host hunts for a stag locally known as *Kehie*, and the *Kehie* is presented to the *Rehangki* clansmen. In accordance with the customary practice, the host do not part take in the consumption of meat he has hunted, instead he killed a rooster for himself. Following this stage of the process, the host in-laws slaughter two to three pigs, which are subsequently offered to the host family. From these pigs, fifteen sizable portions of meat are prepared. One portion is retained by the host family, while the remaining fourteen portions are distributed among members of the *Pehaime* extended kin network. In reciprocation, each of the fourteen *Pehaime* families presents two *Gwapa* of rice (see Plate 59) to the host in-laws as a gesture of acknowledgment and appreciation.

iii). *Herei/Kerei Zau*

The third stage, *Herei* or *Kerei Zau*, lasts for four days and is typically held in November (Fig. 21). To host this feast, the individual invites the entire village

to his terrace field on the day of the harvest. In the evening, the villagers bring the harvested paddy rice to the host's house. While in the field, the host slaughters a pig and cooks it, and each participant is given a portion of the cooked meat, known as *Pekwa*. During lunch, they consume rice along with their share, and any leftovers are brought back home. This marks the beginning of the feast.

During the *Herei* or *Kerei Zau* feast, the host slaughters two pigs—a male and a female, both of which have been reared by them. The remaining animals are provided by the host's relatives, close friends or *Pehaime*, and clan members, as their contributions. The meat is then distributed to every household in the village, with fifteen large pieces allocated in total. Additionally, each household is required to contribute two vats of rice beer, while a widow is expected to provide one vat to the host.

The first day of the feast is dedicated to slaughtering the pigs. The butchering of the pig is ceremonially cut where a person from *Hauna* chop the meat first while *Hoina* holds the meat, and the 15 pieces of meat known as *Nnuunggi* is distributed among the villagers. The day ends with a communal meal for those who assisted in the preparation. The second day is called *Mipei mi*, during which all villagers partake in the feast, with the day spent in dancing, singing, and merrymaking. The third day, known as *Mipui mi*, is reserved for the women of the village to feast together, while in the evening, only clan members participate in the meal. On the final day, the focus shifts to distributing meat to relatives and those who helped in the feast's organization. iv). *Hetui Zau*

Hetui Zau, takes place between the month of August and September (Fig.21). It follows the same feasting process as *Herei/Kerei Zau*. The rituals and the distribution of food and rice beer are nearly identical to the third stage of feasting.

v). *Nkai Zau*

The final stage, *Nkai Zau*, takes place in November (Fig. 21). This feast is significantly larger, involving the slaughter of at least twenty animals, including cows and mithuns. Pigs are not included in the feast and only cows

and mithun's are used, as it is the highest feasting stage and unlike the previous stages, thirty portions of meat are distributed to the villagers. The ceremonial structure follows that of the *Kerei Zau*, but on a much grander scale.

3.6. Stone Selection and Stone-Pulling Process

Following the completion of the third phase of the feasting sequence, specifically the *Herie/Kerei Zaulu*, members of the Zeme community may initiate the construction of *Renei*, a stone platform which, unlike the traditionally circular form, may assume various configurations. In instances where the host intends to construct *Renei* on land not personally owned typically selected for its proximity to major paths or advantageous visibility prior consent from the landowner is required. This permission is generally accompanied by a compensatory offering. Notably, when such requests originate from the host, refusals are rare.

Upon securing the designated plot, the host returns to his residence to await a revelatory dream *hemang ndi*. A favourable dream signifies divine sanction and permits the continuation of construction; conversely, an unfavourable dream necessitates the search for an alternative site. The physical construction is undertaken by *Pekiname* (close relatives) and *Pepeiname* (clan members). Ethnographic accounts indicate that, for this occasion between 20 and 30 animals like pigs and mithuns are slaughtered. The feast is communal, involving the entire village. According to an informant, the initial stone used in the construction of a *Renei* platform must be contributed by a family deemed ritually appropriate—that is, a couple considered morally upright and free from any familial deaths within that year (H. Hau, personal communication, December 2, 2023). Only upon the placement of this first stone may the construction of the platform formally commence. Upon completion of *Renei*, the host slaughters a mithun and places its stomach on the newly built platform, symbolizing both the culmination of the land-based labour and the invocation of spiritual blessing. The construction of the traditional circular *Neigwa/Neiliem* necessitates the completion of the full cycle of feasting rites, culminating in the *Nkai Zaulu*. Given the significant economic demands of this ritual progression, it remains unattainable for many individuals. Fieldwork revealed only one completed such stone platform locally known as *Heiyile Neiliem* within the study area. Upon successful

completion of the sequence, the host acquires the right to dig a pond in his name. According to informants, the act of digging a pond is symbolic: the mud surrounding the water signifies protective containment of the individual's wealth, while the trapped water represents future prosperity and affluence (H. Hoi, Personal communication, December 8, 2021).

In contrast, the procedures associated with the erection of a standing stone differ significantly. Notably, the full sequence of ritual feasts is not mandatory. Instead, the process is marked by a series of symbolic, social, and ritual actions, including animal sacrifice and the hosting of a communal feast. A prerequisite for initiating the stone erection is marital status; the presence of a spouse is considered essential. Stone selection generally occurs in February or March. Upon identification of a suitable stone, the host returns home to await a revelatory dream. If the dream is deemed unfavourable, the stone is rejected and the search for another stone ensues. A favourable dream allows the process to proceed.

In May, a communal firewood-gathering event is organized, requiring the participation of all village members. The host distributes *tsehi* (a yeast used in brewing rice beer), which is then brewed communally. Ritual slaughtering of cattle and mithun follows to provide meat for the feast. In the evening, the firewood is ceremonially delivered to the host's household, symbolizing collective endorsement of the impending ritual. In August, the host summons ritually "clean" individuals—those who have strictly adhered to customary practices—from both the *Heu/Hoi* and *Hau* groups to clean the selected stone (Fig. 21). The presence of animal faeces on the stone during this process renders it unsuitable, requiring its replacement. Following stone selection, the host couple adheres to a series of ritual taboos, including the suspension of hospitality, abstention from the distribution of goods, and celibacy. These prohibitions remain in effect until the successful erection of the stone or completion of a *Renei/Neigwa* platform.

Two traditional methods for quarrying the stone were recorded. In the first, the desired outline is marked on the stone using an egg, after which a fire is lit beneath to aid in detaching the intended portion. The second, predating iron tools, employs a *kehie*/stag horn chisel to carve the stone.

In December, a designated day is set aside for binding the stone with durable ropes in preparation for transport. On the day of the stone-pulling, the *Tingnapei* (village priest) announces the event. Male members of the village gather at the site, where a rooster is placed beneath the stone. The *Tingnapei* then delivers a ritual invocation:

“Tangcu nang A gim gwet delo, ih henai ncu nzang tet nbam keyi ge nzang gwang delo, nang helu kehing tsu, nang ndo keyi be tei eh tet lo.”

(Translation: “Stone, you are mine. I have come today to take you to a better place. Prosperous stone, may your path be good as you go.”).

Following this, the villagers collectively pull the stone while chanting “*Hui...*” en route to the designated place of erection. During this procession, the host family, clad in ceremonial clothing, moves in and out about the house, deliberately avoid sitting down until the arrival of the stone as they believed that by doing so, they may disrupt the stone pulling process. The garments of the host are dressed by the *peki nkwet* (ritual helpers). Any physical obstructions, such as houses, are dismantled and later reconstructed at the host's expense.

Upon arrival, the host pours rice beer over a *plantain* leaf and spills a portion onto the stone before consuming it; the wife drinks her share without pouring. The *peki nkwet*—a young male and female from affluent families assisting the host—also consume the rice beer, followed by other participants. During the feast marking the stone’s arrival, a basket of meat in *Gwapa* (Plate 59) is distributed to each household. Fifteen portions of meat are reserved for male spirits and twelve for female spirits; these are ritually discarded along the stone’s path. On the third day, the stone is erected. Prior to erection, the *Tingnapei* offers another invocation:

“Tangcu nang bam keyi ni bam lulo, helu kelung, tak kehei tsu.”

(Translation: “Stone, may you stay in the good place—prosperous and wealthy stone.”).

The rooster sacrificed at the beginning is buried in the hole prepared for the stone, and male villagers assist in its erection. The stone is subsequently anointed with the blood of animals sacrificed during the feast, signifying its ritual consecration. According to ethnographic testimony, the erection of such stone monuments is believed to involve supernatural agency, which purportedly enables the placement of large stones with minimal sub-surface anchoring typically to a depth of only an arm’s

length. This claim was corroborated through field observation during site visits, where several fallen monoliths were found to conform to this description (Plate 55).

Following the stone's erection, the host family sacrifices a hen and a rooster using a bamboo knife *Tampe*. The hen's orientation upon death is considered a divinatory sign: if the body falls eastward, it symbolizes success and longevity; westward, by contrast, portends misfortune. The *peki nkwet* consume the respective chickens, with the female consuming the hen and the male the rooster. The hearts of the slaughtered animals are consumed by the host's clan, with the tip of each heart reserved for the host himself, marking the conclusion of the ceremonial activities. A dietary restriction is then observed by the host family for one week, during which time their diet is limited to rice, rice beer, salt, chilies, and meat from the sacrificed animals.

Upon completing this final observance, the host family visits the wife's parental home to partake in a closing ritual meal. If the host intends to travel after the rituals, it is imperative that they depart in an eastward direction—a symbolic gesture believed to usher in a prosperous future.

3.7. Social Status

In Zeme society, individuals who successfully complete the various stages of feasts are known as *Hekuihera teikelume* (Translation: - "Person/Individual who have hosted Feast of Merit"). One of the markers of this status is the right to decorate one's house with a central post made from a special wood known as *Ngga tsing* (*Phoebe haisiana*) (Plate 58). The presence of a central post made from *Ngga tsing* in a private residence, as opposed to a morung or *Rehangki*, signifies that the house's owner has completed the entire series of feasts or has hosted up to the *Herei* or *Kerei Zaulu* feast and ornate the house entrance with the horns of animals slaughtered during the feasts. Furthermore, upon the death of a feast host, the individual's grave is marked with a wooden structure carved in the form of a banana flower stalk, in addition to the display of animal horns, symbolizing both ritual accomplishment and social distinction.

Hosting such feasts not only elevates the individual's status within their clan but also garners respect in the broader community. Additionally, the children of those who host these feasts are regarded as desirable marriage partners, due to the social prestige and the wealth associated with the successful completion of such ritual.

3.8. Domestic Architecture

The Zeme villages, located at relatively high altitudes, display distinctive architectural characteristics that are closely informed by the region's topography and environmental conditions. Residential structures are predominantly rectangular in form and are constructed using materials readily available from the surrounding forested landscape. A notable architectural feature observed in traditional Zeme houses is the design of the thatched roofs, which extend downward on both sides of the eaves to a level nearly in contact with the ground (Plate 57). Ethnographic data indicates a general preference for orienting the front facade of the house toward the east, a practice symbolically, represent a prosperous and a good life associated with the direction of the rising sun. However, this orientation is not universally applied and is frequently modified based on the spatial constraints imposed by the size and shape of the building plot.

Construction materials are derived almost entirely from local sources, underscoring the community's sustained engagement with its immediate ecological setting. Timber is utilized for vertical structural supports, thatched leaves serve as the primary roofing material, and bamboo is commonly used for the fabrication of roof structure and walls. These building choices reflect not only ecological adaptation but also the cultural continuity of vernacular architectural knowledge within the Zeme community. The Zeme, like the other Nagas, keep their barns separately in the house compound for fear of fire (Plate 60).

Zeme houses commonly consist of three distinct compartments, although the dimensions of each room can vary depending on the available space of the plot. Upon entry, the first compartment is an open porch and functions as a storage area for firewood and a designated area for the pigs. The second room serve multiple functions; as a guest room, storage unit for essential household items such as *hepa/kapa*, smaller rice barn, agricultural tools, chicken coop, etc. The third room, situated at the rear of the house, contains a central hearth, two beds, and is divided into two areas: the upper section is designated for the head of the household, while the lower section is reserved for the spouse.

In cases where a male child marries, the newlyweds initially occupy the third room, while the parents relocate to the second room, where they establish a separate

hearth. After a year, or when financially viable, the family typically constructs a new home for the couple, allowing them to transition to their own residence.

In instances where a family is sufficiently affluent to host a significant feast, particularly the *Herei Zaulu*, the third stage of such a feast, they decorate the house with a prominent post made from a special type of wood, *ngga tsing* (*bonsum*, *Phoebe haisiana*) (Plate 58) positioned at the entrance. Additionally, the heads of animals slaughtered during the feast are displayed on the front post of the house, symbolizing the family's achievements and social standing.

3.9. Landscape, Social Memory and Stone Monuments

The Zeme villages of Manipur, akin to many upland communities in Northeast India, are characteristically located on or near hilltops—choices informed by practical considerations. Within these elevated landscapes (Figs. 17-20), the placement of stone monuments substantially reconfigures the spatial and social perception of the terrain. These monuments, along with the associated ritual and communal activities involved in their erection, become integral to the landscape, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by it (Plate 38). They are what Wangjin (2014) aptly observes, “this landscape, by means of monumental space, is actively imagined and recreated” (Wangjin, 2014, p. 325).

The preferred location for erecting a stone monument is typically one that ensures its visibility to the broader community and to individuals passing through the area. Commonly chosen topographical features include hilltops, ridgelines, rocky outcrops, riverbanks, minor watercourses, and areas proximate to natural ponds or terraced wet-rice fields (see Jamir, 2019). In this way, monuments are strategically positioned along pathways leading to agricultural fields, near public water sources, or at the entrances to residential compounds (Fig. 17). Their visibility within these frequented pathway routes ensures their continued relevance as landmarks of social memory and personal achievement.

At Ze village, standing stones are predominantly located either within the village epicentre or around its periphery. When situated within the village, they are often placed adjacent to traditional communal spaces, such as playgrounds, to ensure frequent interaction and maximum visibility (Plate 48). When positioned on the village

outskirts, they are typically aligned along paths everyday foot paths connecting to neighbouring settlements, thereby enhancing their visibility to both villagers and travellers (Fig. 17). In contrast, *Renei* (sitting platforms) are commonly placed alongside footpaths leading to agricultural fields. With the exception of recent constructions, the majority of these platforms are intentionally located in areas frequently traversed by the host's family—particularly their parents—or by villagers en route to daily tasks. These platforms serve dual functions: they act as commemorative structures that celebrate social status, and also offer resting points for those engaged in agrarian and cattle pastoral routines (Plate 49).

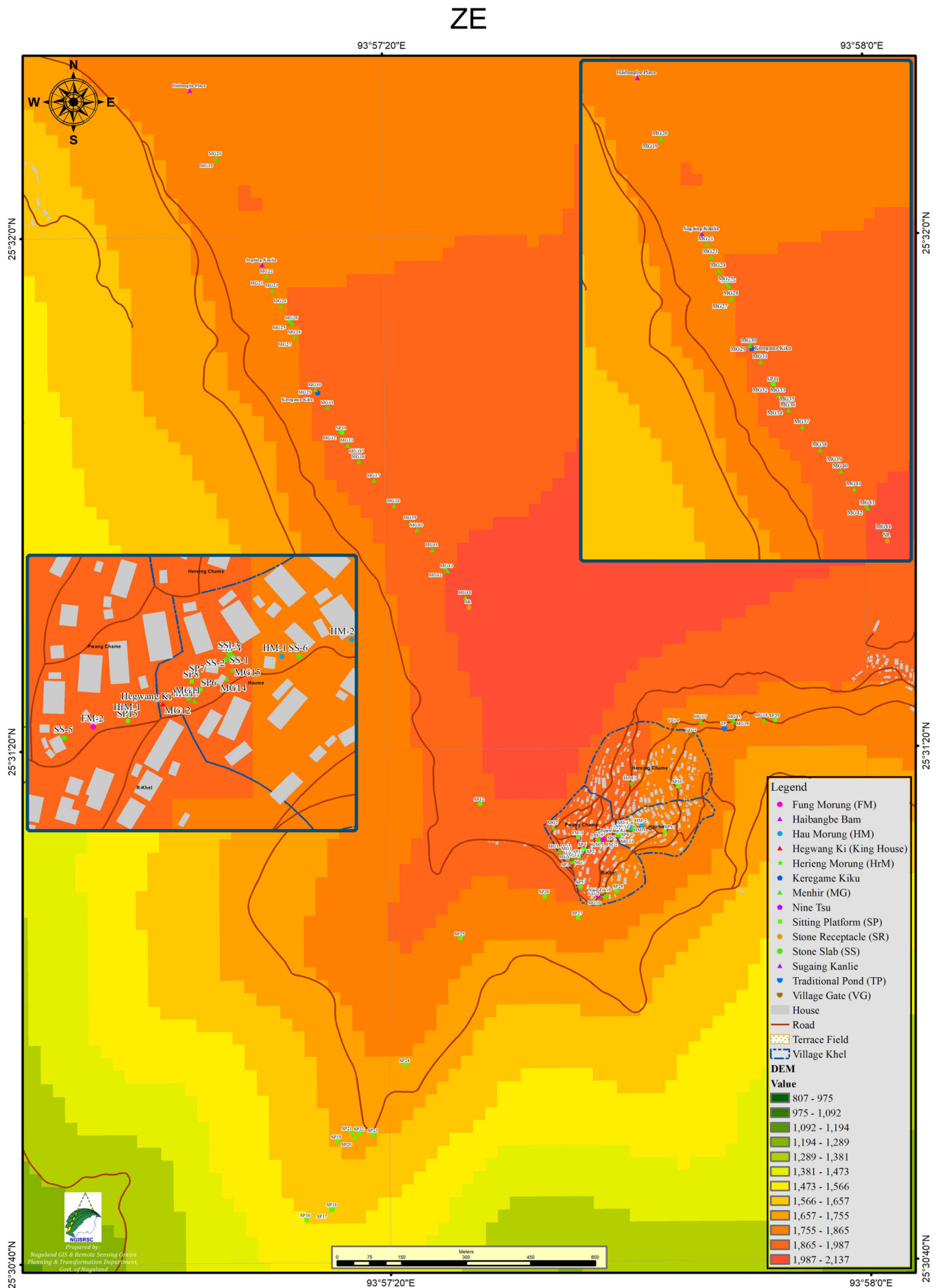
Another prominent structure, the *Tsubau* (Plate 46) a substantial stone heap featuring a sitting platform—is typically found along agricultural pathways beyond the village perimeter, with at least one located near the village gate. They were constructed by affluent individuals and historically served not only as commemorative structures but also as strategic watchtowers during periods of inter-village conflict particularly during village warfare. Additional structures of this type have been documented along the routes leading to *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields, especially near *Teisie*, a site used by the hunters to deposit a small portion of their kill as part of a ritual practice. The monuments are placed either on elevated terrain, at crossroads, or near cultivated fields which underscores the significance of visibility in monumental practice. Their positioning offers both a moment of physical respite during treks across challenging topography and a site of social reflection. Through their enduring physical presence, these monuments not only commemorate the accomplishments of individual hosts but also embed such achievements into the collective social memory of the community. Regular interaction with *Hedwa*, *Tsubau* and other monuments by the villagers during routine activities such as farming or water collection, ensures the continuous circulation of narratives linked to the individuals and rituals associated with them.

As Jamir (2019) notes, “.... the durability of the material enhances the monumental nature of the structures for social memories to be encoded, not only for the present generation but as a vehicle through which memories can be transmitted to the future” (Jamir 2019, p. 15), these monuments in the study area function as mnemonic devices that preserve and communicate social history, reaffirming communal identities and reinforcing continuity between past and present. The

repetition of associated stories and ritual practices perpetuates the memory of the host while simultaneously embedding these narratives within the collective memory of those who encounter them in daily life.

Numerous oral traditions are associated with commemorative stones found in the region. Amongst these, certain narratives are particularly prominent due to their symbolic or extraordinary content. One such monument is a large standing stone in Ze village, measuring approximately 3.20 meters in height, 1.90 metres width and 32 cm thick. Affixed near its summit is a smaller stone, which, according to local accounts, was placed there by an individual named *Riehing*. It is claimed that *Riehing's* ability to place the stone at such a height indicates he was of exceptional stature. Consequently, the monolith was named *Riehing tsukai* (Plate 53) by the local community (N. Hoi, personal communication, December 10, 2021).

Another notable example is the *Tekaing sangtung* (Plate 54), which stands at approximately 1.65 meters in height, 50 cm in width and 30 cm in height. According to an oral account, local tradition holds that the stone symbolizes the physical stature of a man named *Tekaing*, whose height was so extraordinary that height of his genitalia was said to have corresponded with the top of the stone (N. Hoi, personal communication, December 10, 2021). While the veracity of such accounts cannot be empirically verified and must be regarded as part of the region's legends-historical corpus, the continued presence of these monuments underscores their role in preserving and transmitting collective memory. These stones, and their associated stories surrounding them, remain integral to the social and cultural identity of the community.



BAKIE

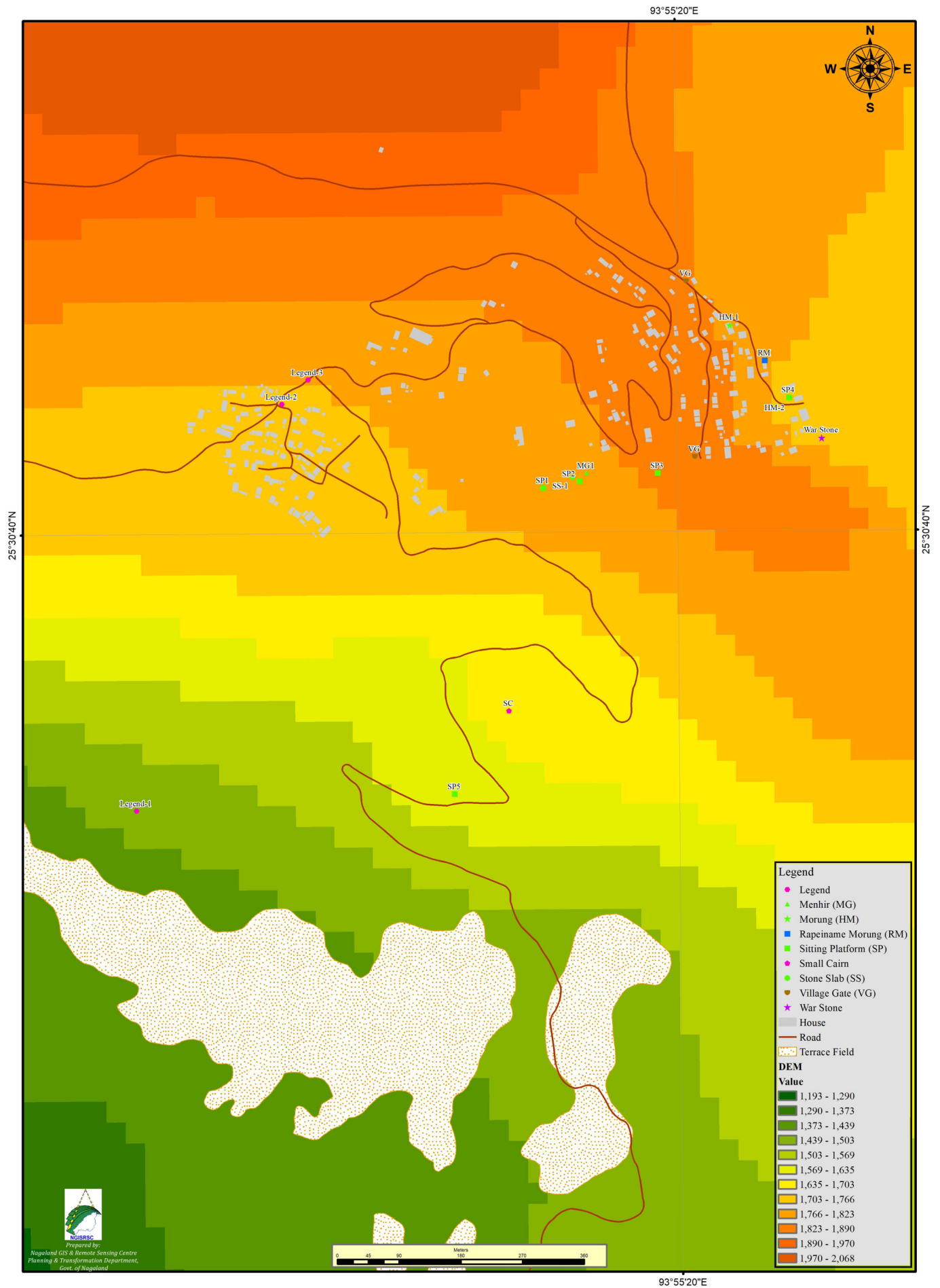


Figure 18: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Bakie village.

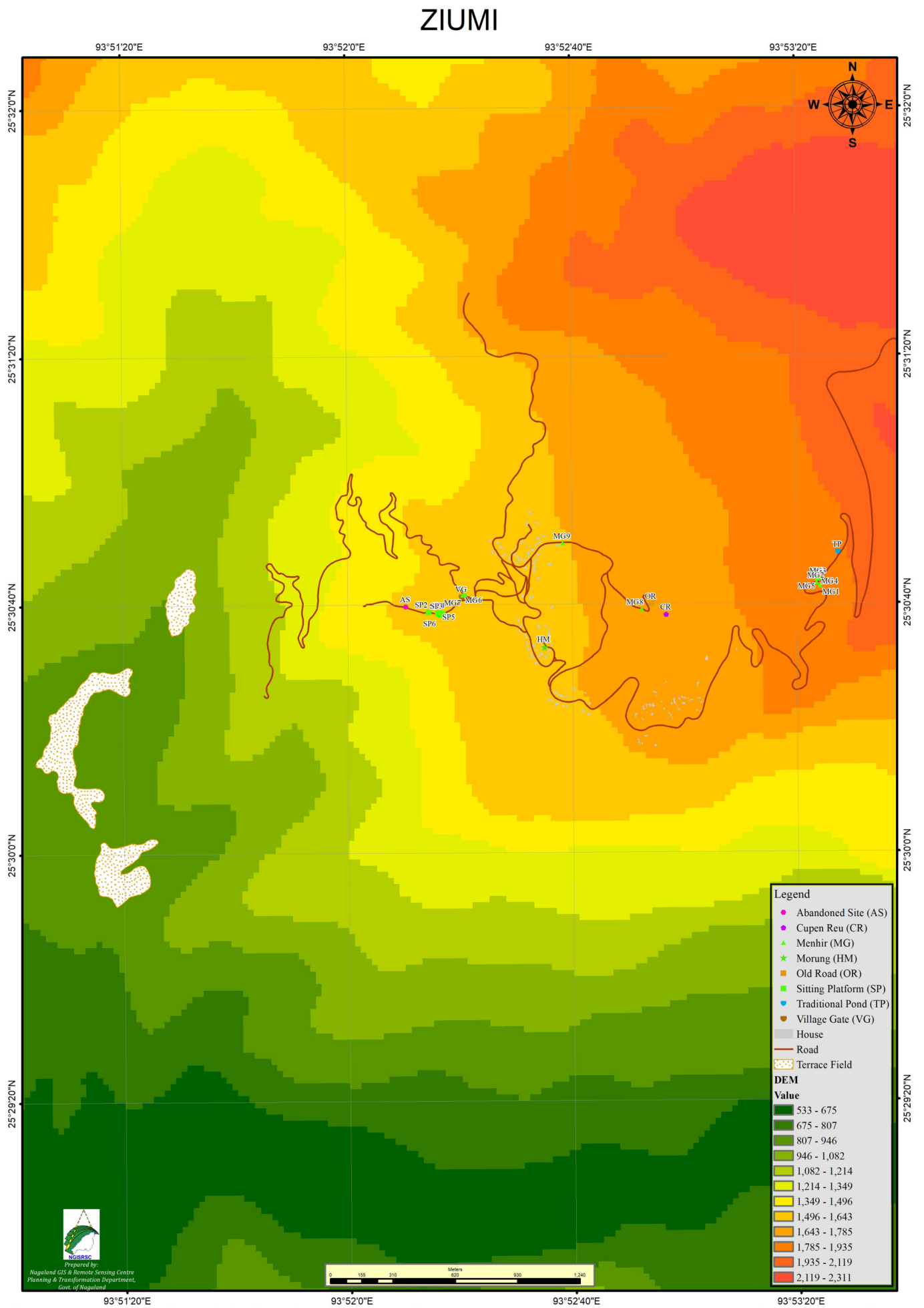


Figure 19: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Ziumi village.

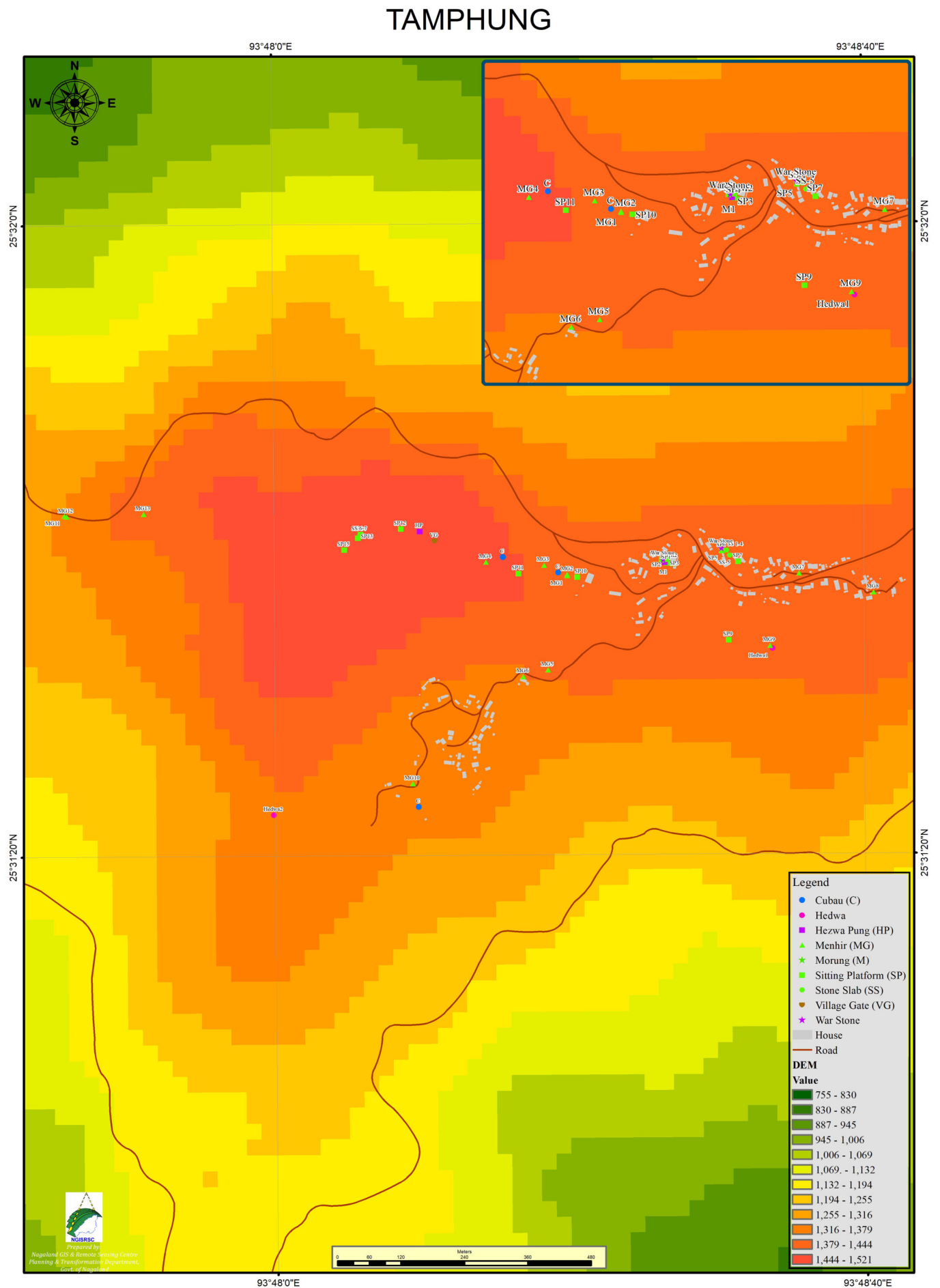


Figure 20: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Tamphung village.



Plate 33: Single standing stone with platform, Ze village



Plate 34: Single standing stone without platform, Ze village



Plate 35: Fallen menhirs, Ze village



Plate 36: Twin standing stone without platform, Ze village



Plate 37: Twin standing stone with platform, Ze village



Plate 38: Alignment/Rows of standing stone, Ze Village



Plate 39: *Hedwa*/Stone circle, Tamphung village



Plate 40: *Neigwa*/Circular stone platform, Tamphung village



Plate 41: *Renei*/Stone platform, Ze village



Plate 42: Stone slab on a platform, Ze village



Plate 43: *Hereupeitsu*/natural boulder for head- taking rituals, Bakie village



Plate 44: *Nsebekie tsu*/Natural boulder named after an individual, Bakie village



Plate 45: *Ninne tsu*/Fetish stone, Ze village



Plate 46: *Tsubau*/Cairn, Tamphung village



Plate 47: *Kirie*/Fortified village gate, Ze village



Plate 48: Standing stones erected near the traditional playground, Ze village



Plate 49: *Renei*/Stone platform constructed on the way to the field, Ze village



Plate 50: *Rausam*/Stone slab on a platform, Tamphung village



Plate 51: Sitting platform, Ze village



Plate 52: Standing stones erected as boundary, Ze village



Plate 53: *Riehing tsukai* – a small stone placed on top of a monolith, Ze village



Plate 54: *Tekaing sangtung*, Ze village



Plate 55: Photo plate showing the buried portion of a fallen monolith, Ze village



Plate 56: *Teizai tekwa*/Ritual Pond, Ze village



Plate 57: A partially dilapidated traditional house of Zeme Naga, Ze village



Plate 58: Central post in the house of a feast host who completed a series of feast, Ze village



Plate 59: *Gwapa* – hand woven bamboo basket



Plate 60: *Hebau*/Rice barn

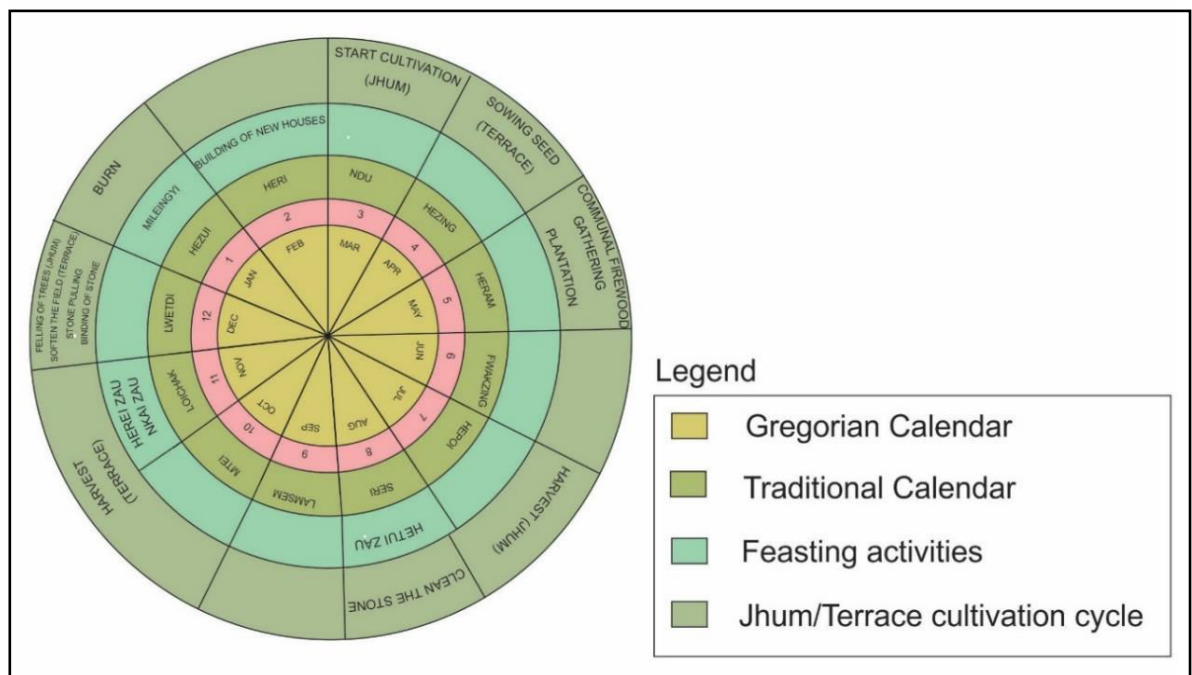


Figure 21: Calendrical cycle chart showing different month in local dialogue, important ritual months relating to feasting and agricultural cycle of Zeme Naga Manipur.

CHAPTER 4

Stone Monuments of Zeme of Dima Hasao, Assam

This chapter examines the typological variation of the stone monuments situated in the Zeme-inhabited villages of Hejaichak, Hejailo, Laisong, and Hangrum, located within the Dima Hasao Autonomous council of Assam. Analysis encompasses the socio-economic functions of these monuments, mechanisms underlying stone selection process, and the symbolic and material dimensions through which monumentality articulates social stratification. In addition, the study explores the relationship between monumental and domestic architectural forms, as well as the spatial and mnemonic linkages that connect these structures to the surrounding cultural landscape.

The study sites are situated in the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council formerly North Cachar Hills District which is characterized by significant demographic representation of Indigenous communities, comprising approximately 71% of the district's population (Census of India, 2011). Geographically, the region is marked by its diverse topography, with the Barail Range playing a defining role in shaping its temperate microclimatic conditions, in stark contrast to the more humid climatic patterns of the adjoining plains of Assam.

Dima Hasao shares its boundaries with Nagaland and Manipur to the east, the Barak Valley region to the south, Meghalaya to the west, and the districts of Hojai, Karbi Anglong, and West Karbi Anglong to the north and northwest. Haflong, the administrative headquarters, accommodates both the office of the Deputy Commissioner and the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC), thereby serving as the district's political and bureaucratic centre.

The District hosts a plurality of tribal communities, notably the Dimasa, Kuki, Zeme, Hmar, and Karbi, along with smaller groups such as the Khelma, Hrangkhel, and Biates. Additionally, significant non-tribal populations—including Bengali, Nepali, and Assamese communities also reside in the District.

Hejaichak is located in the Mahur subdivision, approximately 42 kilometres from Mahur town and 72 kilometres from Haflong. According to the 2011 Census, the village comprises 58 households, with a total population of 346 individuals (181 males and 165 females). Laisong, also situated within the Mahur subdivision, lies about 45 kilometres from Mahur and 75 kilometres from Haflong, with a population of 1,235 individuals (625 males and 610 females) across 214 households. Hangrum is located 61 kilometres from Mahur and 92 kilometres from Haflong; the 2011 Census records a population of 398 (197 males and 201 females) distributed across 71 households. Hejailo, a relatively small settlement, consists of 20 households and a total population of 116 individuals (59 males and 57 females), based on the same census data.

Archaeological data and Ethnographic interviews were conducted in all four villages; however, particular emphasis was placed on Hejailo due to the community's continued adherence to the religion locally known as *Paupai renet*. This village represents a unique ethnographic context wherein traditional religious customs and ritual practices are still actively maintained. According to one respondent, while the current generation continues to observe the ancestral animist practices, there is growing uncertainty regarding the ability or willingness of future generations to maintain these traditions, given the increasing complexity and frequency of associated rituals and taboos (*gennas*).

It is noteworthy that Hejailo is a relatively recent settlement, established approximately 58 years ago following a community-led relocation from the former site of *Nimlou*. The impetus for this migration, as indicated by oral history, was rooted in intra-community religious divergence. The former settlement had experienced a shift towards the *Heraka* faith a religious reform movement initiated in the early 20th century by *Haipou Jadonang* and later institutionalized by *Rani Gaidinliu*. This movement aimed to unify diverse traditional beliefs under single monotheistic belief and reinterpret traditional Zeliangrong polytheism. Due to the resulting divergence in ritual practices and cosmological structures, the animist community perceived cohabitation as untenable, thus prompting a section of the group to leave and establish a new settlement - Hejailo.

4.1. Typology of Monuments: Structural Forms and Functional Classifications

This section provides a systematic typological classification of monumental structures among the Zeme Nagas of the Dima Hasao District in Assam. The classification is primarily based on structural attributes and their corresponding socio-cultural functions. Identified categories include commemorative and memorial stone structures, ritualistic installations, and other culturally significant stone features. In comparison to the Zeme communities in Manipur and Nagaland, the Zeme Nagas of Assam exhibit a more limited range of monument types. The following are the monument types:

4.1.1. Commemorative and Memorial Stone Structures

a). *Tsusumbe/Menhirs (Standing Stones)* (Plate 61-63)

The term *Tsusumbe* is derived from the Zeme words *tsu* ‘stone’ and *sumbe* ‘standing’, denoting an upright stone. These standing stones are typically arranged in rows, with a larger stone representing the male individual being commemorated, and smaller stones signifying the women with whom he had relationships. Ethnographic data collected from four Zeme villages indicates that such structures were recorded in Hejaichak and Laisong. In local terminology, these configurations are referred to as *Heram-leu-sumbe*, wherein *heram* denotes ‘land/place’, ‘*leu*’ refers to a girl, and *sumbe* implies ‘erection or standing’. The structure, therefore, symbolizes a location where a relationship with a woman is commemorated through a standing stone.

In Hejaichak, a sequence of 60 standing stones was recorded, while in Laisong, two sites were identified: one comprising 5 miniature standing stones (most of which have been damaged or displaced due to site development), and another site comprising 30 miniature stones. The tallest recorded standing stones measured 60 cm in height, 30 cm in length, and 21 cm in thickness, while the smallest measured 15 cm in height 12 cm in length 5 cm in thickness (Plate 61).

Another standing stone was documented in Hangrum village, commemorating a man's martial prowess (Plate 62). It measures 120 cm in height, 54 cm in breadth, and 12 cm in thickness. A separate structure within the same village, while not related to feasting, functions as a defensive post or boundary marker and is located at the village periphery (Plate 63). These typically measure approximately 120 cm in height, 90 cm in length, and 20 cm in breadth.

The construction of such commemorative monuments often involves the participation of youths from the *Hangseuki* (male dormitory), for this, preference is given to his/her own *Hangseuki*. However, there are instances where both the *Hangseuki* cooperatively work together and assist in the transportation and erection of stones. Upon completion, they engage in a ritualistic chant, “*Rehoi...Hoi...*” at the host's residence, where rice beer is typically offered in return. Contributions from extended kin networks may support the ritual by providing rice beer, and the host family traditionally reciprocates with gifts, including valuable items such as conch shells. While there is no fixed temporal framework for erecting such structures, they are commonly constructed post *Hega ngyi* festival during the agrarian off-season, typically winter or early spring.

b). *Herautsu/Slab grave stones* (Plate 64)

Herautsu, derived from *Herau* ‘grave’ and *tsu* ‘stone’, refers to the practice of placing stone slabs over burial sites. These structures are among the most prevalent megalithic monuments observed among the Zeme of Assam. Earlier ethnographic literature of Bower (1950) states that the size of the stone correlates with familial wealth; however, contemporary oral testimonies indicate that the size of the stone is more closely associated with the age of the deceased (S. Newme, personal communication, 25 February 2022).

Typically, the gravestone is installed three years post-burial. However, in circumstances where the village is relocated, the slab may be installed earlier. The commemorative act of stone pulling is accompanied by the offering of rice beer; food is generally reserved for relatives arriving from adjacent villages. This ritual is typically performed during the *Ncui-ngyi* period (late November to December), marking the ceremonial farewell to the deceased.

Recorded dimensions vary significantly. For instance, in Hangrum village, a slab measuring 264 cm in length, 142 cm in breadth, and 37 cm in thickness was documented, while in Laisong, smaller slabs were observed -94 cm in length, 69 cm breadth 12 cm thickness.

c). *Hekua/Stone platforms* (Plate 66 & 67)

The term *Hekua*, is derived from the word *Kaube* which means to ‘to pile together,’ it basically means ‘pile of stones.’ The constructed stone platforms, generally built in

honour of individuals noted for bravery (e.g., warriors or tiger hunters) or socioeconomic status. Here, there are three variants that exist: rectangular or square platforms erected to honour males for valour, and while circular platforms built by wealthy individuals. These structures are constructed exclusively for men in the former case.

Animal sacrifice is not a mandatory component in the construction of *Hekua* stone structures, nor are formal rituals necessarily performed during the process. When an individual intends to initiate construction, they typically approach members of the village council as well as their affiliated youth dormitory group to request assistance. Site selection is carried out by the host, who assumes responsibility for determining the location of the structure.

Upon the completion of construction, youth participants engage in a traditional chant, “*Rehoi...hoi...*” directed towards the host’s residence. Subsequently, they are offered rice beer and at times food as a gesture of hospitality. The majority of the rice beer is provided by the host, though extended family members and close associates also contribute to its preparation, thereby reinforcing communal ties and reciprocity.

Historically, as an expression of gratitude, the host would present the assisting dormitory with conch shells, a practice that has evolved into monetary compensation following the introduction of a cash economy. There is no prescribed calendrical period for construction; however, *Hekua* are most frequently erected in the post *Hega ngyi* festival period—typically in late winter or early spring—when villagers experience a seasonal break in agricultural labour and thus possess greater temporal availability.

In Laisong village the *Hekua*, measuring 210 cm in length, 126 cm in breadth, and 100 cm in height serves as a commemorative monument recognized for their gallantry in war, specifically head-taking. A particularly exceptional case involves a headless female figure placed alongside a *Hekua*, symbolizing a woman who was killed and taken away during a raid, which is notable given that *Hekua* are traditionally reserved for men. *Hekua* are constructed only for men and this exclusivity in gender underscores a cultural distinction in memorial practices within the community (Plate 67).

Additionally, the *Bamdun*, meaning "to seat," is a separate but related circular memorial structure used to honour affluent individuals (Plate 68). Its form and social function diverge somewhat from the *Hekua*, indicating a wider spectrum of commemorative practices tied to social hierarchy and recognition.

The *Hepie*, deriving its name from the term "to watch," is another unique memorial erected solely by acknowledged head-hunters in the community (Plate 65). This practice signifies an exclusive insider status linked to the headhunting tradition, reinforcing social identity and valorisation through architectural symbolism.

Together, these memorial forms illustrate a complex cultural system of remembrance and honour in Laisong village, where physical monuments embody both individual valour and collective memory within the sociocultural and gendered frameworks of the community. Such practices provide valuable insight into local conceptions of heroism, social status, and memorialization linked to warfare and affluence.

4.1.2. Assorted Stone Structures

a). Table stone/Proclamation stone (Plate 69)

A flat stone slab 154 cm length, 125 cm breath, 25 cm thickness and the vertical stone beneath the slab is about 25 cm in height is placed atop a platform of smaller stones, raising the overall height to approximately 35 cm. In Hejaichak, this functions as a proclamation stone used by local priests and is pulled by *Hangseuki* youth members.

b). Hejua tekung/Long jump boulder (Plate 70)

Derived from *Hejua* 'long jump' and *tekung* 'solid base/foundation', this boulder is placed ceremonially upon village establishment, signifying foundational permanence. It is positioned near the men's long-jump area adjacent to the *morung* (male dormitory); the *Hejua tekung* is considered immovable and sacred.

4.1.3. Assorted Types

Tekoa/Commemorative water tanks (Plate 71)

Although not lithic in the true sense, *Tekoa* ponds are significant commemorative features. Constructed primarily in memory of well-regarded women, the construction process of *Tekoa* is as akin to the *Hekua* platforms. The host solicits assistance primarily from members of his or her own dormitory. Typically, no animals are sacrificed, and ritual elements are absent during the digging process. The task of digging is undertaken collectively by dormitory members, and upon completion, the group proceeds to the host's residence while chanting "*Rehoi.....*" and is offered rice beer. Close relatives of the host also contribute materially, most commonly through provisions such as rice beer. Upon the conclusion of the work, the host expresses gratitude by presenting the dormitory with tokens of appreciation—these may include monetary compensation and items such as conch shells, which are regarded as precious objects. There is no fixed calendrical period designated for pond construction; however, it is generally undertaken during the winter and early spring months, when agricultural responsibilities are reduced and villagers possess greater temporal flexibility.

The ponds are usually constructed nearby the natural spring, sometimes in the jungle, which also symbolizes the gendered division of labour, as it is particularly women's role in water collection. Instances of *Tekoa* constructed in memory of men are rare (N. Nriame, personal communication, August 1, 2025). Field observations indicate that the majority of the ponds exhibit varying degrees of physical disturbances, predominantly attributable to the cessation of their traditional usage. Several of these structures have undergone modifications with cement and rod in recent times. However, one representation of the pond shows 91.44 cm breadth, 182.88 cm of length and 100 cm depth (Plate 71).

Additionally, ponds may be constructed in memory of individuals who suffered unnatural deaths, such as by fire. It is believed that such individuals died in thirst, and their spirits remain unfulfilled. The construction of a pond is thus intended to symbolically quench their longing and facilitate spiritual peace.

4.2. Monument Types

For the four Zeme villages of Assam, the following monument types are identified in the surveyed villages:

- Type 1(A): Single standing stone (with platform) (Plate 62)
- Type 1(B): Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 1(C): Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 2(A): Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 2(B): Twin standing stones (without platform) (Plate 63)
- Type 2(C): Alignment/Stone rows (Plate 61)
- Type 3: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 4: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 5(A): *Hekua*/Stone platform (Rectangular, circular, square, oval, shaped structure) (Plate 67)
- Type 5(B): Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 6: *Herautsu*/Slab graves (Plate 64)
- Type 7(A): Assorted Type A: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 7(B): Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual) (Plate 72)
- Type 7(C): Assorted Type C: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 7(D): Assorted Type D: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 7(E): Assorted Type E: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 7(F): Assorted Type F: *Tekoa/Tekwa*/Commemorative water tank (Plate 71)
- Type 8: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam
- Type 9: Not observed in the case of Zeme Naga of Assam

4.3. Overview of Monument Types

A total of 78 monuments were recorded during field investigation. They are categorized under seven typological categories along with some interesting features. The distribution of the monument types are as follows:

Types	Description of Types of Monuments	Remarks	Frequency	Percentage
Type 1(A)	Single standing stone (with platform)	Observed	2	2.56%
Type 1(B)	Single standing stone (without platform)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 1(C)	Fallen menhirs	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 2(A)	Twin standing stones (with platform)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 2(B)	Twin standing stones (without platform)	Observed	1	1.28%
Type 2(C)	Alignment/Stone rows	Observed	3	3.85%
Type 3	Stone cluster	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 4(A)	<i>Hedwa</i> /Stone circle (without platform)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 4(B)	Miniature stone circle(rituals)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 5(A)	<i>Renei</i> /Stone Platform (rectangular, circular, square, oval shaped structures)	Observed	10	12.82%
Type 5(B)	<i>Rausam</i> /Stone Slabs on platform (Commemorative)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 6	<i>Raukap</i> / <i>Herautsu</i> /Slab graves	Observed	58	74.36%
Type 7(A)	Assorted Type A: <i>Hereupeutsu</i> /Natural boulder for Head taking rites	Not observed	Nil	Nil

Type 7(B)	Assorted Type B: Natural boulders (named after an individual)	Observed	1	1.28%
Type 7(C)	Assorted Type C: Fetish stones (Monolith or flat stone slabs, or any stone structure considered sacred)	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(D)	Assorted Type D: <i>Resu tsu/Reset tsu</i> /Stone slab/Oath stone	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(E)	Assorted Type E: <i>Teisie</i> /Stone receptacle	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 7(F)	Assorted Type F: <i>Tekoa/Tekwa</i> /Commemorative Water tank	Observed	3	3.85%
Type 8	<i>Kirie</i> /Fortified village gates	Not observed	Nil	Nil
Type 9	<i>Tsubaul</i> /Cairn	Not observed	Nil	Nil

Table 3: Showing Types, numbers & percentage of Monuments observed in the surveyed villages of Dima Hasao, Assam.

An analysis of the typological dataset indicates that among the identified monument types, Type 6 classified as Slab graves, recorded the highest (n=58). This is followed by Type 5(A), classified as Stone platforms (n=10), the third represents as Type 2(C) Stone rows and Type 7(F) Water tank recorded as(n=3) each, followed by Type 1(A) Single standing stone with platform(n=2) and lastly Twin standing stones without platform and Natural boulder named after an individual(n=1) each.

Among the 99 standing stones recorded from three major sites (two in Laisong, one in Hejaichak), no uniform orientation pattern was observed (Fig. 23). One site (n=30) exhibited northeast (NE) orientation, another (n=5) southwest (SW), and the final site (n=60) aligned north–south (NS). Single standing stones (n=2) were oriented towards the north(N) and northeast (NE), and the twin standing(n=1) stone oriented

southwest respectively. Ethnographic data suggests that orientation is determined by the individual patron, with a general preference for placing monuments adjacent to footpaths, enhancing public visibility and social recognition through display in prominent locations.

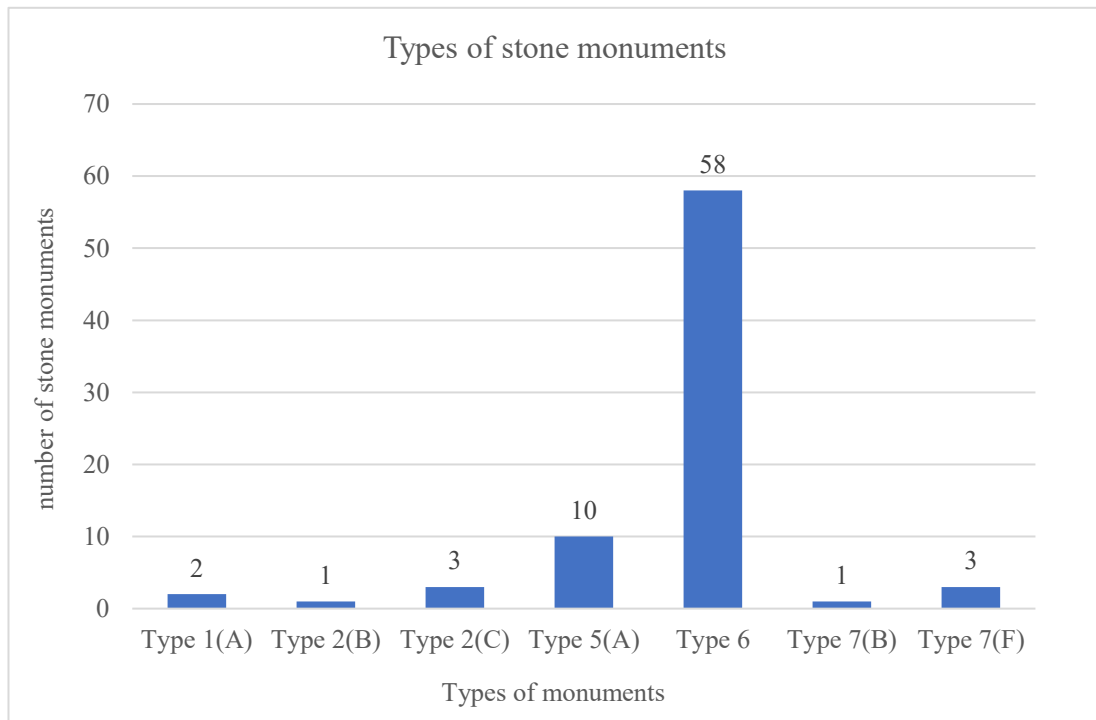


Figure 22: Graph showing types of monuments

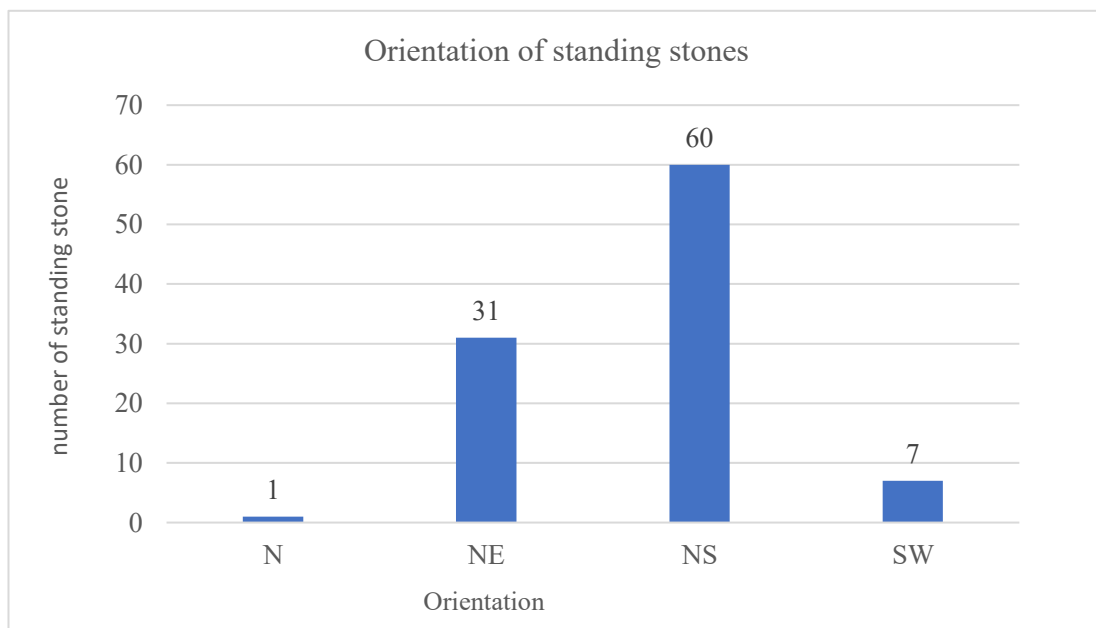


Figure 23: Graph showing the type of orientation of standing monuments

In contrast to the other two Zeme groups of Nagaland and Manipur, the volume of all 99 standing monuments from the Assam Zeme falls within a narrow range of 0–0.5 m³ (Fig. 24). The largest recorded monument measures 0.155 m³ and is identified as a village defence *tsusumbe* stone erected at Hangrum village. The smallest, measuring 0.003 m³, is associated with the commemoration of a man noted for his romantic affairs with multiple women documented at Hejaichak village. The data indicate minimal variation in the volumetric dimensions of these monuments, as all measurements fall within the lowest volume category. Moreover, the overall scale of these structures is notably smaller in comparison to those documented in the other two groups. This suggests a relatively limited investment of labour and resources in their construction, further distinguishing them from the monuments found in other regions.

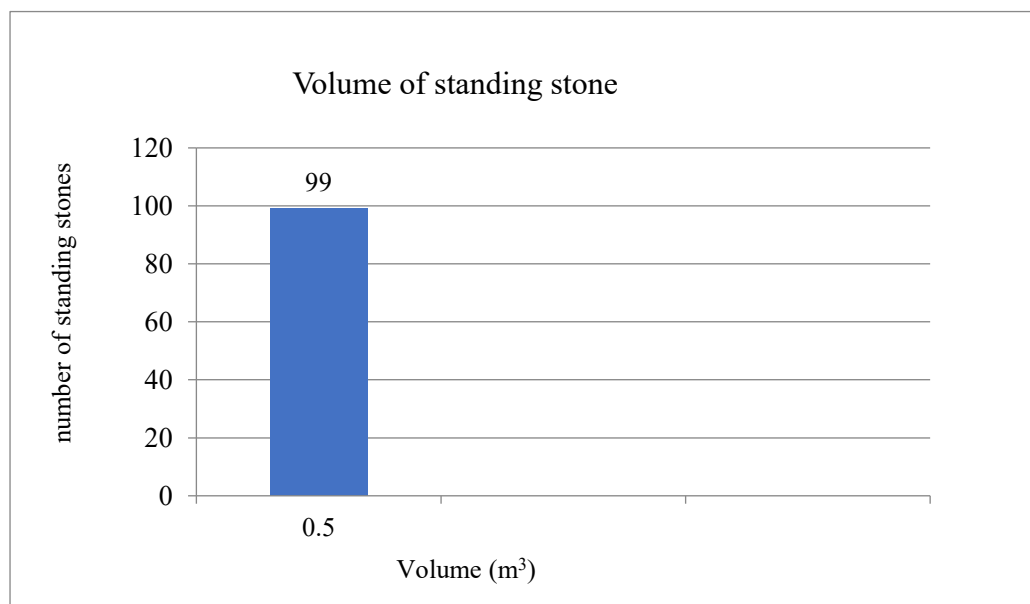


Figure 24: Graph showing the volume of stone monuments

Out of the 10 stone platforms initially identified, two were found to be significantly disturbed and thus excluded from detailed analysis. As a result, only eight platforms from the four surveyed villages were documented with complete measurements. According to the data presented (Fig. 25), the volumes of the platform's ranges between 0 and 10 m³. Notably, no two platforms share identical volumetric measurements, indicating variation and individuality in construction. The largest platform, measuring 7.32 m³, is located in Laisong village, while the smallest, with a volume of 1.875 m³, is situated in Hejaichak village. Both were reportedly

constructed by affluent individuals as commemorative structures erected during their lifetimes.

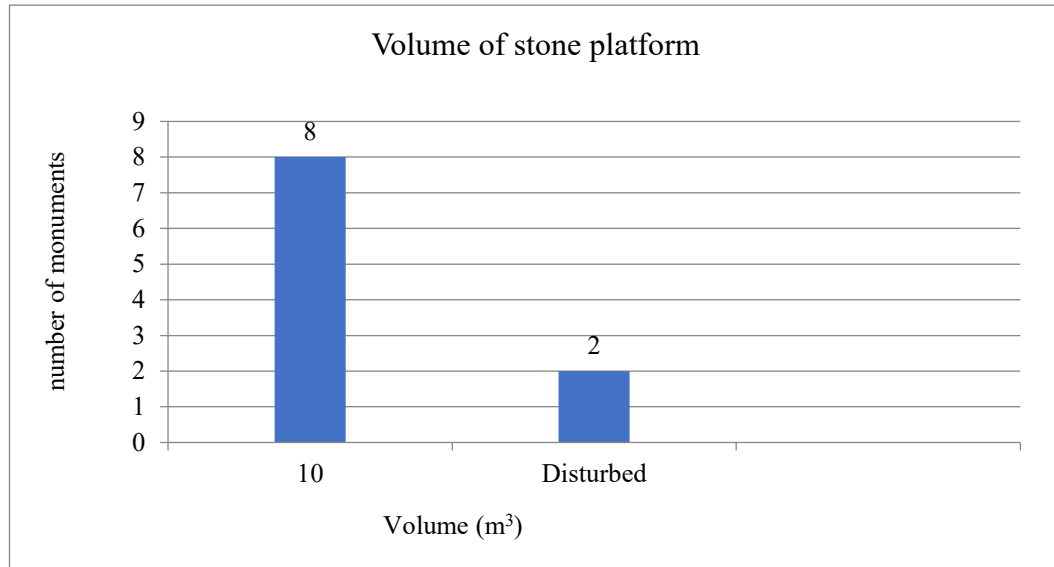


Figure 25: Graph showing the variation in volume of stone platforms

4.4. Socio-Economic Organization

Akin to the other two states, the Zeme society of Assam is patrilineal, with descent traced through the male lineage. It is an exogamous community, (marriages unpermitted within the same clan) and follows a patrilocal system of residence, where the newlywed couple resides in the husband's household. The Assam Zeme are primarily divided into two main moieties: *Nriame* and *Newme*, although additional clans such as Nkwame, Ngame, Daime, and Npame have also emerged over time (Betts, 1950). Oral narratives collected during fieldwork corroborate earlier ethnographic accounts, indicating that the two foundational ancestors, Namtunglung Nriame and Nrisuang Nriame, were among the first to settle in the Nianglo area. Subsequent migrations led to the incorporation of additional groups into the region. For example, a segment of the Nriame moiety, originating from Mbaupungwa, self-identified as Bauriame. The Newme clan, which later established a presence in Nianglo areas (Laisong, Hangrum, and Hejaichak) is said to have migrated from the Tousem region of present-day Manipur. Other segments of the Newme clan, particularly those residing near Mahur town in Nriajeunam village, trace their migration from Nkialwa in Nagaland. Additionally, some Newme clans now residing beyond Haflong town report ancestral origins from Ketiang in Manipur and from Ndunglwa in Nagaland.

The Ndaime clan reportedly migrated from the village of Nkau, located in the present-day Liangmai region of Senapati district. The *Pame* clan has a two-way migration narrative: one group, referred to as Nruang Pame, originated from Tamenglong, Manipur, and includes forebears with Rongmei affiliations; the other group, known as Ngam-Pame, migrated from Ngam in Nagaland. Both lineages are collectively identified as ‘Pame’. The Pame clan and Kuame clan is believed to have migrated from Tousem, Manipur.

The Zeme society in Assam, as in its counterparts in Nagaland and Manipur, is marked by a fundamentally egalitarian social structure. There is no codified class hierarchy within the village setting; instead, social organization is primarily based on kinship, age-grading, and communal reciprocity, reflecting broader patterns of social egalitarianism characteristic of many indigenous communities in the region.

In central Zeme society, social organization is characterized by a division into two theoretically exogamous moieties, designated as *Nriami* (*Nriame*) and *Neomi* (*Newme*) (Betts, 1950). Among the northern Zeme, analogous divisions exist, although they are referred to by different nomenclatures, including *Hau* and *Heu*, or alternatively *Pame*/*Mpamei* and *Newme*/*Neomi*. Despite regional variations in terminology, the fundamental dual structure remains consistent across Zeme communities. Betts (1950), in her work refers to a story on the origin of the two moieties. The narration of the folklore goes as follows:

“Nriami was the son of a female spirit called Heratingrangpui. One day an egg fell from the sky and landed near Nriami’s house; he built a fence round it and watched it, and at last it broke open and Neomi came out. Nriami then claimed that he was the elder and therefore the master, but Neomi disputed this, saying that he came from heaven and so the more important. Neomi married Nriami’s daughter. In course of time their descendants multiplied and spread out from Nui their place of origin” (Betts, 1950, p. 29).

Each moiety is further subdivided into *tsami*, which are extended patrilineal family units. These *tsami* typically reside within a single village; however, in certain cases, members of a single *tsami* may be distributed across multiple settlements due to multiple migrations. Traditionally, Zeme society adheres to a nuclear family structure, encompassing a married couple and their unmarried children. Additionally, single-parent households, with or without children, are also recognized as family units. Although the nuclear family is the typical arrangement, joint family structures are

occasionally observed. Upon marriage, a son typically resides with his parents for the first year before being allocated a portion of land by his parents, which to build a separate residence. The father assumes the role of the family head, responsible for making all major decisions. Inheritance is patrilineal, with unmovable property passed down from male ancestors and further divided among sons upon their marriage and establishment of their own households.

Upon reaching marriageable age, a man proposes marriage to a woman through intermediaries, typically an aunt or relative, who contacts the girl's family. Traditionally, arranged marriages were more common than love marriages, and elopements were rare. After marriage, the couple initially resides with the groom's family for a year, after which they move into a new home provided by the groom's family. The Zeme predominantly practice monogamy, although instances of polygamy do occur, albeit infrequently.

The Zeme population in villages remains relatively small due to the practice of shifting/jhum cultivation land scarcity, and high infant mortality rates. Social cohesion is notably strong, with clan members providing mutual support during times of illness, crisis, or in fulfilling communal tasks such as farming, house construction, and pooling resources for grave slabs etc. The societal structure operates on reciprocity, where the exchange of assistance is a fundamental aspect of community life.

Work in the field is primarily carried out by the male head of the household, his wife, and unmarried daughters. The young unmarried sons are exempted from domestic and fieldwork, and are mainly assigned for village guards, especially during headhunting times. The male members are responsible for clearing the jungle, setting fire to it, sowing seeds, and threshing crops, while the female members handle tasks such as sowing, reaping and weeding. In addition to agricultural work, men engage in activities such as hunting, fishing, house building, and basketry, whereas women are tasked with fetching water and firewood, pounding rice, brewing, cooking, and weaving.

Rice is the staple food of the Zeme people, and its cultivation is of central importance. A person who has an abundance of rice is regarded as wealthy. Shifting cultivation remains the primary agricultural method, a practice sustained across generations. In addition to rice, secondary crops such as maize, millet, taro, pumpkins,

cucumbers, beans, chillies, sugarcane, and cotton are cultivated. During periods of food scarcity, locally referred to as *Herakum* the Zeme people rely on wild roots, palm tree products, wild leaves, and banana stems as alternative food sources.

In addition to subsistence farming, the Zeme cultivate cotton and chillies in surplus, which are traded in neighbouring markets for salt. During the fieldwork at Hejailo village in 2022, a respondent mentioned that they still have this barter system with Semkhor village (I. Nriame, personal communication, February 24, 2022). Salt is a critical import, especially in the central Zeme region, alongside other essential goods such as hoes and cooking pots. Prior to the introduction of coinage, bride prices were paid in livestock, specifically cattle, mithun, dogs and pigs.

A distinctive characteristic of the Zeme, particularly evident among the central Zeme villages of Assam, is the practice of cycle migration. This rotational settlement strategy appears to have emerged as an adaptive response to environmental constraints affecting agricultural viability in the region—namely, limited land availability due to factors such as elevation, slope gradient, water scarcity and the spatial distance between village sites and cultivable fields. In response to these limitations, the Zeme developed a cyclical migration or rotational settlement system. This practice entailed a historical pattern in which communities gradually descended from the Barail Range to lower altitudes, occupying a series of sites in succession and eventually returning to earlier settlements after a period of time.

Such a cyclical pattern of movement represents a distinctive form of mobility not commonly observed among other Naga groups (Betts, 1950; Bower, 1952). Notably rare within both Naga societies and the broader Assamese context, this migratory tradition influenced not only the spatial organization of Zeme villages but also had profound implications for their socio-economic structures. Agricultural practices and the spatial patterning and distribution of stone monuments were closely intertwined with this pattern of movement.

As Longkumer (2007) notes, the establishment of new village sites was accompanied by ritual practices wherein original leaders were reinstated in accordance with customary land tenure systems. Over time, villages would relocate in search of arable land, yet previously inhabited sites were not permanently abandoned. Instead, they were left fallow, often retaining visible remnants of earlier habitation such as

defensive structures, house platforms, and monumental architecture. This pattern of cyclical return thus underscores a complex relationship between mobility, memory, and material culture in Zeme society. It was observed that the Zeme communities in Assam did not practice shifting settlements as a cultural tradition, but rather as a response to practical survival challenges. These included the need for arable land, scarcity of water resources, and, in some cases, outbreaks of disease within villages (N. Nriame, personal communication, August 1, 2025).

4.5. Feasting

Among the Zeme communities of Assam, the practice of stone pulling vary significantly from those in Nagaland and Manipur. In Assam, two primary categories of stones are recognized in these rituals: *Heram-leu-sum-be* (standing stones) and *Herau-tsukhang* (gravestones). The former is associated with personal life-histories, particularly romantic relationships. Individuals erect these stones to correspond with the number of romantic relationships they have had during their lifetime. The stones are selected by the individual himself, and subsequently transported to the designated location by members of his *Hangseuki*. Notably, this type of stone-pulling ritual does not necessarily involve a grant feast for the labour invested instead, after the construction, members assisting the pulling and are treated with rice beer, and are compensated monetarily upon completion of the task. In earlier times, they are paid with precious ornaments like conch shells.

In contrast, the slab graves *Herau-tsukhang* is integrated into a more elaborate ritual framework, typically observed during the annual *Ncui/Nchui Ngyi* festival, held in the months of November and December (Fig. 30). This ritual cycle spans thirteen days, with distinct functions assigned to specific days. The first eight days are largely uneventful in ceremonial terms. On the eighth day, known as *Hekak tam*, animals are slaughtered; however, only the innards are consumed on this day. The remaining meat is reserved for consumption the following day, *Kering ngyi*, which also marks the ceremonial placement of *herau-tsukhang* over the grave.

According to informants from Assam, there is no fixed day for stone-pulling; however, the process must be completed prior to *Ncui ngyi*. Once the stone is placed and the ritual meat is consumed, the Zeme believe that the soul of the deceased

transitions into the gravestone. The subsequent day, *Hekak*, is observed as a communal fast. All members of the village, with the exception of children, participate in the fast, which is believed to possess healing properties for the sick. Villagers abstain from entering their homes until noon. Upon the conclusion of the fast, the village priest *Tingkupeu* performs a ritual proclamation at the village gates, reciting the following invocation:

“Hekak ting cang delie, Hera kaneu medu heneu tadu, Hera herei gadelie, Kechai medu pekalia gangdu, kering me ailia Wangdu”

(Translation: “The old year is over, the person fasting can stop and eat. No more disturbance, the dead person goes to the world of death, the living return to the land of the living.”)

The priest repeats this proclamation while moving between the village gates. Subsequently, the families who participated in the slab grave stone-pulling ritual perform a ritual cleansing bath, and later in the evening, the host relatives and guests, offer rice beer as part of the observance. This gathering also serves as a New Year celebration. Importantly, family members refrain from sleeping on this night, driven by the belief that dreaming of the deceased may invite misfortune.

The subsequent day, referred to as *Heragua*, is traditionally designated for the ritual expulsion of malevolent spirits. During this period, villagers customarily carry black ginger locally known as *Hega* and avoid re-entering their homes until the completion of the prescribed ceremonial activities. The priest, accompanied by his assistant, walks from the upper to the lower end of the village proclaiming:

“Herabai, Herabai, aram kelua hera bam mak lei. Nki hera patingna teu mak beram tet lu lau”

(Translation: “Spirit, Spirit go away. Go to the places where no ritual is performed.”)

Following this ritual, villagers remain indoors for the remaining time of the day. The priest and his assistant conclude the day's observances by sacrificing a dog, which is subsequently consumed by him and his assistant only. The final day of the festival, *Herapui*, is designated as a day of rest, marking the conclusion of the ritual cycle and the return to ordinary life.

In her ethnographic work, Ursula Graham Bower (1950), notes that the size of gravestone slabs varies significantly and is often influenced by the family's economic capacity. She observes that, “The slabs vary in size; families of small means cannot provide the food and drink necessary to entertain the pullers of a large slab, and must

be content with a stone which can be moved by only a few men. The well-to-do can afford large slabs, such as one at Laisong which measured 6 feet long, 5 feet wide, and 9 inches thick, and required 80 to 90 men to move it” (Bower, 1950, p. 25).

While this observation may hold true in certain contexts, data collected from four villages in Assam—particularly from the community of Hejailo, where traditional practices are still observed—suggest that the size of the stone is not necessarily an indicator of economic status. Rather, informants emphasized that stone size correlates with the age of the deceased; larger stones are typically reserved for elderly individuals, whereas smaller stones are used for younger deceased and the size of the stone is not particularly important, as selecting and using the stone is a personal choice, what is done by the sons-in-law who finds the stone stands as final (S. Newme, personal communication, 25 February 2022).

Another significant monument associated with ritual feasting is the construction of *Hekua*, typically undertaken by individuals who have attained social distinction—such as successful warriors—or by affluent individuals seeking to commemorate their achievements. A comparable practice involves the construction of ponds, which may also be built in honour of wealthy individuals who have hosted the village. One informant recounted the example of a pond constructed in honour of his maternal grandmother.

Additionally, there is a unique ritual practice of pond-digging in the case of death caused by fire. In such instances, it is believed that the presence of water in the pond may alleviate the suffering of the deceased's spirit. Notably, this form of ritual construction does not involve feasting.

4.6. Stone Selection and Stone Pulling Process

The selection of stones for the standing stones and slab graves among the Assam Zeme does not involve any specific ritual. For slab grave stones, stone pulling typically occurs in November and early December, prior to the *Hekak* ritual, which takes place in December, and the slab graves are pulled by wooden sledge (Plate 73). The Zeme believe in life after death, and during the *Hekak ngyi* ceremony, it is believed that the soul of the deceased is transferred to the stone. Once a stone is chosen, the village priest, or *Tingkupeu* informs the villagers about the upcoming stone pulling, which is

announced at the proclamation stone. After the announcement, the villagers especially all the abled male proceed to the site.

According to an informant from Hejaichak village, the host family provides rice beer to the pullers on the day of the stone pulling, although food and meat are not typically offered. Due to the significant costs involved, the host family attempts to complete the stone pulling in one day. However, there are instances where the stone pulling process extends over several days. The rice beer for the event is typically pooled together by family members, and relatives assist in its preparation. In instances where the stone proves difficult to move, an egg is broken and smeared on the stone to appease it, ensuring that it moves to its desired location (T. Nriame, personal communication, February 24, 2025)

Although women do not participate directly in the physical act of stone pulling, they play a supportive role by providing rice beer to the pullers. Regarding the placement of stones, the individual for whom the stone is pulled does not need to seek permission for its location. In the case of grave markers, the slabs are placed directly above the grave, typically within the house compound. For cenotaphs and small menhirs, careful consideration is given to their placement in locations that ensure maximum visibility within the community social space.

4.7. Social Status

Stone monument practices among the Zeme are deeply intertwined with social status and communal identity. Monuments such as standing stones, stone platforms serve as symbolic representations of an individual's achievements, social standing. Erecting these monuments often signifies recognition of personal feats, such as martial prowess or exemplary conduct within the community. The presence of these monuments in public spaces, often along footpaths or other high-visibility locations, functions not only as a form of commemoration but also as a means of asserting one's status within the society.

In particular, the standing stones, accompanied by smaller stones like *Heram-leu-sum-be* reflect a historical focus on relationships and personal honour, especially in the context of one's romantic or sexual exploits. In former times, a person achieving this feat in liaisons with the ladies are not only shown in his monuments, however,

during the ceremonial occasions like festivals, the man is entitled to wear a single hornbill's tailfeather upright in his hair and this separates a man achieving this feat from others because the virgin boy cannot wear this and it is believed that if he does it they are believed to go bald (Bower, 1950, p. 54). In contemporary times, however, there is a noticeable reluctance among the younger Zemes, particularly those who have converted to Christianity, to openly discuss or celebrate the narratives associated with these monuments. This shift indicates the changing cultural and social dynamics within the community. The Zeme practice of erecting these memorials along prominent pathways further underscores their intent to ensure that their names and deeds are recognized by passersby, thereby maintaining their legacy and social visibility within the community.

4.8. Domestic Architecture

In the Zeme dialect, the term for a house is *ki*, which is linguistically and functionally distinct from *Hangseuki*, the term for the communal youth dormitory, or *morung*. The typical Zeme dwelling is architecturally vernacular, constructed primarily from locally available organic materials (Plate 74). The roofing is traditionally thatched, referred to as *nsie/nggai*, although in regions such as Hangrum, where thatch is not readily available, fan-shaped palm leaves are substituted (see Bower, 1950). The house's framework is built from timber, while the walls are composed of interwoven bamboo strips a technique that provides both ventilation and insulation.

The roof is supported by substantial wooden beams and carved columns, often displaying intricate decorative motifs. These structural elements highlight the advanced carpentry and aesthetic sensibility inherent in Zeme craftsmanship. In areas lacking access to thatching grass, palm fronds serve as a functional alternative.

The front section of the house, referred to as *kisoa*, functions as a semi-public reception area. Seating is arranged in this space to accommodate guests, underscoring its social function as a liminal zone between the public and private domains of the household.

Upon entering the dwelling, the first internal room, known as *namsung*, is typically used for practical storage. It houses firewood, a wooden mortar *kapa* for husking rice, and a plank-enclosed pen used for rearing small livestock such as pigs.

This room also contains *nruirak* (chicken roosts), as well as a horizontal bamboo beam from which utilitarian implements such as spades, rain shields, fishing traps, and craniums and horns of hunted animals are suspended. These items serve not only functional purposes but also signify the subsistence activities and status of the household.

The main room, termed *kilung*, is characteristically dark due to the absence of windows—a consistent architectural feature across all three states inhabited by the Zeme population. Central to this space is the hearth *mang*, constructed by placing three upright stones in a triangular formation. The hearth serves as the principal cooking area and also functions as a social nucleus of the household. Above the hearth, wooden trays are suspended in vertical tiers for drying agricultural produce and preserved food items such as chillies, unhusked rice, and meat.

This central room also houses cooking utensils and *teko ping*, bamboo tubes used for carrying water. Adjacent to the hearth, the men's sleeping area is typically located on the right side of the house, furnished with bamboo and wooden plank beds. On the opposite side lies the women's sleeping area, along with a collection of household goods. Among these stored items is the *nsung*, a traditional basket used to secure valuables such as conch shells, ceremonial garments, and the family's *hega* stone—an object imbued with ritual and symbolic significance.

Beyond the main room lies an auxiliary space known as *kit-sai -nkua ki*, which serves multiple residential and functional purposes. It may be used as a guest room, storage space, or accommodation for elderly parents or widowed daughters. In the case of a newly married son, this room often functions as temporary lodging until he and his spouse establish a separate household.

In Zeme settlements of Assam, rice barns are traditionally located outside the primary residential compound. This spatial separation is a preventive measure against fire hazards and reflects the importance attributed to food security and architectural risk mitigation within the domestic context.

4.9. Landscape, Social Memory and Stone Monuments

The landscape of Zeme villages in Assam is notably characterized by the presence of stone monuments, which serve as enduring markers of collective memory and cultural

identity. Upon entering these settlements, gravestones are prominently visible often located outside household compounds or alongside village footpaths (Figs. 26, 27, 28 & 29). These gravestones function not only as funerary markers for the deceased interred beneath them but also as tangible symbols of memory embedded in the physical and social fabric of the community (Plate 64).

Slab graves are traditionally situated within the domestic compound or just inside the village gates, signifying the intimate spatial and emotional ties between the living and the dead. The act of pulling and erecting these stones is imbued with ritual and memory, forming a permanent association between the monument and the experiences surrounding its creation. As Khongreiwo (2014) articulates, “In the case of a memorial to a deceased, the size and nature of the monument erected in his honour might have been determined largely by the socio-political importance he held in society; or by the economic capacity of his family, or even by the intensity of the living people's fear of the spirits and their belief in the eternity of the soul or life after death, for they erected megalithic monuments to contain the wandering souls of the dead” (Khongreiwo, 2014, p. 296). Among the Zeme of Assam, belief in an afterlife is widespread, and slab graves are regarded not merely as commemorative structures but also as sites of spiritual residence. The soul of the deceased is believed to remain with the family until the stone is pulled and placed—an act that ritually houses the spirit and marks its transition. The rituals performed before and after stone erection are emblematic of this belief system, underscoring that these practices are not only about communal feasting but also about reinforcing social cohesion through shared labour and ritualized cooperation. Often, members of a single *Hangseuki* (male dormitory) or, occasionally, multiple dormitories collaborate in these endeavours, strengthening inter-group solidarity.

A related commemorative form is the *Hekua*, constructed in conspicuous locations within or near the village. While Bower (1950) observed that these structures were historically erected outside the village gate “It is sometimes set up over the grave-shaft itself instead of the slab mentioned above, but it is quite as often built as a cenotaph in a conspicuous place outside the village gate” (Bower, 1950, p. 26). However, recent field observations indicate that many such *Hekua* structures are now found within the village itself. This spatial shift may be attributed to demographic

expansion and increased settlement density. The platform serves as a sitting platform for the passerby and the people returning from the field.

Contemporary *Hekua* are frequently placed beside key communal spaces such as the *Hezua tekung* (village foundation stone), along primary pathways, or near modern market areas to ensure high visibility. Construction is generally undertaken by the deceased's own dormitory group, although collaboration between multiple dormitories is not uncommon. As Wunderlich et al. (2022) note, “Although the prestige and status connected to the organisation of feasts are mainly attached to the feast giver himself, these structures actually provide the required cooperative background in order to enable the collective framework, in which the construction of the monuments is embedded through the cooperation of, for example, clan members” (Wunderlich et al. 2022, pp. 12–13).

Thus, these monuments simultaneously commemorate the deceased and articulate the cooperative ethos that underpins Zeme social organization. Their prominent placement in village landscapes reflects a deliberate performative function: they are meant to be seen, remembered, and interpreted as signs of prestige, community cohesion, and ancestral presence.

Additionally, standing stones, often accompanied by smaller stones known as *Heram-leu-sum-be*, are erected to commemorate personal achievements—most notably, in the context of male romantic conquests. Historically, these monuments symbolized masculinity and social status. Positioned near pathways for maximum visibility, they served as public declarations of a man’s desirability and virility. In contemporary times, particularly among Christianized Zeme populations, the narratives behind these stones are rarely discussed. Elders and local guides often avoid engaging with their historical meanings, indicating a broader cultural shift in value systems and the suppression of pre-Christian practices.

Another noteworthy landscape feature is the commemorative water tank/*Tekoa*, often constructed in the name of a prominent or affluent individual. These ponds are usually located near natural springs, in forested areas, or where rainwater can be effectively harvested. Historically, such ponds were vital to community water supply, particularly in periods preceding piped water infrastructure. The act of pond construction serves dual functions: addressing communal resource needs and

memorializing the individual associated with the site. In this context, the pond becomes both a utilitarian asset and a symbolic "source of blessing," as the name of the commemorated individual is invoked each time villagers fetch water.

The spatial logic behind the placement of these monuments whether slab graves cenotaphs, standing stones, or ponds—is clearly intentional. Their location along footpaths and in other high-traffic or symbolically charged areas reflects a desire for visibility and enduring remembrance. Monuments are that part of culture which stage-manage it: they want to be seen, preserved, and remembered by contemporary and later generations. Monuments are purposefully constructed to encode a message intended to endure over time. They want to be seen, withstand the present era but also to communicate across generations, reaching people who may live thousands of years in the future. Through its lasting form and meanings imbued in the monuments it enables cultural exchange and transmit memory, knowledge beyond its own time. In essence, monuments serve as a channel for dialogue between the present and the distant future, preserving messages for posterity (Assmann, 2011, p. 15).

In this sense, Zeme stone monuments function as both mnemonic devices and instruments of social messaging. They articulate personal and familial prestige, affirm group identity, and reinforce historical continuity across generations. Collectively, they inscribe memory onto the landscape, rendering it not merely a physical space but a symbolic terrain of shared history and cultural meaning.

HEJAICHAK

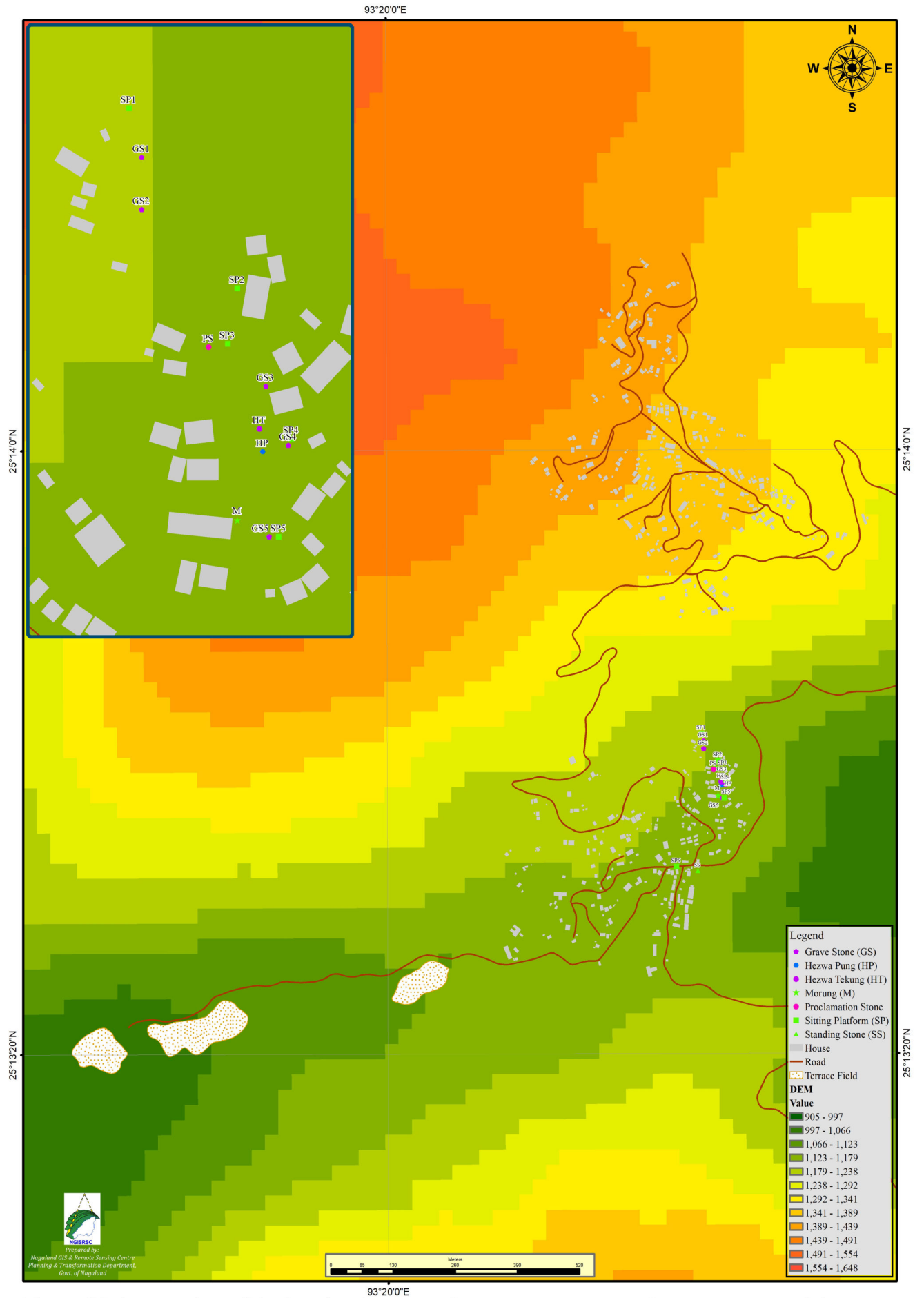


Figure 27: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Hejaichak village.

HEJAILO

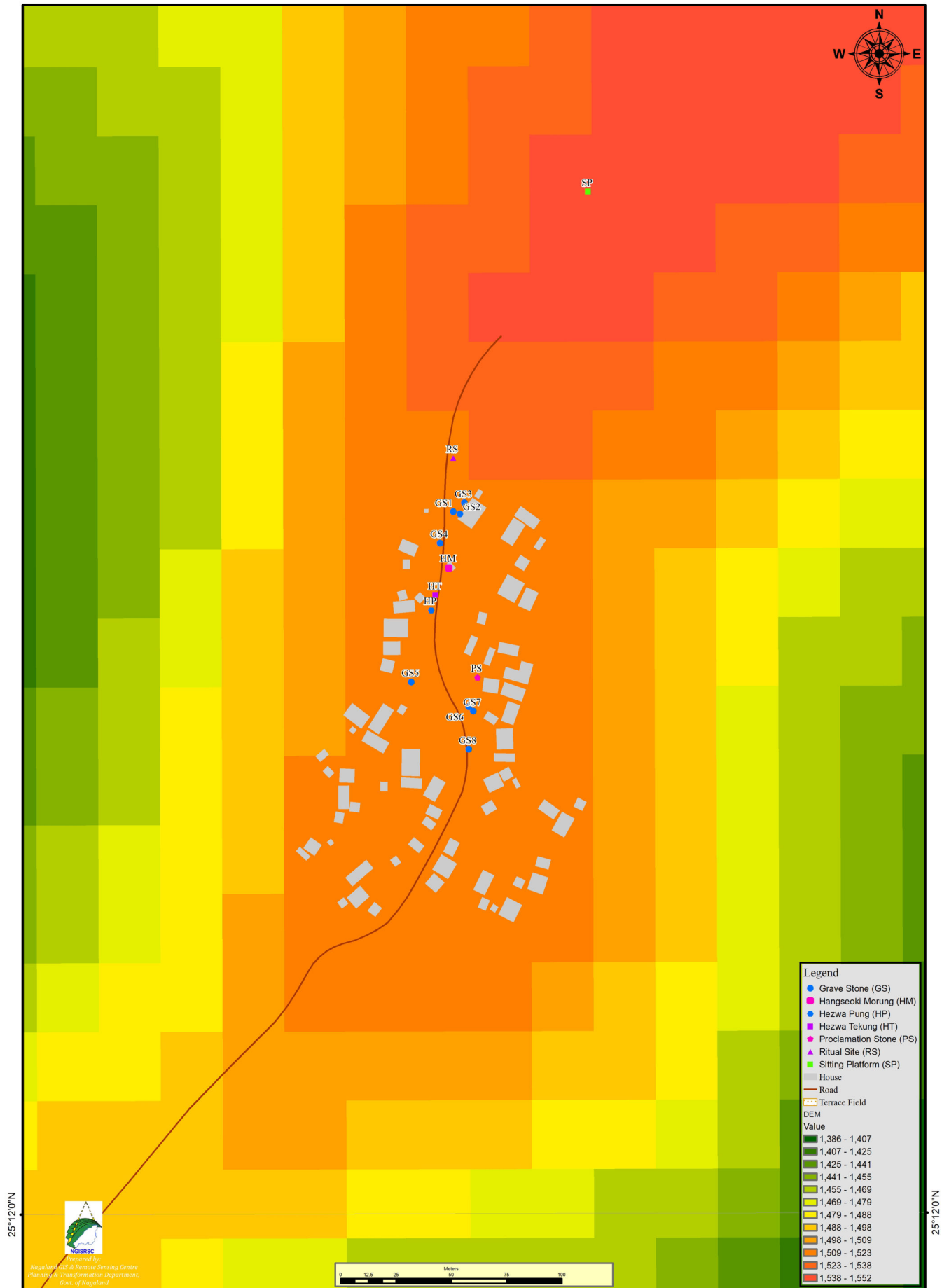


Figure 28: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Hejailo village.

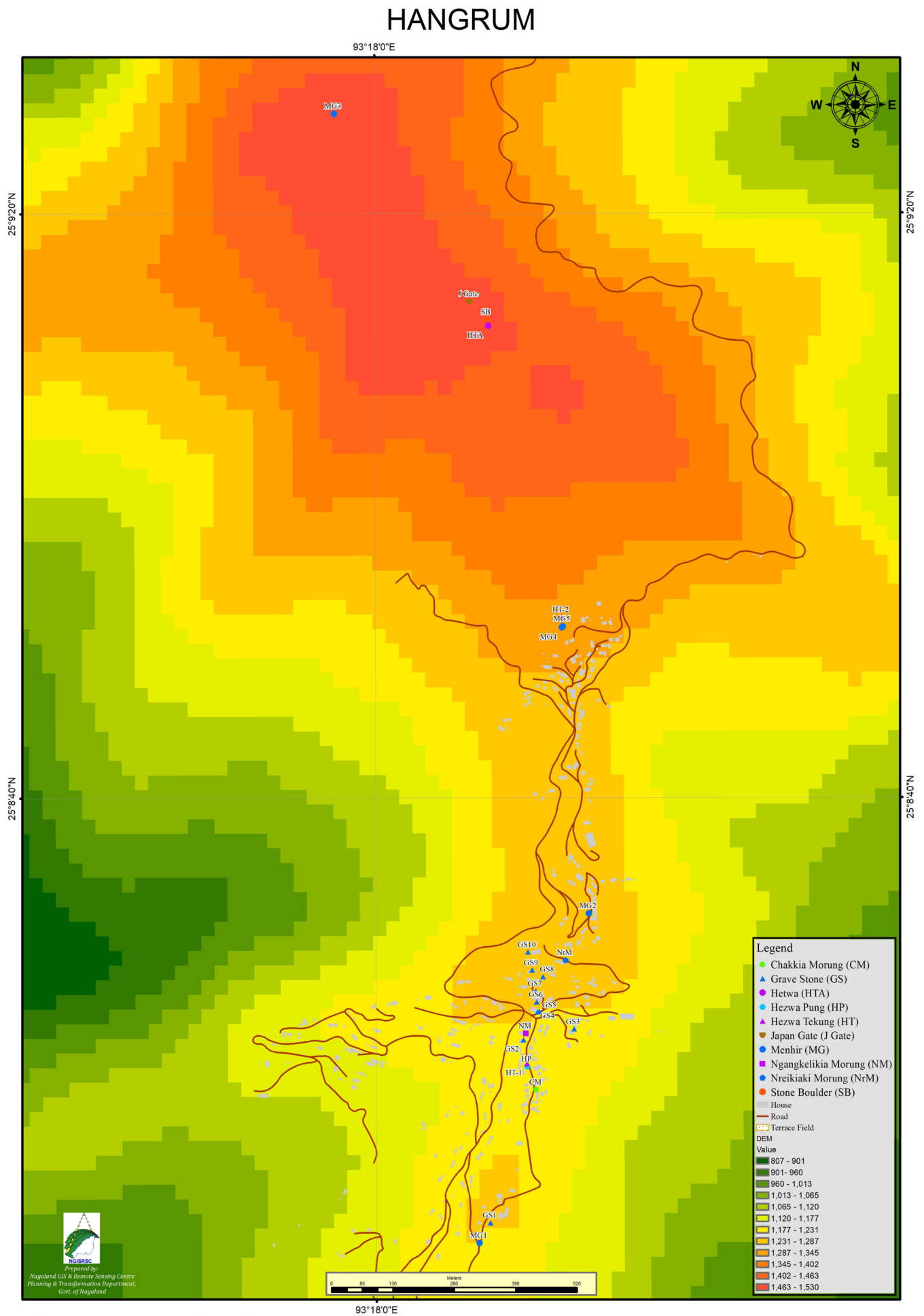


Figure 29: An overview of the locational pattern of stone monuments, settlement pattern, and the surrounding landscape features, Hangrum village.



Plate 61: Rows of standing stones, Laisong village



Plate 62: Single standing stone (with platform), Hangrum village



Plate 63: Twin standing stones (without platform), Hangrum village



Plate 64: *Herautsu*/Slab graves stone, Hangrum village



Plate 65: *Hepie*/Stone platform, Hejailo village



Plate 66: *Hekua*/stone Platform, Hejaichak village



Plate 67: *Hekua*/stone platform with a headless stone figure of a woman, Laisong village



Plate 68: *Bamdun*/stone platform, Hejaichak village



Plate 69: Proclamation stone, Hejaichak village



Plate 70: *Hejua tekung*/Long jump boulder, Hejaichak village

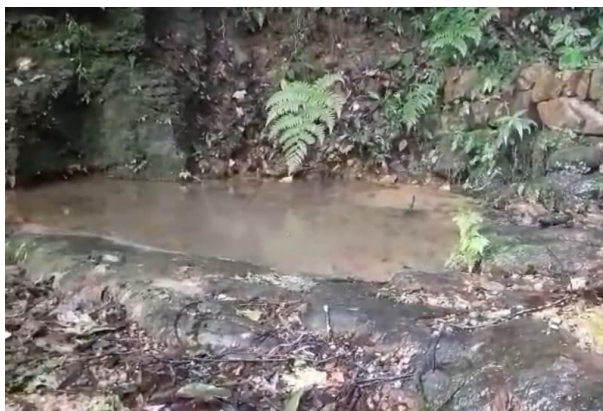


Plate 71: *Herieking tekoa*/Water tank, Nianglo pungo village



Plate 72: Stone boulder name after an individual, Hangrum village



Plate 74: Traditional Zeme House of Assam



Plate 73: Wooden Sledge for Stone Pulling, Nianglo village



Plate 75: Herautsu/Slab grave stone, Laisong village

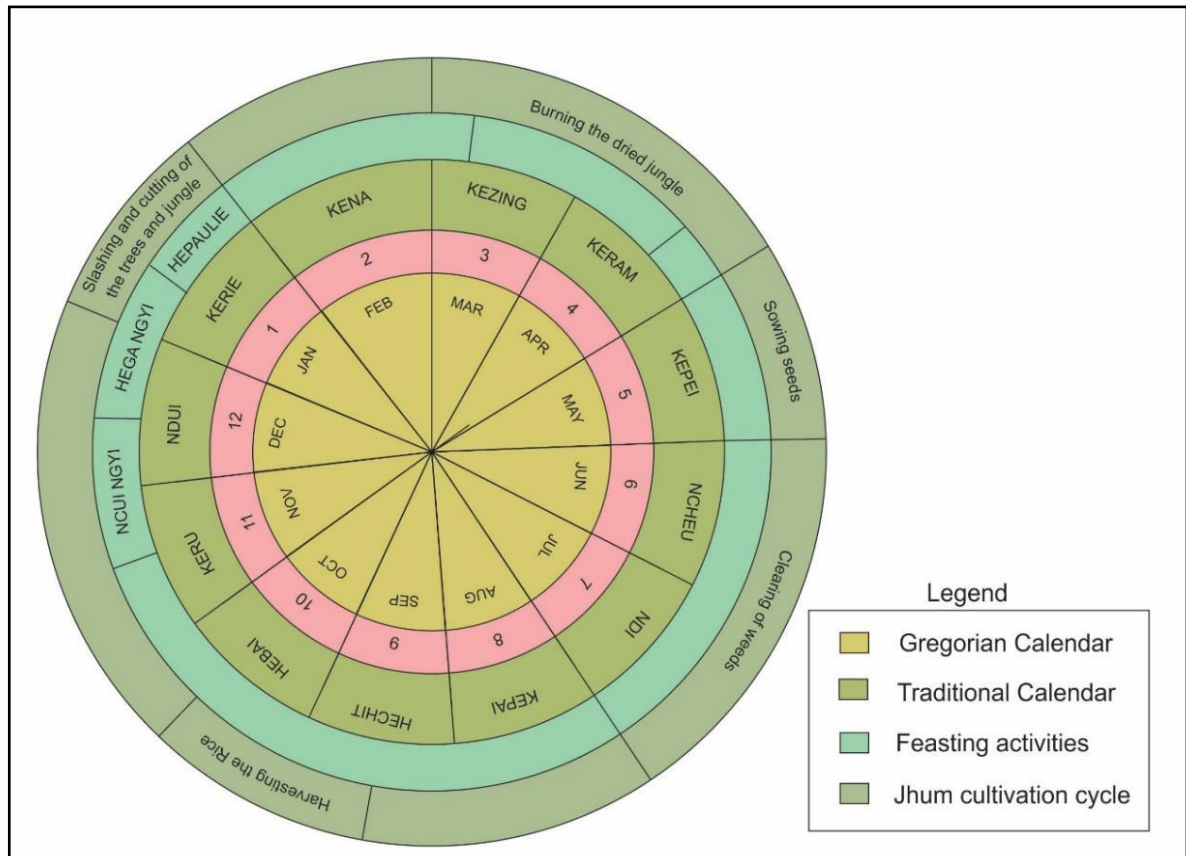


Figure 30: Calendrical cycle chart showing different month in local dialogue, important ritual months relating to feasting and agricultural cycle of Zeme Naga Assam.

CHAPTER 5

Traditional Practices of the Zeme Nagas and the Impact of Christianity

5.1. Traditional Practices of the Zeme Nagas

This chapter explores the traditional cultural practices of the Zeme Nagas across the three states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. The analysis engages with both the continuity and transformation of these practices, particularly in the context of the advent and spread of Christianity in the region. It critically examines the diverse responses of the Zeme people to the cultural and religious shifts introduced by Christian missionaries, highlighting both the perceived benefits and disruptions that accompanied these changes. Furthermore, it considers how contemporary Zeme communities perceive and negotiate the transformations that have occurred within their cultural and religious landscapes.

Traditionally, the Zeme Nagas constituted an agrarian society whose cultural life was deeply embedded in the rhythms of the agricultural calendar. Ritual observances, social institutions, and festivals were intricately tied to farming practices and seasonal cycles. As such, the majority of cultural traditions ranging from rites of passage and feasting to communal labour and ritual offerings were organized around agricultural productivity and sustainability. These practices served not only economic purposes but also functioned as expressions of communal identity, social hierarchy, and spiritual belief. Following are the traditional practices:

a). *Milei ngyi*:

The term *Milei* originates from the traditional act of fire-making, typically performed by the male members of the community. *Milei ngyi* is among the most culturally significant festivals of the Zeme people, a festival of purification and sanctification. It is celebrated annually in the month of January. Spanning a duration of ten days, the festival commemorates collective achievements across domains such as agricultural productivity, social cohesion, and communal prosperity, while also reaffirming core

traditional values. Beyond its ritualistic components, the festival functions as a mechanism for social renewal, strengthening intra-community bonds through shared celebration, cultural display, and participation in traditional sports and games. Each of the ten days carries specific ritual as;

i). *Hengyi nna/Hengi sah*

The inaugural day begins with a ritual proclamation by the chief priest *Tingnapei* before sunrise. The priest's announcement marks the commencement of the festival, upon which all male members are expected to rise immediately. A delayed response is symbolically associated with a perceived diminishment of masculinity. The day is largely dedicated to domestic preparations, including the washing of household items and the cleaning of the immediate surroundings, in anticipation of the forthcoming festivities.

ii). *Tuktau/Zautau*

The second day is devoted to the preparation of traditional rice beer, a critical element in both social and ritual dimensions of the festival. A specialized brew is produced for the *Ngwa rai* ritual, marking the initiation of boys into the *Rehangki morung*. On this day, initiates *zau nsi* (rice beer tasting) for the first time, symbolically affirming their eligibility for group membership. Those who reside outside the village or wish to participate in the celebration return on this day.

iii). *Toilak*

On the third day, families slaughter domestic animals and extend invitations to relatives to partake in shared meals. The occasion facilitates communal feasting and the exchange of culinary offerings. Additionally, the male elders shave the heads of newly inducted *morung* members (*Ngwaraima*) at the village pond. By dusk, each household's male members establish a separate hearth specifically for *Milei*, distinguishing festival-related cooking from daily domestic activities. Fresh water is fetched for the preparation of a special meal that continues for five to seven days.

iv). *Rwadi/Rodi*

This fourth day represents the pinnacle of the festival. Male participants don in traditional attire and engage in collective chanting. They also prepare the long-jump arena *Hezwa kie*, where *Ngwaraime* initiates the long-jump and wrestling competitions between *khels* (sectors in a village organised based on clans). Elders officiate the events and publicly recognize the victors, conferring honour and communal esteem.

v). *Regole-Hang*

This day is dedicated to the female members of the community. Both married and unmarried women ascend to the *Regole* (mountain range), chanting traditional verses as they collect softwood *Sahien/Chingkie* from the forest. This wood is intended for the evening ceremony, which concludes the festival and marks the onset of matrimonial rites for couples intending to marry in the coming season.

vi). *Bam Sak*

Following breakfast, male members gather again at the traditional playground to continue with competitive wrestling events, specifically allowing previous losers to issue rematches. The proceedings are again accompanied by traditional chants, reinforcing both physical prowess and social camaraderie.

vii). *Regaupa/Hekotei tamtei*

On this day, preparations begin for the upcoming feast. Male participants venture into the forest to hunt birds and small game, which are presented to the *Releiki* (girls' dormitory). Concurrently, women prepare rice beer and traditional food items, including sticky rice, collar beans, and ginger chutney.

viii). *Hekotei*

A communal fishing expedition is held at the river, involving both men and unmarried women, especially those betrothed. Male participants present their catches to their prospective brides. In the evening, gatherings occur at designated sitting platforms *Renei*, where couples symbolically exchange rice beer vessels *zaula bung* and chutney *Hetam*, signifying mutual affection and intent. A ceremonial procession then returns to the village, led by the betrothed couple, followed by peers and elders.

ix). *Tanghoi nna*

On this day, each bride-to-be hosts a private feast for her close friends. Portions of the meal are also shared with women who provided hospitality the previous evening. This event also holds significance for the groom-to-be, who partakes in a meal prepared by his future spouse for the first time.

x). *Miekeirai*

The final day is of particular ritual importance. At dawn, all brides-to-be relocate permanently to their husbands' households, thereby marking their formal transition into married life. This symbolic act signifies the woman's entry into adulthood and the assumption of new social responsibilities, whereas men continue their routine socio-cultural roles within the community.

b). *Heriak tingna*

Heriak tingna is a significant ritual cycle among the Zeme Nagas, traditionally observed during the month of February, extending over a period of approximately 24 days. This ritual sequence is primarily associated with the authorization and facilitation of house construction for the given year. Once completed, it does not allow the individuals and families to erect new dwellings until the following annual cycle. The event reflects deeply embedded cultural norms that interweave ritual practice, agricultural rhythm, and communal labour organization.

During fieldwork conducted at Ze village, Manipur, in February 2025, it was observed that although the formal structure of the ritual was not strictly adhered to, in its entirety, several key aspects of house construction continued to reflect the broader cultural framework like the villagers helping one another in construction process, during *Heriak tingna*. The following delineation outlines each sequential stage of the ritual process:

Day 1: *Gaipie/Gaipia*

The ritual cycle commences with *Gaipie*, marking the official suspension of agricultural activities, especially *jhum* (slash-and-burn) cultivation. Preparations begin for the demolition and subsequent reconstruction of houses. Community members direct their energies toward assisting those who plan to construct new dwellings during the cycle.

Day 2: *Tanggaiko henei*

This day is observed as a *genna* (ritual abstinence) dedicated to invoking symbolic and practical abundance of thatch an essential material in traditional Zeme architecture. All agricultural, domestic, and ritual activities, including weaving, are strictly prohibited.

Day 3: *Hengyira*

Community members enter the forest to gather construction materials such as bamboo and timber. These resources are integral to the structural framework of the houses.

Day 4: *Rekieba*

Tools required for construction—machetes, axes, spades, hooks, and crowbars—are sharpened and prepared for use.

Day 5: *Herah*

Rituals are conducted to invoke blessings of physical well-being and protection. Routine domestic tasks are permitted, but entry into fields remains restricted.

Day 6: *Herahekam* (also known as *Hechwet keteitingna*)

On this day, the materials collected during *Hengyira* are transported to the village. Additional resources may be gathered as needed, hence the alternative name emphasizing supplementary collection.

Day 7: *Heriak nna*

House construction is momentarily paused. However, the collection of firewood from the forest is permitted, indicating a partial lifting of restrictions.

Day 8: *Herahba*

Village access is restricted until dusk for individuals returning from the fields or from outside the settlement. A key ritual, *Heratoukai*, involves the symbolic casting of a thorny brier at the village entrance, symbolizing communal purification and boundary protection.

Day 9: *Herahba*

The ritual restrictions of the previous day continue. Pigs and mithuns (*Bos frontalis*) are slaughtered to provide communal meals for those engaged in house construction, reflecting the integration of feasting and labour.

Day 10: *Nkan*

Historically associated with the need for vigilance during periods of inter-group conflict, particularly headhunting, this day involves guarding the village and focusing on internal household tasks.

Day 11: *Kannai*

Formal construction of new houses begins on this day.

Day 12: *Loikei*

This marks the ceremonial commencement of the sowing season. While actual sowing is not performed, selected individuals perform a symbolic circuit of the village boundary, signifying agricultural readiness. Prior to this, sowing is ritually prohibited.

Day 13: *Besau*

Existing houses are dismantled. Usable materials such as thatch are salvaged and stored for reuse in the new structures.

Day 14: *Loikeilou Chang*

Villagers return to their agricultural fields to undertake pre-sowing tasks, resuming partial engagement with the agricultural cycle.

Day 15: *Kizem*

Formal house construction begins. The house owner undertakes a ritual fast, abstaining from lunch and partaking in a symbolic dinner served on a *Tangkwa* leaf. This ritual continues for five to six days, reflecting individual devotion and ritual discipline.

Day 16: *Kitak*

Skilled labourers are engaged to complete structurally significant aspects of the house, particularly roofing, which may have been left unfinished the previous day due to ritual constraints.

Day 17: *Ki nlut*

Roughly translated as "entering the house," this day marks the family's ritual transition into the newly constructed dwelling, which occurs at dusk. This timing is symbolic, reflecting the belief that couples return home only after a day of agricultural labour. The husband enters with a traditional shawl, spear, and rooster; the wife carries essential household items in a basket *kelo/kelwa*.

The ceremony concludes with the ritual preparation and consumption of rooster, and children sleep on floors laid with thatch *Nggai*, symbolizing the grounding of the new household.

Day 18: *Heroizau*

Traditional rice beer is brewed and stored in bottle gourd containers in preparation for the following day's communal rituals.

Day 19: *Heroikielie*

All male community members gather in the *Rehangki* (male dormitory) for a communal ritual that includes the symbolic slaughter of a rooster. This act is followed by collective activities such as hunting or repairing *morung* infrastructure, underscoring communal labour and male bonding.

Day 20: *Nrou*

A communal hunt *renam teigo* is conducted by able-bodied men. This day is believed to enhance future prosperity, particularly for men.

Day 21: *Rekieba*

This day serves as a flexible interlude, allowing villagers to either rest or undertake personal work as needed.

Day 22: *Herah*

Rituals are performed for the collective well-being of the village. Agricultural labour remains strictly prohibited.

Day 23: *Nchougwet/Ncheugwet*

Literally translated as "nail scraping" or "cleaning," this day provides elder or economically disadvantaged members the opportunity to request assistance from wealthier households, without contravening cultural norms prohibiting direct begging.

Day 24: *Miepet nli*

This day symbolizes the return to regular agricultural activity. Villagers ceremonially walk to the village boundary (fortress) and back, invoking blessings for health, longevity, and successful cultivation in the new season.

c). *Herasam ngyi*

Herasam ngyi is a significant one-day ritual observed by the Zeme Naga community at the end of May or the beginning of June, immediately preceding the initiation of the

agricultural planting season. The festival is primarily centred on ritual slaughter, communal feasting, and invocations for agricultural prosperity. Its observance serves as a liminal marker, transitioning the community from the preparatory to the productive phase of the agrarian calendar. The ritual is held at *Hegwangki* "the king's house" and is conducted by members of both moieties within the Zeme social system—*Hoi* and *Hau*. A notable ritual prescription observed among the Ze community of Manipur pertains to the symbolic use of odd numbers in ceremonial contexts, particularly during head-taking and feasting practices. It is considered essential that animals slaughtered for ritual purposes whether during festivals or communal feasting are done in odd numbers (e.g., 3, 5, 7), as odd-numbered killings are believed to foster ongoing prosperity and vitality. In contrast, even-numbered killings are viewed as representing closure or finality, thus symbolically hindering further progress or growth. This symbolic numerology extends beyond sacrificial practices into the realm of ritual art and communal architecture. For instance, among the Ze village, it is customary that carvings of human heads displayed in the *morung* (male dormitory) are executed in odd numbers, such as 7, 9, or 11. This practice is rooted in the belief that odd-numbered representations signify competitive vitality and spiritual dynamism, particularly resonant with the ethos of head-taking, where individual prowess was historically valorised. Conversely, even-numbered arrangements are thought to represent completeness or stasis, thus lacking the aspirational or competitive symbolism necessary for spiritual progression.

This emphasis on odd numbers aligns with a broader pattern of ritual numerology within Zeme religious cosmology, wherein odd numbers are imbued with meanings associated with continuity, abundance, and generative energy. Such symbolic preferences reveal the deep entwinement of numerological systems with ritual logic, social values, and cosmological beliefs within the community.

Ritual eligibility to perform the slaughter is contingent upon specific moiety-based marital alliances: an individual from one moiety must be married to a member of the opposite moiety (e.g., a member of the *Heuna* moiety must be married to a *Hauna*, and vice versa). This requirement reflects underlying cosmological beliefs in dualism and balanced reciprocity. The butchering process is highly codified. A member of the *Heuna* group restrains the animal with a rope, while a *Hauna* individual

performs the slaughter using a wooden pestle—a tool typically used for rice pounding. Division of labour during butchering follows along moiety lines: *Heuna* members handle the carcass, whereas *Hauna* individuals are responsible for cutting and portioning the meat. Specific anatomical parts including the eyes, penis, testicles, and shanks are ritually reserved for the *Tingnapei* (priest), underscoring his central role as ritual mediator. In adherence to ritual prescriptions, the animal's hide is not burned, which contrasts with more conventional butchering practices.

The ritual concludes with a communal feast, if there is any leftover meat it is ceremonially buried, signifying ritual closure and preventing contamination. The final act of the ritual involves the symbolic initiation of the sowing season by a ritually appointed individual from the *Hau* moiety. This person must proceed to the agricultural fields in a state of ritual abstinence without consuming food and remains in seclusion throughout the day. During this time, strict spatial boundaries are enforced: no outsider is permitted to enter the village, and residents may not leave. Upon returning at dusk, the cultivator may eat, marking the completion of the ritual and the sanctioned beginning of agricultural activity. The underlying aim of *Herasam ngyi* is to secure divine favour for adequate rainfall, robust crop development, and protection from environmental adversities.

d). *Loikiu: Pre-Sowing Ritual for Millet and Job's Tears*

Loikiu is a preparatory ritual observed in advance of the *Milei ngyi* festival and specifically precedes the sowing of millet and Job's tears (*Coix lacryma-jobi*), crops central to the *Zeme jhum* (slash-and-burn) agricultural system. The ritual is performed by a male from the *Heu* moiety, who conducts a sacrificial offering involving a red rooster.

The practitioner observes ritual seclusion throughout the evening of the sacrifice and abstains from social engagement, including hosting visitors. Any leftover meat is symbolically suspended on the kitchen wall, signifying its consecrated status and demarcating it from ordinary consumption. The central objective of *Loikiu* is to invoke divine benevolence for agricultural success and protection from misfortune during the *jhum* cultivation cycle. The ritual acts as both a personal and collective form of spiritual petitioning at the threshold of the agrarian season.

e). *Ningsum rai: Dream-Divination in Wet Rice Agriculture*

Following *Loikiu*, the ritual cycle continues with *Ningsum rai*, which integrates oneiric (relating to dreams) divination into the decision-making process surrounding wet rice cultivation. Performed by the same individual, this ritual involves a solitary visit to the rice field, after which the practitioner returns home and spends the night in ritual observance.

The dream experienced that night holds determinative power: if the dream is deemed favourable interpreted through culturally specific signs and symbols—the community proceeds with planting activities the following day. If the dream is unfavorable, the ritual must be repeated until an auspicious vision is received. This practice illustrates the centrality of dream interpretation in Zeme cosmology, wherein metaphysical insight is sought not merely through formal rites but also through personal visionary experiences. *Ningsum rai* therefore mediates between individual agency and collective agricultural labour.

f). *Rasam: Post-Plantation Ritual*

Rasam is performed upon the completion of wet rice planting and functions as a closing ritual that transitions the community into the next agricultural phase. The ritual takes place at *Hegwangki* and involves the ritual selection and slaughter of several cows and mithuns (*Bos frontalis*). The selection is conducted by the *Tingnapei* (chief priest), who ensures that the animals meet the spiritual criteria for sacrifice.

Consistent with ritual purity prescriptions, the animal is slaughtered without use of any iron tools bamboo sticks are used in their place to avoid ritually polluting the meat and, by extension, the rice fields. The meat is distributed across various *Rehangki* reinforcing intra-community bonds and institutional hierarchies.

Ritual protocol also forbids the burning of animal hair during preparation, as this act is believed to jeopardize crop vitality. Specific anatomical parts of the sacrificed animals, including the tongue, brain, penis and testicles, are designated for the *Tingnapei*, reinforcing his central ritual authority. Importantly, all meat must be consumed before sunrise the following day. Any remnants are ritually discarded, as consuming leftover meat beyond the designated temporal window is believed to result in defilement and agricultural misfortune.

g). *Hechingkwak pwa/Kumchang tingna: Honouring the Elders*

Hechingkwak pwa, also referred to as *Kumchang tingna*, is an autumnal festival celebrated predominantly in October. Literally translated as “serving elders”, this ritual centre on intergenerational reverence, where children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren prepare and serve food to family elders. The festival spans multiple days, with each phase holding symbolic and ritual significance.

The festival begins in the evening with the blowing of a traditional flute, believed to stimulate rice growth during the spikelet formation stage. On the first day, known as *Kumchang*, families prepare rice beer in anticipation of the festivities. The subsequent day, *Kauta*, is dedicated to cattle owners, who abstain from food—especially salt—until dusk, drinking only rice beer to invoke blessings upon their livestock. Children celebrate with roasted or boiled corn, mung beans, or soybeans, prepared by their parents. The roasting of grains is symbolically associated with harming the mouths of insects, thereby protecting the crops.

The following days include:

- *Rekieba*: Light domestic work is allowed, and men often hunt and fish in preparation for the central celebration.
- *Herah*: A day for gathering firewood, house weeding, and other household tasks.
- *Herahekam*: Villagers are barred from entering agricultural fields but may engage in household activities.
- *Meivwentokto*: A day of spiritual invocation for crop protection and bountiful harvests.
- *Hengyi nna*: Marks the beginning of the main celebration, with hunting and collection of wild edibles such as oak worms (‘carpenter worm’).
- *Tamcham*: Involves collecting vegetables and herbs from cultivated fields, as well as foraging for wild and edible plants within forested areas. The duration of this activity may extend over three days, depending on the needs of the community.
- *Hengyi*: The principal day of the festival, where children formally serve food to their elders, sharing meals with relatives and neighbours in a spirit of communal unity and joy.

- *Loitwut*: Villagers does not work on this day but spend their day mending fences and gardening.
- *Lamliet*: On this day, the mothers of young children fetch water from the ritual pond (Plate 29) and perform ritual on their children by touching water and tapping the joints of the hands and legs of the child to whom the day is dedicated. It is performed on the youngest child in the family. Since fresh water is regarded as the purest form, tapping fresh water on the child's joints signifies healing and blessing to live without sickness.
- *Loudi*: On this day, nursing mothers stays back home and perform the ritual known as *nlau*. Invoking God's (*Herapui*) blessing over the child for healthy life upon the children.
- *Lungnam*: It is a day to perform special blessing like *nlau* for the sickly children in the family. Invoking's God's healing to the child.
- *Hengyira*: This is an auspicious day for the villagers and they believe that the spirits dread the observance of these rituals.
- *Rekieba*: This is the second Rekieba and the villagers are restricted from working in the field, but they can cut firewood and haul it home.
- *Herah*: On this day, the villagers observe to invoke blessings upon the body and mind. They stay at home and do not engage in any work.
- *Lungleisiet*: A day observed to invoke blessings for the peaceful co-existence for everything.
- *Loudoi/Ludeu*: *Ludeu* ritual, observed prior to the harvest season, constitutes a culturally significant agricultural rite among the Zeme community. Central to this ritual is the participation of a ritually pure female from the *Hau* moiety, who is required to visit the fields and subsequently return carrying a handful of ripe paddy sheaves. This act symbolically represents fertility and the anticipated agricultural bounty. A crucial element of the ritual involves the female maintenance of absolute silence throughout her return, including refraining from speech even when addressed directly by name. The ritual underscores the collective aspirations of the community for a fruitful and prosperous harvest.

- *Loudoiba*: This day is dedicated to the person who perform *Loudoi*, so that there may be bountiful harvest through her blessings.
- *Tingjau*: On this day, the villagers prepare local rice beer for the next day on a wooden container (*Tangkwa*).
- *Ting*: On this day, villagers who share the same footpath to the field, kills a rooster and clean the path and mend necessary things.

h). *Kwakpwa ngyi/Lamsim ngyi: First-Harvest Festival*

Kwakpwa ngyi, referred to as *Lamsim Ngyi* among northern Zeme communities in Nagaland, is one of the most significant festivals in the Zeme ritual calendar. Celebrated in the final week of October or the first week of November, the festival marks the culmination of the agricultural cycle and the commencement of post-harvest celebrations. It spans four days and involves ritual offerings, feasting, and the reaffirmation of kinship ties—particularly through the ceremonial exchange of gifts between male kin and female relatives.

i). *Nlauhet* (Day 1 – Preparatory Rituals)

The first day, *Nlauhet*, serves as a preparatory phase for the subsequent ritual proceedings. Both the husband and wife engage in gendered subsistence activities to collect ritually significant items. The wife brews *Nlau zau*, a sacred rice beer, and gathers fish and aquatic insects from terrace fields. Simultaneously, the husband either hunts or inspects animal traps for suitable catches. These offerings are intended for the ritual observances on the following day and are derived from the first harvest of the season, thereby imbuing the food items with particular ritual potency.

ii). *Nlau* (Day 2 – Child Blessing Ritual)

The second day, *Nlau*, centres on invoking longevity and well-being for the youngest child in the household. At dawn, the mother fetches water from a designated communal pool known as *Nlau dui*, reserved exclusively for ritual use. The water is then sprinkled on the child's joints using unblemished fox-tail millet leaves, while the mother simultaneously chants ritual blessings. The act represents a symbolic invocation for physical and spiritual protection.

Food prepared on this day is shared selectively: with grandparents or parents who are not participating in the associated *genna* (ritual prohibition),

thereby maintaining social cohesion across generational lines. The consumption of *Nlau zau* is also gendered—if the ritual is performed for a male child, only the mother and child partake; for a female child, elder sisters may also participate.

Concurrently, adult males of the village engage in *Tambaukai*, a ritual sport involving the competitive throwing of a *Tambau* (a type of wild stem used for rituals), signifying communal vitality and masculine prowess. Preparations for the ritual slaughter of animals also begin on this day.

iii). *Kwakpwa* (Day 3 – Ritual Gift Exchange)

The third day, *Kwakpwa*, is dedicated to the ritual known as *Kwakpwa pwa*, wherein male kin—including fathers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers—present gifts to their married female relatives. These gifts typically consist of meat, fish, or poultry, and are reciprocated with the best quality homemade rice beer (*Nlau zau*) offered in carefully selected bottle gourd. The ritual functions as a reaffirmation of kinship ties, reciprocal obligations, and female-centric lineage continuity within the Zeme social structure.

Newly married women receive the most lavish offerings traditionally 100 pieces of meat reflecting their new social role and the high expectations placed upon them as transmitters of familial honour and hospitality. In return, these women host a communal feast and prepare a dish known as *Tam ram*, symbolically returning the gift to their male kin. The first *Kwakpwa* after a woman's marriage is especially significant, often functioning as an extension of the protective covenant known as *Geu teu*, whereby the bride's brothers and special maternal uncles publicly reaffirm their commitment to protect and support her throughout her married life.

Additionally, this day involves a community-wide practice known as *Hekaha*, in which those aspiring to undertake a feast of merit *Hekui hera tei keneume* (a status-enhancing public ritual) collect dried meat from every household. Voluntary participation in *Hekaha* is believed to ensure divine favour and future abundance. The collected meat is then consumed communally during *Hekopung*, a designated feast day not always in

conjunction with *Kwakpwa ngyi*, but ritually linked to its themes of generosity and surplus redistribution.

This harvest festival encapsulates key cultural values of the Zeme community: the ritual centrality of agricultural abundance, the interdependence of kin groups, the gendered dynamics of reciprocal obligation, and the sacralization of food as a medium of social and spiritual exchange. *Kwakpwa ngyi* thus functions not only as an agricultural marker but also as a socio-ritual mechanism for maintaining lineage solidarity, redistributing wealth, and reaffirming the moral economy of the Zeme Nagas.

iv). *Lamsim ngyi* (Day 4 – Communal Labour and Ritual Games)

The final day of the *Kwakpwa ngyi* or *Lamsim ngyi* festival is marked by a combination of ritualized communal labour and traditional competitive games. This phase involves a coordinated weed-clearing activity, beginning below the western village gate and extending to the *Hezwakie* long-jump pit symbolically associated with masculine strength and ancestral memory.

The task is initiated by ritual representatives from the two moieties, *Heuna* and *Hauna*, whose ceremonial involvement confers both legitimacy and spiritual sanction to the activity. Their participation underscores the moiety system's centrality in structuring social and ritual life. Following their initiation of the weed-clearing, other members of the community—particularly young boys and men—join in the collective labour. The task culminates with the performance of *Ho-hoing*, a ritual chant that marks the symbolic closure of the activity and reaffirms communal solidarity.

After a communal lunch, the community transitions to a series of traditional games that holds recreational significance. These include:

Long jump (*Hezwa*)

Wrestling (*Hepwa*)

Shot put (*Tsugi*)

High jump (*Heram*)

Hedau, a unique sport involving leaping with both feet onto an upright standing stone.

Among these, *Hepwa*—a ceremonial wrestling match—is particularly noteworthy. As with the weed-clearing ritual, the initial bout is performed by selected individuals from the *Heuna* and *Hauna* moieties. This first match is imbued with symbolic weight, functioning as a formal blessing over the event and setting the tone for the rest of the competition. Thereafter, other villagers participate, reinforcing values of strength, discipline, and unity.

The games and communal tasks are not merely recreational; they are integrally linked to broader cosmological and social functions. Physically, they demonstrate individual capability and communal resilience; symbolically, they mark the readiness of the village to transition from post-harvest celebration to the next agricultural phase. The clearing of paths signifies the cessation of headhunting and inter-village hostility, ensuring safe movement to and from the fields for both residents and neighbouring communities.

Thus, the fourth day of *Lamsim ngyi* serves as a liminal space where competitive sport, ritual labour, and social cooperation converge—anchoring the festival’s closing in both embodied performance and cosmological renewal.

i). *Laktak (Marriage)*

In Zeme society, the foundational social unit is the family, and the institution of marriage functions as a key mechanism for social organization. When a male reaches marriageable age, the initiation of the matrimonial process is undertaken through familial consultation. A proposal is formally conveyed to the prospective bride’s family via a mediator dispatched by the groom’s household—a practice known as *naurang*, typically conducted in the month of September to seek the consent of the bride.

Marriage within Zeme society is considered legitimate and ritually appropriate when it occurs between members of the *Heu* and *Hau* moieties. Marital arrangements adhere to a hierarchical order based on sibling seniority; wherein elder siblings customarily marry prior to their younger counterparts. Following mutual agreement

between the families, the bride customarily weaves a shawl for her intended spouse as a pre-nuptial gesture.

The engagement phase involves symbolic exchanges between the betrothed parties. The bride presents a bottle gourd filled with specially prepared rice beer to the groom, while the groom reciprocates by offering a handful of rice to the bride on the day of the wedding. Additionally, a bride price is rendered in the form of an iron piece used as currency, signifying the formalization of the union. On the wedding day, ritual dietary observances are strictly maintained: the groom abstains from consuming any meat except that which is brought by the bride, symbolizing her integration into his household. Conversely, the bride fasts until the evening and consumes only birds hunted by members of the groom's clan.

In Benreu village, preceding the wedding ceremony, the bride is accompanied by her female peers from the *Releiki* (girl's dormitory) and male clansmen, who engage in night-long festivity. On this night, the bride's mother ceremonially blesses her by draping a shawl over her shoulders, followed by the father's blessing. Without returning to her natal home, the bride, escorted by her companions, proceeds to the *Releiki* dormitory. From there, the bridal party visits two culturally significant sites, *Heluikieswang bam* and *Rau kuda*, regarded as resting places, where traditional songs are performed. At a designated halfway point, the groom's mother, adorned in ceremonial attire, receives the bride and escorts her to her new home.

In pre-colonial contexts, Zeme marriages were typically solemnized en masse during the *Milei ngyi* festival, generally observed in January. Although the specific dates may vary across communities, the ritual structure remains consistent. On the wedding night, various *khels* (clans or neighbourhood units) visit the bride's new household in succession, engaging in celebratory performances of traditional songs and *yodelling*.

Post-wedding rituals extend into the third day, during which the newlywed's express gratitude by cutting and delivering firewood to the bride's brothers and, occasionally, other relatives. This practice may vary by village; for instance, in Benreu village, the prescribed bride price for a virgin is twelve rupees, while that for a divorcee is eight rupees. Additionally, four rupees are customarily allocated to each male

relative whom the bride refers to as “brother,” and another four rupees to her maternal uncle.

j). *Ketsai and Ketsaibai (Treatment of dead and funeral)*

Zeme funerary beliefs hold that the deceased travels to *Herumedoi/Heruimedeu*. The entire community enters mourning, suspending work. Distinguished individuals—warriors, ritual leaders, or feast-givers—receive special homage.

Coffins are traditionally carved from wood, with the head facing west or north and the feet south or east. The deceased are adorned with the shawl *mpak pai*. Offerings include odd numbers of food items, wine, weapons, and ornaments. In case of unnatural deaths, the deceased are buried outside the village gate with minimal rites and without the ceremonial *mpak pai* shawl.

k). *Seutwa*:

The term *Seutwa* denotes the bereaved family members following a death. During this mourning period, the family abstains from all festivals, celebratory gatherings, and from wearing ornaments until the final death ritual *Rekak* is completed.

l). *Rekak: Final farewell ritual*

Rekak takes place in late December or early January, marking the formal separation between the living and the death. Until this ritual is performed, the bereaved family continues to offer a portion of rice and curry to the spirit of the deceased, acknowledging its continued presence.

The *Rekak* comprises two significant days:

i). *Nnit benai*:

The family mourns the deceased, and animals such as pigs or mithuns are sacrificed, with meat distributed among relatives. A substantial portion of the meat is given to those who performed the burial. As noted by Bower (1952), the village priest *Tingnapei* proclaims:

“Oh, all you dead! Go to your own place and leave the living here. Oh, all you dead!

It is time to part. Let the living remain and let the dead go!”

This proclamation is repeated throughout the village, followed by a second:

“The dead have gone to their own place! The dead are separated from the living!”

Following this, normalcy returns to village life.

ii). *Keha benai*

This is a day of renewal for the bereaved. Villagers gather plants locally known as *Tamen leaves*, and during a symbolic act, they pluck leaves while chanting “*Aki agum, Alu agum, maleu agum*” seeking protection from malevolent forces for their homes and fields.

m). *Bungtak Renet: Sacred ritual of the spirit*

Bungtak Renet, meaning “coping the spirit,” is among the most sacred rituals of the Zeme. Named after the spirit *Mbung*, the ritual is considered so sacred that even its name is often avoided in speech. Performed by a couple from *Hau* and *Heu* moieties with honourable lineages (*Heria keyi/Kemci ria*), the ritual involves strict taboos: abstinence from sex, bathing, and verbal requests for a year.

Eligibility for the ritual is highly restrictive. Any injury, insect bite (bee, wasp, Snake, etc), or child death in the household disqualifies participation. The couple performs the rite on behalf of the entire village, including the ritual slaughter of a mithun. Even the individuals preparing for the slaughter must observe a three-month period of abstinence and purification.

A participant from Ze village recounted that after this ritual was performed, barren women conceived, and abundant harvests followed.

n). *Teisie: Ritual of the hunt*

In Zeme cosmology, hunting constituted not only a subsistence activity but also a spiritually significant event that necessitated ritual observance. When a large game animal (*kaudi*) is successfully hunted, a segment of its ear is ritually left at the site of the kill as an offering to the forest spirits, signifying respect and reconciliation with the natural world. Upon returning to the village, another portion of the ear is pierced into a twig of a plant (*Tambui bang*) and placed within a designated stone receptacle near the village gate. This symbolic act communicates the success of the hunt to both spiritual and social spheres, while simultaneously serving as a preventive measure—ensuring the spirit of the slain animal does not return to seek its kin or disturb village harmony.

o). *Hepaulia: Annual village protection ritual*

Hepaulia is an annual protective ritual performed in the month of January under the guidance of the village priest, referred to as the *Tingkupo* or *Tingnapei*. Conducted at a ritual site located near the village's upper gate, the ceremony seeks divine

intercession for the collective wellbeing of the village. Its primary objective is to ensure protection from diseases, misfortunes, and malevolent forces for the coming year. Although the ritual has diminished in prevalence due to religious and cultural shifts, it continues to be observed in select localities, such as Hejailo village in Assam, where traditional cosmological frameworks retain social relevance.

p). *Hedua ketip: Grain storage protection ritual*

The *Hedua ketip* ritual is concerned with safeguarding village granaries and ensuring the continuity of food security. During the ceremony, a pig is sacrificed by the *Tingkupei*, and its blood is ritually sprinkled across the grain storage structures. In exchange for this communal service, villagers contribute offerings such as rice, chilies, and other ritual items to the priest. The rite is believed to prevent famine, pestilence, and spiritual afflictions from affecting the stored harvest. Notably, agricultural activities such as tree felling for new cultivation are prohibited until five days after the performance of this ritual, reflecting the ritual's calendrical significance.

q). *Heratei: Healing ritual for chronic illness*

The *Heratei* ritual is conducted in response to prolonged illness, which is interpreted within the Zeme spiritual paradigm as the possible consequence of a soul being abducted by malevolent entities. Depending on the severity and duration of the affliction, a range of sacrificial offerings may be made, including mithun, cattle, pigs, dogs, chickens, or, in milder cases, eggs. Participants are required to fast until sunset, underscoring the ritual's gravity. The afflicted individual is strictly prohibited from consuming the sacrificial meat and is instead permitted to eat only fish or birds, indicating a form of ritual exclusion and spiritual differentiation.

r). *Ma-npet/Hera hepau: Spirit offering ritual*

Closely associated with *Heratei*, the *Ma-npet* or *Hera hepau* ritual differs in that the sacrificial offerings are not consumed by the community but are entirely devoted to appeasing or propitiating the involved spirit. Items typically offered include a live chicken, egg, cotton, iron chips, and *Reloak* (*Elsholtzia blanda*), all of which are considered spiritually potent. These offerings are placed beyond the village boundary under the supervision of a designated fortune-teller, who determines the appropriate location and ritual sequence. The act is understood as a direct negotiation with the spiritual realm, aimed at restoring individual or collective harmony.

s). *Mna/Kemna: Birth rituals*

Childbirth among the Zeme is accompanied by specific ritual practices that emphasize both purity and cosmological reintegration. Following delivery, the mother undergoes a period of seclusion lasting seven days, during which she uses a separate hearth to avoid ritual contamination. In cases of stillbirth, these rites are not observed, reflecting a different ontological status of the stillborn. The placenta is interred in a designated location believed to hold spiritual significance, as it is assumed that the individual's spirit will return to this site after death.

Immediately after childbirth, the father performs a symbolic act involving the *Tambui* plant. He splits the plant, marks each half with charcoal, and places them at either side of the door locally known as *Nkam*. The number of charcoal lines indicates the newborn's gender: two lines denote a female child, while three lines signify a male child. This practice functions as both a gender announcement and a ritual marker of the child's integration into social life.

t). *Releiki and Rehangki: Female and Male dormitories*

Prior to the widespread adoption of Christianity, one of the most pivotal socio-educational institutions in Zeme society was the dormitory system—*Releiki* for females and *Rehangki* for males. These dormitories functioned as foundational structures for cultural transmission, communal discipline and social integration. Unlike the two counterparts of Zeme from Nagaland and Manipur, the Zeme of Assam exhibit a distinctive pattern. In Assam male dormitories commonly referred to as *Hangseuki* are bifurcated into two units, *Nkangme* and *Nreume*, often reflecting the village geographical divisions rather than clan affiliations.

The allocation of male children to a specific *morung* follows a customary practice rooted in communal protocol. Upon the birth of a male child, representative from both units proceed to the household of the newborn with an egg. The *morung* whose members arrives first customarily claims the child as part of its dormitory membership. The method of affiliation underscores a unique, time sensitive criterion of dormitory assignment, diverging from the patrilineal or clan-based system observed in adjacent ethnic groups.

Boys formally joined the *Rehangki* following the *Ngwarai* ritual, conducted during the annual *Melei ngyi* festival. Entry into the dormitory was predicated on ritual

purity; events such as menstruation or death within the family led to the postponement of initiation. Historically, the *Rehangki* also served as a defensive outpost, particularly during periods of tribal warfare or headhunting raids.

Among the Zeme unlike the male dormitories the girls reside in designated houses under the custodianship of elderly couples. During the day, girls worked at home, but at night they gathered in the *Releiki*, where they engaged in spinning yarn, singing, storytelling, and the transmission of moral values. These activities facilitated both vocational training and the reinforcement of communal ethics. In the event of a death in the host family, girls temporarily vacate the premises until the final funeral rite (*Rekak*) was completed. Remarkably, widows also maintained their own dormitory spaces, indicating the institution's flexibility across life stages.

Beyond their protective function, male dormitories operated as informal academies wherein boys received instruction in martial arts, music, folklore, etiquette, and religious doctrines. The dormitory system fostered discipline, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. While girls ceased attending *Releiki* upon marriage, married men retained the right to participate in *Rehangki* activities. Those overseeing the dormitories were referred to as *Rehangki kemduime* and *Releiki kemduime*, signifying their authority and custodial role within these institutions.

u). *Hangsiu bam: Village guard*

In the pre-colonial period, when the practice of head-taking was prevalent among the Zeme, communal security mechanisms were central to village life. One such institution was the *Hangsiu bam*, a rotational system of six days in which clan members assumed responsibility for overseeing the village's safety. This system operated particularly when the majority of the population—primarily adults—were away in the fields, leaving behind children, the elderly, and the infirm.

Responsibility for village surveillance rotated among the various clans residing in the settlement. The clan on duty not only ensured protection against external threats—such as enemy raiders or wild animals—but also took on functional roles in the event of crises. For instance, if a death occurred and a body needed to be transported to a neighbouring village or vice versa, the clan assigned to *Hangsiu bam* would undertake the task.

Communication was also a vital component of this duty. Around midday, the designated watchers would shout announcements from the village overlook, informing caregivers that it was time to feed the children. On days of heavy fog or low visibility—conditions believed to increase the threat of wild animals or hostile intruders—warnings were issued to instruct children and vulnerable individuals to remain indoors.

The institution of *Hangsiu bam* was regarded with considerable seriousness and carried both practical and symbolic significance. It embodied not only the communal responsibility for safety but also the deeply embedded Zeme value of collective care and vigilance in times of insecurity.

v). *Practice of Stone Erection and Construction of Stone Monuments*

Among the Zeme community, the erection of stone monuments and construction of stone platforms constitutes a central socio-ritual practice, often linked to the performance of feasts of merit. As previously discussed, (see Chapter 3), this practice is deeply embedded in traditional Zeme socio-cultural and religious life and symbolizes not only personal status and lineage commemoration but also the fulfilment of communal obligations through ritualized generosity.

While there are variations in ritual performance and the structural forms of stone monuments across Zeme populations in the three states of Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam, the underlying principles governing these practices remain largely consistent. In most Zeme villages, such monuments were historically widespread. However, multiple factors—including long-term village abandonment, inter-village conflicts (particularly in Assam), and the advent of Christianity and *Heraka* religious movement—have contributed to the decline or discontinuation of these practices, resulting in the loss of significant cultural and ritual knowledge.

Field investigations indicate that Poilwa village in Nagaland and Ze village in Manipur retain comparatively intact traditions, enabling the reconstruction of these practices with a reasonable degree of ethnographic reliability. In Poilwa village, for instance, an individual seeking to erect a standing stone monument whether in their own name or in honour of their parents is required to complete a formal sequence of five stages of feasts of merit. Upon successful completion of this series, the individual is permitted to construct a properly elevated stone platform accompanying the standing monument. In certain instances, however, standing stones may be erected without an

accompanying platform, provided that a specific sub-sequence of feasts has been performed.

In contrast, among the Zeme of Ze village (Manipur), the process is marked by more elaborate ritual obligations. The highest expression of this practice culminates in the construction of a circular stone platform. According to an informant from the village, the construction of such *Neiliem* (stone platform) requires strict observance of ritual protocols and the completion of the prescribed feasting series. While the erection of a standing stone monument also necessitates ritual observance and the hosting of a communal feast, it does not, in this context, require adherence to the full series of feasts of merit.

The Zeme communities in Assam exhibit notable deviations from these patterns. Though certain unique forms of monuments persist—such as the *Heram-leu-sum-be*, associated with social achievements involving women—these are not accompanied by formal feasts following erection. Instead, monetary compensation is provided to *Hangseuki* (dormitory or *morung* members) for their ritual services. The principal focus in these communities appears to centre around the *Herau-tsukang* (Slab grave), which is ceremonially installed at burial sites. A communal feast is held at the time of the monument installation, but unlike their counterparts in Manipur and Nagaland, the Zeme of Assam do not require a sequential feasting process to legitimize the erection or construction of such monuments.

In sum, while regional variations exist, the practice of stone erection and platform construction among the Zeme reflects a broader cultural logic of ritualized prestige, intergenerational memory, and social continuity mediated through both material and ceremonial forms.

5.2. Impact of Christianity

The introduction of Christianity among the Nagas can be traced to the efforts of American Baptist missionaries in the 19th century, particularly Miles Bronson, who is widely recognized as one of the earliest to bring the Christian gospel to the region. Over time, the missionaries established several mission centres: Impur (1876), Kohima (1880), Wokha (1885), and Aziuto (1948) in present-day Nagaland (formerly referred to as the Naga Hills), and Ukhul (1896) and Kangpokpi (1919) in Manipur. These

mission centres served as pivotal nodes for evangelistic activity. The Zeme Nagas in Nagaland were primarily reached through these mission fields, while the Zeliangrong communities in Manipur encountered Christianity via the mission centres in Ukhrul and Kangpokpi (Philip, 1976; Luikham, 1948).

The first recorded Zeme Christian convert was *Heizieluing Meru* of Benreu village (Nagaland), who received the gospel through the American Baptist Missionaries and was subsequently believed to be baptized by Rev. C.D. King. Consequently, the Benreu Baptist Church was believed to be established before 1897, becoming the first church within the broader Zeme region (Zeliang, 1997). In the 1980s, Baptist churches were also founded in Assam, largely through the missionary endeavours of Zeliangrong Baptist congregations in Manipur and Nagaland. Currently, the Zeliangrong Baptist Church in Northeast India comprises eight associations, encompassing approximately 407 local churches.

In addition to Baptist denominations, other Christian groups such as the Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and various indigenous missions have also established their presence within Zeliangrong communities. In 1910, Dituing of Malangpeuram in Dima Hasao (then known as N.C. Hills, Assam) converted to Christianity through the ministry of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission. This development marked the inception of Presbyterian missionary activity among the Zeme in Assam, which subsequently expanded into Nagaland and Manipur (Newme, 2010).

The emergence of Christian missions in Northeast India must be understood within the broader context of Western imperial expansion in the 19th century. The American Baptist missionaries were, in many ways, products of their time shaped by a worldview influenced by Western cultural superiority, economic affluence, and political dominance (Pathak, 1967). This ethnocentric worldview was frequently reflected in missionary attitudes toward indigenous customs and belief systems.

From the 1870s onward, American Protestant's thought underwent a significant transformation. The theological focus shifted from individual salvation to the regeneration of society through the Christian gospel. By the 1880s, it was widely held that the teachings of Jesus Christ had implications not only for individuals but for societal, moral, and economic structures as well (Pathak, 1967).

The introduction of Christianity and Western-style education resulted in profound transformations across social, political, economic, religious, and cultural domains within Naga society, particularly among the Zeme. One notable consequence was the gradual discontinuation of traditional communal institutions, such as the *Rehangki* and *Releiki* which had functioned as key centres for indigenous education and socialization. As formal schooling gained precedence, village children ceased to gather in these spaces, leading to their eventual decline and disuse.

The adoption of Christianity was accompanied by the rejection of numerous traditional rituals and practices. Educated converts increasingly viewed ancestral customs—such as ritual animal sacrifices, animistic worship, and headhunting—as incompatible with Christian teachings. This shift not only altered religious beliefs but also transformed physical and architectural aspects of life, such as house construction styles, which began to reflect modern and Western aesthetics.

In certain instances, the transition to Christianity engendered significant tension between converts and adherents of traditional religious practices. A notable example is found in Benreu village. In 1913, the Benreu Baptist Church hosted the Second Kohima Field Conference during the period of American Baptist missionary activity in Nagaland. Shortly thereafter in 1918, an epidemic afflicted the village, resulting in numerous fatalities. Among the most devastating incidents was an occurrence locally referred to as *Lakrum*, wherein entire families perished. Significantly, *Heizieluing Meru*, the first Zeme Christian convert, and his son *Gwizao* who was a prominent figure serving as the first headmaster of the Impur Mission School both succumbed to the epidemic in 1918. These events led traditional animist villagers to associate the calamity with the Christian gathering, interpreting it as divine retribution for introducing foreign religious practices into the community.

As a consequence, a prohibition was imposed on hosting any future Christian associations within the village. Furthermore, individuals who had participated in such gatherings were required to spend a night outside the village before being allowed to re-enter, symbolically distancing themselves from perceived ritual defilement (H. Lungalang, personal communication, August 14, 2025). In a more formal act of protest, a monolith was erected in 1994 by members of *paupai renet* community, explicitly opposing Christian noncompliance with customary religious norms. The

inscription on the monolith declared that Christians unwilling to conform to certain traditional practices would be required to relocate three kilometres away from the village (Plate 76).

The decline of traditional structures is further evidenced by the disuse or demolition of domestic traditional house. In Ze village, for example, the last thatched house was dismantled in recent years, leaving only non-functional *Rehangki* as vestiges of the past.

The introduction of Christianity also resulted in the cessation of headhunting practices, which had been practised by the Zeme's. The Christian doctrine of forgiveness discouraged vengeance and retributive violence, leading to the abandonment of beliefs in multiple deities and their associated appeasement rituals. As a result, cultural practices such as *Hereu tsu*—stone erection ceremonies commemorating headhunting or *Heram leu sum be*, multiple romantic conquests—ceased to be observed. Fieldwork in Assam further revealed that the communities are now reluctant to publicly acknowledge these once-celebrated traditions. In contemporary contexts, stone erection is typically undertaken to mark secular events, such as jubilees or the laying of village foundation stones. Similarly, grave markers are now often inscribed with textual epitaphs, and granite is increasingly employed for its aesthetic qualities (Plate 78). Furthermore, although stone platforms continue to be constructed, they are no longer referred to as *Renei*; instead, they function as memorial structures and are now designated as *Bam* (Plate 79).

While certain cultural festivals such as *Henakwak pwa*, *Hechingkwak pwa*, and *Teisie* (the ritual placement of game meat e.g. a small portion of an ear) continue to be practised/celebrated, the religious rituals formerly associated with them have largely disappeared. The position of *Tingkupo/Tingnapei* (village priest) has become obsolete, reflecting a broader societal shift away from the traditional religious framework.

During fieldwork conducted in 2022 in Hejailo village the only village in Assam that continues to practice the traditional *Paupai renet* religion it was noted that this indigenous faith may not persist beyond the current generation. One village elder expressed concern that the younger generation perceives the numerous *genna* (ritual taboos) and associated obligations as burdensome (S. Newme, personal communication, February 25, 2022).

The transformation is also evident in commemorative practices. Traditional Zeme stone-pulling and erection ceremonies, once central to expressions of merit and communal identity, have been supplanted by the installation of village foundation stones and jubilee monuments celebrating Christianity.

In contemporary discourse, some educated members of the community have emphasized the necessity of critically engaging with traditional cultural practices, advocating for a discerning approach that distinguishes between constructive and detrimental elements. Zeliang (2005), in his reflective paper, underscores this perspective by stating:

“Nda hecingme teu kelungzai pelane yiciak ma nah sia ciak ma. Cine kesiabe dung gi di nah keyi dung de teu lo kerabe,”

which translates as, “Not all cultural practices handed down by our forefathers are entirely virtuous or wholly detrimental. Therefore, it is imperative we discard those elements which are detrimental for us and preserve and integrate those that will be good for us” (Zeliang, 2005, p.18).

This viewpoint reflects a growing tendency within the community to reconcile cultural heritage with contemporary values, promoting the preservation of positive traditions while consciously abandoning those deemed harmful or obsolete.



Plate 76: Agreement stone, Benreu village



Plate 77: Monolith erected in commemoration of church Jubilee, Peren village.



Plate 78: Contemporary slab grave, Nsong village



Plate 79: Recently constructed *Bam*/sitting platform, Poilwa village

CHAPTER 6

Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Research Overview

The present research has aim to investigate the socio-economic organization of the Zeme society in the pre-colonial period through an integrated analysis of stone monuments, utilizing both ethnographic and archaeological methods. Particular attention has been paid to the role of monumentality, feasting activities, and social structure, alongside an analysis of various types of stone monuments associated with the Zeme Nagas. The study explores their meanings, functions, and archaeological significance, particularly as they relate to social memory, the spatial distribution of monuments, and the broader cultural landscape, including folk beliefs. In order to provide a holistic understanding, oral traditions were incorporated alongside archaeological data, with field sites spanning the Zeme populations of the three states- Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam.

The theoretical framework centering this analysis include models of social stratification and segmentation. These models help distinguish between hierarchical (stratified) societies, typically associated with monumental architecture and political centralization, and egalitarian or anarchistic (acephalous) societies, characterized by decentralized power structures and collective socio-political organization. In particular, the study draws upon the work of Jeunesse (2019, 2022) who examined megalithic practices on the Indonesian island of Sumba, identifying two distinct societal configurations: segmented egalitarian societies and stratified hierarchical societies. These configurations were found to correlate with two distinct forms of megalithic practice: the former associated with modest, collective dolmens, and the latter with elaborately constructed megaliths used for elite burials.

In the context of Zeme society, data from fieldwork conducted in twelve villages demonstrates that monumental forms particularly stone platforms and standing stones are constructed not as elite symbols but as markers of individual or

domestic achievement, especially in relation to feasting. An individual with sufficient resources may host a series of feasts and eventually erect a monument either in their own name or in honour of deceased relatives, typically parents. Among the Zeme of Assam, slabs graves are the most prominent form of stone monument. The stone-pulling ceremonies are performed by any individual member of the community, and the practice is linked to the belief that the soul of the deceased enters the stone. Monument size typically reflects the age of the deceased rather than social status, further reinforcing the absence of rigid social stratification.

To assess the social structure of the Zeme more systematically, this study applies the models articulated by Jeunesse (2019). His typology of segmented societies includes the following characteristics: 1) Clans are considered equal and politically autonomous, with symbolic hierarchies based on genealogical proximity; 2) There is no coercive political authority 3) Village governance is managed by councils that include representatives from both commoner and noble clans, adhering to a one-man-one-vote principle; 4) Noble clans possess limited ritual privileges; and 5) Economic wealth is not restricted to noble clans.

Field data from Benreu village, for example, confirms that multiple clans exist within each *khel*, spatial residential unit. In Benreu, three *khels* Nringpeitsa, Ikumbetsa, and Raumna each consist of several clans. Despite clan distinctions, all are treated as politically autonomous and enjoy equal status within the community. Zeme society adheres to ethical norms that guide mutual obligations among clan members, including support during feasts, house construction, and periods of hardship. Importantly, no individual possesses the authority to compel another to act against their will, mirroring the segmentary, non-coercive structure observed in Sumba.

Prior to modern influences, Zeme governance operated through a council of elders known as *Kecingme* or *Hangkiam* with two representatives selected from each *khel*. These councils functioned as the principal decision-making body in the village. Although founders of a village are accorded certain privileges, such as receiving a central residential plot, these are largely symbolic and not transmitted across generations. Wealth and status in Zeme society are typically achieved rather than inherited/ascribed, and members of non-founder clans often possess more economic resources.

In addition to Jeunesse's (2019), theoretical framework, this study also draws on the work of Wunderlich (2019) in her work. She examined the acephalous nature of certain Naga societies, specifically Angami and Chakhesang villages. Wunderlich in her work identifies three key features of acephalous societies: 1) Decentralized governance without a centralized leader; 2) non-hereditary, achievement-based status systems; and 3) a fundamentally cooperative and collective ethos, particularly evident in communal labour and ritual.

These characteristics are highly applicable to Zeme society. While feasting and stone monument building are important markers of social prestige, the right to participate in decision-making remains the prerogative of respected elders *Hecingme/Hangkiam* rather than being conferred through feasting achievement. Nonetheless, the cooperative dimension is particularly salient. Feasts of merit involve substantial contributions from close kin, clans, and khels. This includes the donation of livestock and rice beer, active participation in meat distribution and preparation, and the reservation of a day for communal feasting among clan members. These acts underscore the importance of reciprocal obligations and reinforce social cohesion. Notably, in Assam where feasting is less prevalent slab graves are typically constructed through the collective efforts of one's own *Hangseuki*, with assistance from other *Morungs* only sought when necessary.

This reciprocal and cooperative structure creates a moral economy in which individuals who benefit from communal support during their own feasts are expected to contribute similarly when others undertake such endeavours. This dynamic network reinforces social bonds within and across kinship units, functioning as both a social integrator and a redistributive mechanism. Monumental practices, far from signifying elite dominance, therefore reflect communal values, individual achievement, and enduring social memory. The study thus contributes to broader debates about the variability of stone monuments traditions and their relationship to social organization in non-state societies.

Another theoretical stance employed in this study is an idea grounded in the phenomenological perspective articulated by Christopher Tilley (1994, 2004). Tilley's phenomenology foregrounds the embodied and sensory modalities through which individuals engage with and interpret their environment. Central to this approach is the

reflexive, descriptive analysis of space and materiality as apprehended through lived experience, with the objective of illuminating the dynamic interplay between people and their material surroundings.

In the context of the Zeme Naga villages specifically Ze and Tamphung village in Manipur the spatial distribution and orientation of stone monuments reveal elements of intentionality that resonates with Tilley's propositions. The positioning of these monuments within the landscape affords expansive visual access to the surrounding topography (Fig. 17). From an elevated vantage point (Plate 37), the undulating terrain unfolds into a panoramic view of the valley below, with the village nestled within. To the left, the land ascends to an elevation of approximately 2,000 meters, providing a commanding overlook of the broader spatial configuration. This visual and embodied engagement with the landscape creates an immersive experience that accentuates the symbolic and commemorative roles of the monuments. This visual and embodied engagement with the landscape contributes to an immersive spatial experience, thereby enhancing the symbolic and commemorative significance attributed to the monuments. The placement of these structures is consistently intentional rather than incidental. For instance, *Hedwa* constructed in a low-lying area in Tamphung is strategically placed adjacent to a natural well, which functions as a communal water source frequented daily by the villagers. This example illustrates the integration of ecological knowledge with spatial practices, thereby reflecting a nuanced relationship between ecological and cultural expression.

The phenomenological perspective privileges such embodied experiences, not only as contemporary interpretative tools but also as heuristic devices for accessing the experiential dimensions of past landscape engagements. The physical act of traversing a landscape today may serve as an analogue for understanding historical perceptions and spatial practices (Tilley, 2004).

A further illustration of this phenomenological dynamic is observed in Poilwa village, where a series of standing stones are situated along a path leading to agricultural fields (Fig. 6). While the landscape in its natural form may not exhibit distinct focal points, the placement of stone monuments fundamentally reconfigures its meaning and experiential quality. These monuments inscribe memory and social significance into the terrain, particularly within an agrarian context wherein such

routes are frequently traversed. The act of erecting the stones, and their continued presence within the daily movement of the community, renders the landscape not merely as a backdrop, but as an active participant in the creation and perpetuation of social memory and identity.

Several ethnographic examples from the Zeme communities of Assam illustrate the spatial and commemorative role of stone monuments in shaping social memory and identity. In Hejaichak and Laisong villages, small standing stones are prominently erected either within central communal spaces or along key village footpaths. These stones function not merely as markers of individual achievement but also as mnemonic devices embedded within the social and physical landscape. Specifically, the number of stones attributed to an individual often correlates with personal milestones, the number of romantic relationships a man had with women a symbolic assertion of social stature and personal agency within the community.

The spatial configuration of these stones is particularly significant. Their placement ensures maximum visibility whether in the village centre or alongside frequently used paths thereby integrating individual commemoration into the collective experience of movement and place. The arrangement of stones across two or more key locations allows for repeated visual and bodily engagement, producing a landscape with narratives of individual and collective memory. This aligns with Tilley's phenomenological approach to landscape, wherein monuments are not passive markers but active agents in the experiential and sensory structuring of place that suggests, movement through a landscape imbued with material culture engenders a "dwelling perspective" in which memory, identity, and spatial perception are co-constituted (Tilley, 1994, p.12).

At Peren village, the presence of stone platforms arrayed along both sides of the village pathway further exemplifies this interrelation between monumentality and topography. Constructed on gentle slopes, these platforms stretch across the landscape, offering an extended visual contour that reinforces their social and collective significance. While some monuments are the product of collective labour by clan members, others are erected individually to commemorate personal achievements. The cumulative visual impact of these features transforms the village environment, reinforcing a sense of historical depth and social differentiation.

Similarly, the prevalence of slab graves within Zeme settlements constitutes another significant example of how the material culture of commemoration intersects with lived space. These slabs vary in size, often corresponding to the age of the deceased, and their widespread distribution alters both the aesthetic and experiential dimensions of the village. The presence of numerous slab graves imposes a commemorative framework onto the settlement spatial organization, encouraging a form of embodied remembrance consistent with Tilley's assertion that the materiality of the landscape is the medium through which memory is inscribed, recalled, and contested (Tilley, 2004).

In each of these examples, the interplay between monumentality, spatial arrangement, and sensory experience illustrates the phenomenological idea suggesting principle that places are not merely containers of memory but are themselves constituted through the practices of remembrance and emplacement. The Zeme practices suggest a landscape in which stones, paths, and bodily movement are interwoven in the production of social meaning, offering a compelling instance of what Tilley (1994) refers to as the "topography of memory."

Another relevant framework employed in the analysis of Zeme ethnohistory is derived from James C. Scott's (2009) seminal work *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Among the various mechanisms that he articulates regarding highland societies resistance to state incorporation, the concept of "escape agriculture" is particularly salient. This framework provides a politically nuanced interpretation of upland agricultural practices, situating them as deliberate strategies of state evasion within the broader historical and geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia. However, ethnographic evidence from the Zeme Nagas suggests that swidden cultivation locally known as *jhum* is more accurately interpreted not primarily as a strategy of state avoidance, but as an ecological adaptation to the high-altitude, forested environments in which these communities reside. The agricultural systems employed by the Zemes reflect a sophisticated ecological intelligence and long-standing community resource management practices. These practices are better understood as an integrated response to environmental constraints rather than as reactive measures to political pressures.

The Zeme Nagas predominantly inhabited hilly terrains with elevations ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 meters above mean level (Figs. 7 & 17). The preference for such locations historically offered a defensive advantage, particularly during periods characterized by inter-group conflict and headhunting. Given the scarcity of cultivable land in these regions, swidden agriculture emerged as the predominant form of subsistence, with rice, millet, and Job's tears forming the staple crops. Terrace cultivation, while present, was limited due to its labour-intensive nature and the distance of such plots from the main settlements. Consequently, in the Zeme context, the choice of swidden agriculture is better attributed to ecological necessity rather than deliberate state evasion.

Scott (2009) posits that upland societies adopt egalitarian structures as a means of resisting state incorporation. This framing aligns in part with the Zeme Nagas socio-political organization, wherein individuals possessing sufficient resources may host communal feasts and erect monuments activities that confer prestige within the community. These practices resonate with Scott's argument that hill societies foster social systems as opposed to hierarchical state formation. However, a closer ethnographic analysis reveals that these practices are also mechanisms for prestige accumulation, intra-community status differentiation, and the reinforcement of social cohesion. The egalitarian ethos is thus tempered by a recognition of individual achievement, negotiated within the bounds of communal values and ecological realities. These dynamics underscores the agency of the Zeme in balancing social equality with merit-based recognition.

Scott (2009), further contends that the oral nature of most upland languages in Mainland Southeast Asia is a strategic choice intended to prevent codification and thus state control. While the Zeme Nagas maintained an oral tradition prior to the advent of colonial administration and Christian missionary activity in the late 19th century, this orality cannot be reduced solely to an anti-state stance posture. Rather, it reflects a deeply embedded cultural mechanism for preserving collective memory, transmitting social norms, and maintaining group identity. The centrality of oral traditions expressed through folktales, songs, and legends demonstrates the Zemes' unique engagement with their historical and cultural environment. Orality, in this case, represents a deliberate cultural choice rooted in historical experience, rather than

merely a strategic evasion of state authority. Moreover, the relevance of Scott's framework of state evasion among highland communities appears to be only partially accurate in the context of Peren village. Ethnographic fieldwork reveals evidence that challenges a uniform interpretation of state avoidance. A local narrative recounts the case of an individual named *Kwetrie Herie*, a wealthy and influential figure, who reportedly maintained amicable relations with a Kachari king. As a symbol of their friendship, the Kachari king is said to have presented *Kwetrie Herie* with gifts, including shawls and a necklace. Furthermore, a notable cultural landmark locally referred to as *Kwetrie tsusum* (Plate 6) comprises a cluster of stones, where the largest stone is believed to represent *Kwetrie Herie* himself, a second stone his wife, and approximately 420 smaller stones are interpreted by the local community as symbolizing his followers or destitutes and orphans. This material and oral evidence suggests that interactions with lowland polities may have been more complex and varied than a strict adherence to state evasion would imply.

A further component of Scott's thesis involves the supposed high mobility of hill populations. He succinctly maintains, "It is the ability and indeed the practice of hill people to move at the drop of a hat and on the slightest pretext" (Scott, 2009, p. 218). This characterization, however, is complicated by ethnographic accounts that suggest a much more rooted relationship between hill communities and their physical environment. For instance, Mark Post documents the case of Kebang village in Arunachal Pradesh, wherein, despite the village being razed down by British military forces in 1911, it was meticulously rebuilt with clan neighbourhoods restored to their original spatial arrangements. This careful reconstruction suggests a profound attachment to 'place' that contradicts Scott's generalization of flight-prone behaviour (Post, 2022). The Zeme Nagas similarly possess oral histories that recount episodes of village abandonment and relocation. One such narrative from Benreu village describes an earlier settlement that had to be vacated for reasons now lost to memory. The villagers, particularly those with substantial resources such as rice stockpiles and livestock deliberately extended their stay to ensure communal consumption of these resources prior to migration. Upon the present resettlement around the 1840s, the Lungalang clan was allocated the same *Rehangki* area as in the previous settlement. This continuity indicates a conscious effort to maintain social and spatial structures

despite displacement. While mobility did occur, it was often precipitated by internal conflict or disease instances of widespread epidemics rather than as a spontaneous response to external pressure, and such movements had significant ramifications to their social organization.

Finally, in considering the broader question of Zeme migration, oral traditions suggest origins from a primordial cave known as *Hecumle* in association with *Makhel* located in present-day Manipur and subsequent migrations to the other Zeme villages. The Zeme case indicates that settlement patterns and cultural evolution were not solely the result of political resistance. Instead, they reveal a nuanced interplay between environmental adaptation, historical contingencies, and social continuity. While Scott's theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the political and social dimensions of upland societies, including considerations of ecological factors and their relationship with the state, its application requires nuanced interpretation. Scott (2009) emphasizes that elements such as mountainous terrain, dense forests, and shifting cultivation practices create ecological conditions that act as natural barriers, thereby limiting the penetration and administrative reach of state power. He argues that these ecological adaptations are not solely strategies for subsistence, but also function as deliberate political mechanisms aimed at evading state incorporation. For example, practices such as shifting cultivation, the cultivation of "escape crops," and the maintenance of acephalous (non-hierarchical) social structures are framed as forms of resistance against state centralization and control. Scott interprets the social organization of upland communities as emergent from a combination of ecological constraints and political imperatives, resulting in social forms characterized by mobility, fluidity, and egalitarianism. These traits, in his view, are instrumental in resisting state hegemony and maintaining autonomy.

However, applying this framework to the case of the Zeme Nagas necessitates critical qualification. While certain elements of Scott's thesis may hold relevance, empirical evidence suggests that the Zeme agricultural practices, social organization, oral traditions, and patterns of mobility are more coherently interpreted through a combined ecological and cultural lens, rather than being understood as manifestations of intentional state evasion. This suggests the need for a more context-specific analysis that considers both the material and symbolic dimensions of Zeme life beyond the

framework of state avoidance. In addition, the idea of Zomia, as argued by Post (2022), is not to be understood solely in opposition to state formation. This counterpoint introduces a necessary caution against over determining the role of the state in shaping upland identities and invites a more nuanced consideration of indigenous agency (on a critique, see Post 2022). Also, Das (2014) posits, “No highland tribe is “lawless” as we elucidate in our case studies, the highlanders undeniably function in accordance with their customary laws and through self-governing institutions which in contemporary times have backing in modern state” (Das, 2014, p.11). Thus, the Zeme experience exemplifies how upland communities negotiate their identity and livelihood through adaptive strategies grounded in both environmental realities and autonomous cultural logics.

6.2. Affinity and Difference: The Zeme Nagas of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and other Naga cultural groups

The Zeme communities across the Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam share a common oral history of origin, tracing their ancestral roots to *Makhel* and *Makuilongdi* in present-day Manipur. Prior to the advent of formal education and literacy, oral traditions in the form of folktales, folk songs, and other narratives were the primary means of historical transmission and cultural expression. Due to the lack of written records, it remains difficult to determine with certainty when the practice of erecting megalithic monuments such as standing stones was first instituted.

In both Nagaland and Manipur, stone monuments such as *Tsusum*, *Renei*, *Rausam*, and *Hedwa* exhibit remarkable similarities in form and function. The *Tsusum*, a prominent standing stone, is typically erected to commemorate the completion of a feast of merit. However, it may also serve other purposes, including memorializing a skilled warrior, honouring a deceased child, or expressing the legacy of a childless couple. Though the motivations may vary, the symbolic significance remains consistent across these regions. Additionally, in Peren village in Nagaland, there are oral accounts of early wooden markers (Fig. 32) that were later replaced with more permanent stone monuments. The widespread availability of jhum swidden and terrace cultivation facilitated the production of surplus rice, a prerequisite for hosting such

feasts. Among the Zeme, the act of hosting a feast and erecting a monument is not restricted to any moiety or clan; any individual with sufficient resources may do so.

In contrast, the Zeme of Assam, while sharing many core cultural traits with the Zeme of Nagaland and Manipur, demonstrates certain distinctive practices. During field investigation, respondents initially claimed that the tradition of erecting standing stones was not prevalent; however, further inquiry revealed that small-scale stone erection does occur. For example, in Hangrum village, a standing monument commemorates a distinguished warrior, while three additional standing stones were reportedly erected to have been used as defensive posts. One unique cultural practice observed among the Zeme of Assam, involves the erection of small stones symbolizing the number of romantic relationships a man had—a practice not found among their Nagaland or Manipur counterparts. Additionally, stone platforms are occasionally constructed to honour wealthy individuals and warriors.

A common cultural trait observed across Nagaland, Manipur and Assam Zeme is the construction of ponds associated with the feast of merit. Traditionally, upon completing the full sequence of feasting, individuals were entitled to construct a pond in their name. These ponds symbolised both the accumulation and redistribution of wealth, metaphorically represented through the continuous flow of water. The act of villagers drawing water from these ponds was perceived as a tangible expression of communal blessings. Notably, the construction of ponds was not strictly limited to those who had completed the entire feasting cycle; affluent individuals—both men and women could also sponsor the construction of ponds in the names of their children or deceased parents. Prior to the advent of modern pipeline, such ponds held both symbolic and functional significance within the community.

Another shared feature across all three regions is that the size of monuments does not necessarily reflect economic disparities among individuals. Fieldwork indicates that, unlike the Chakhesangs (Wunderlich, 2019), the Zemes did not customarily repeat the process of feasting and erection of stone monuments once they were completed. Data from Nagaland and Manipur indicate that the size of commemorative monuments does not necessarily correlate with the economic status or wealth of the individual responsible for their erection. For example, in Poilwa, an informant reported that the act of erecting a standing stone was evaluated not by the

size of the stone itself but by the nature of the platform upon which it was placed. A platform constructed with stone signifies that the individual has successfully completed the series of feasts associated with social prestige. In contrast, a platform made of mud suggests an incomplete feasting sequence.

In Assam, funerary monuments represent the predominant form of memorial structure. In villages such as Hejailo and Laisong, oral accounts assert that the size of slab graves is influenced by multiple factors, including the age and status of the deceased, as well as the capabilities of the individual tasked with sourcing the stone. Notably, the responsibility of selecting and procuring the stone often falls to the son-in-law of the deceased (referred to as *Hameime Napeu*), and the outcome depends upon his access to appropriate materials and labour. However, in Hejaichak and Hangrum, there is evidence to suggest that economic capacity plays a partial role. Wealthier individuals were reportedly able to transport and install large single-slab grave stones, occasionally with the assistance of extended kinsmen or *morung* (*Hangseuki*) members. Conversely, individuals with fewer resources often utilized smaller, more manageable stones or constructed grave markers using multiple smaller slabs combined.

Slab graves are commonly found among the Zeme of Assam with the exception of Nsong village in Nagaland, which may be attributed to the geographical proximity (Fig. 2). Informants explained that slab graves are positioned horizontally to demarcate burial sites for present and future generations to prevent further human activities over the graves. Furthermore, there exist a cultural apprehension that the incorrect vertical placements of the stones, specially misaligning the head and foot ends of the stone may cause adverse spiritual consequences. This cautious approach underscores the symbolic and ritual importance attributed to their mortuary practices. These maybe one of the reasons of the limited number of standing stones among the Zeme of Assam.

An intriguing observation during fieldwork in Peren village was the presence of a communal clan burial platform. According to local informants, this practice is rooted in the Zeme belief in life after death. Individuals who wished to be interred alongside their kinsmen would often express this desire prior to death, thereby ensuring that their burial arrangements reflected their communal ties. A related mortuary custom observed in the same village involves the burial of clan members

beneath the morung bed, a practice similarly motivated by the wish to maintain posthumous proximity among kin. These two practices appear to be unique to the Zeme of Nagaland and are not documented among the other two counterparts. While not identical in method, a comparable emphasis on clan-based mortuary customs is found among the Chang community. In Tuensang district, for instance, clan members preserve the skulls of the deceased in designated clan-specific caves, reinforcing a comparable worldview in which kinship ties extend beyond death (Ngullie, 2023; also see Jamir 2024).

Language variation across the three states offers further insights into the processes of cultural continuity and divergence. Field observations suggest that the dialects spoken by the Zeme of Nagaland and Manipur are largely mutually intelligible, with only minor tonal variations. However, the Zeme dialect spoken in Assam appears diverse and is not easily comprehensible to speakers from the other two regions. Lexical comparison provides a partial explanation:

Word	Assam	Manipur	Nagaland
Father	Apeu	Apei	Apei
Mother	Apui	Afui/Apui	Apui
Grandfather	Apau	Apau	Apau
Grandmother	Apai	Apai	Apai
Taro	Kebei	Heboi	Hebeu
Ginger	Kebeu	Hebei	Hebei
Boys' dormitory	Hangseuki	Rehangki/Hangseiki	Rehangki
Girls' dormitory	Leoseuki	Releiki/Leiseiki	Releiki
Yam	Kerei	Herei	Herei
Rice	Hebi	Hebi	Hebi
Paddy	Herei	Herei	Herei
Millet	Hetui	Hetui	Hetui
Job's tears	Hechi	Hechi	Hechi
Banana	Rangchi	Tangngouchi	Hegumtsi
Salt	Nchai	Mcaih	Mcaih

Fire	Hemi	Mih	Mih
Water	Hedui	Dui	Dui
Iron	Hegei	Hegoi	Hegeu
Stone	Tingchu	Tangchou	Tangtsu/Ntsu
Mithun	Buisang	Hevu	Hebui
Buffalo	Buiphu	Relui	Relui
Chicken	Nrui	Nru	Nrui
Pig	Hebak	Hebak	Hebak
Dog	Hetei	Hetoi	Heteu

Table 4: Table showing the comparative Zeme vocabulary across Assam, Manipur and Nagaland

Number	Assam	Manipur	Nagaland
One (1)	Kat	Ket	Ket
Two (2)	Kena	Kena	Kena
Three (3)	Kechum	Kecum	Kecum
Four (4)	Medai	Mdai	Mdai
Five (5)	Mingeu	Mengei	Mengei
Six (6)	Seruk	Herok	Herok
Seven (7)	Sena	Hena	Hena/Sena
Eight (8)	Tesat	Heset	Heset
Nine (9)	Sekui	Hekui	Hekui
Ten (10)	Kereu	Kiarei	Kerei
Hundred	Haiket	Hai	Hai
Thousand	Changkat	Cang	Cang

Table 5: Table showing the Zeme numerical system across Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur.

The lexical inversion in the use of terms for taro and ginger is particularly noteworthy. Additionally, the term for chives, *Tingra*, is used in Assam, while *Tamra*

is employed in Nagaland and Manipur. More recently, however, the word *Samprang* borrowed from the neighbouring Dimasa language and meaning "onion" has become common in Assam, highlighting the impact of intergroup contact due to geographic proximity.

An elder informant in Manipur attributed these linguistic differences to the process of cultural assimilation and environmental influence, stating: "When people go to a new place and use new water, even the language changes" (P. Kompoing, personal communication, February 11, 2025). This sentiment encapsulates the Zeme understanding of cultural adaptation as an ongoing, environment-mediated process.

Recognizing the increasing divergence in dialects, a collective effort is currently underway to develop an Anglo-Zeme Dictionary with the aim of fostering a standardized language platform for all Zeme communities across Northeast India. This initiative, led by concerned scholars and community members, seeks to preserve linguistic unity while accommodating regional variation.

6.3. Origin of Feast of Merit

This oral narrative, central to the Zeme community's cultural memory, provides a mythic explanation for the origin of the *Feast of Merit*, a key institution in their ritual and social life. The story follows two orphaned siblings, *Hemangbe* and his sister *Nki Kaukane*, who begin their lives in hardship and marginalization, lacking parental support and economic stability. The turning point in the narrative arises when the siblings observe that their agricultural fields are mysteriously being cleared. Determined to uncover the source of this unexplained labour, they hide near the fields and witness their deceased parents performing the work. Upon confronting them, the siblings refuse to let go of their parents, ultimately leaping over *Tambui bang* (a particular plant used for rituals) transported them to *Heruimedeu/Herumedoi*, (the realm of the dead), where they receive a set of ritual instructions.

These instructions include:

1. Retrieving and cutting a rope from the *langkie* tray (a wooden implement suspended above the hearth), and placing the fragments into a pond frequented by mithuns (*Bos frontalis*). The rope fragments miraculously transformed into living mithuns.

2. Capturing a pigeon and extracting paddy seeds from its crop, symbolically linking animal life with agricultural fertility.

By performing these actions, the siblings attain significant material prosperity, particularly through increased livestock and successful agricultural yields. With this newfound wealth, *Hemangbe* seeks to marry. His first proposal is rejected due to lingering perceptions of poverty, but a second proposal is accepted, and he eventually marries. Following their marriage, Hemangbe and his wife continue to prosper. They eventually host the first feast, known as *Hemangbe Zaulu*, which is open to all creatures, both human and non-human. This event is portrayed as the foundational moment of the *Feast of Merit* tradition within Zeme society.

While the narrative hints at the possibility that Hemangbe inherited ritual knowledge and mithuns from his father, it is unclear whether such feasting practices predated him. Thus, Hemangbe is credited with institutionalizing the ritual feast, embedding it into the cultural and ceremonial fabric of Zeme life.

6.4. Monument-building Traditions in Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam: A Model (Fig. 31)

The tradition of stone monument construction among the Zeme communities in Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam has been documented primarily from ethnographic accounts collected at the village level. These accounts reveal that the erection of stone structures such as paired standing stones, isolated monoliths and stone platforms are closely associated with feasting practices. In some instances, these structures are erected upon the completion of an entire series of merit feasts, while in other cases they are constructed prior to the completion of the series or independently of it.

In Zeme society significant category of standing stones and stone platforms, especially those found in villages such as Poilwa and Ze, is explicitly linked to the completion of the third and fourth stages of the Feast of Merit. These associations suggest a structured hierarchy in ritual performance and commemorative practice. Other categories of standing stones, particularly those associated with warfare or personal accomplishments such as men known for multiple relationships or displays of sexual prowess—serve distinct commemorative functions. In the model (Fig. 31), the inner circle of stones signifies individual achievements, indicating that these

monuments are erected in the name of a specific person. In contrast, the outer circle represents monuments constructed in the collective name of the clan, reflecting a communal form of commemoration. Within Zeme society, individuals may commission and construct personal monuments such as *Rausam*, *Renei*, *Tekwa*, *Tsumsum*, among others as a means of asserting personal status and marking ritual accomplishments. However, there also exists a strong tradition of collective monument construction, particularly in the form of clan monuments. These communal stone structures necessitate the pooling of clan resources, not only during the initial phases of construction but also during subsequent periods of repair and maintenance, which require coordinated labour and active participation from the broader community.

In Zeme society, characterized as acephalous (lacking a centralised authority structure), social status is achieved and expressed through individual agency and merit-based activities, notably feasting. In Ze village, individuals who successfully host a series of feasts are accorded the title *hekuiherateikelome/hekuichehateikelume*, roughly translated as “one who have completed the feasts of merits” signifying high prestige. However, despite the social esteem attached to such accomplishments, this status does not grant the individual formal participation in village governance or decision-making bodies unlike comparable structures among the Angami and Chakhesang communities (see Wunderlich, 2019).

Monument construction among the Zemes functions as a material manifestation of personal achievement and social recognition. While the monuments primarily reflect the accomplishments of individuals or couples, there are notable collective dimensions. Resource mobilisation for feasts and monument erection often involves multiple layers of social affiliation: the *Pehaime* (close kins from both sides of the spouses), the clan or *khel*, and, at the broadest level, the village community. These groups contribute to the distribution and mobilisation of labour and resources, generating a reciprocal system of social obligation. Individuals who receive assistance during their own feasts are expected to reciprocate when others undertake similar endeavours.

A notable spatial feature of Zeme stone monument practices is the placement of monuments along commonly used village pathways. These locational preferences are intentional, serving both commemorative and didactic functions by embedding personal and communal memory into the everyday landscape. Moreover, it permitted the erection of stone monuments even on privately held land, as such acts are regarded as socially sanctioned and publicly significant.

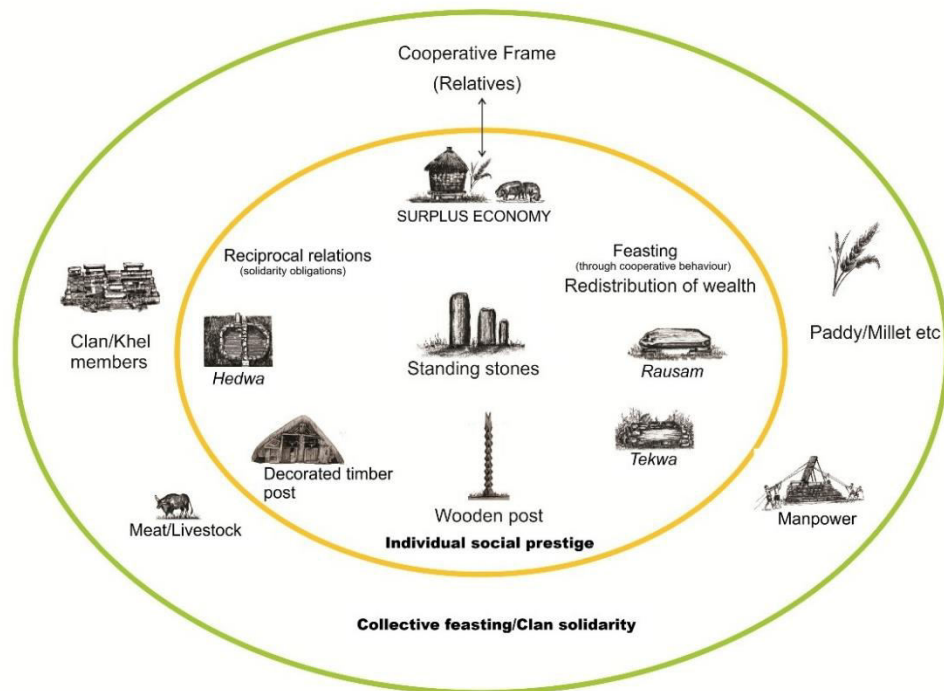


Figure 31: Conceptual model of Zeme Naga idea of cooperative behaviour, feasting and monument building.

The core characteristics of stone-building traditions among the Zemes in Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam can be summarised as follows:

i). *Monumentality and memorization*

Stone monuments are embedded within a culture of memory that is both personal and collective. Two primary types of memorial structures exist: those erected in memory of deceased kin, and those constructed in the name of the builder. The act of feasting and the physical construction process itself become encoded within the memory of the community. The careful spatial positioning of monuments, particularly along village paths and routes to agricultural fields, contributes to the creation of ‘memory landscapes’ that are both symbolically

and practically significant. This suggests that the local landscape and its constituent features exert a considerable influence on the spatial distribution and locational preferences of Zeme monuments.

ii). *Socioeconomic stratification*

Variations in individual wealth across Zeme communities, particularly in Nagaland and Manipur, contribute to visible socio-economic inequalities. Traditionally, wealth was measured in terms of paddy barns, often publicly displayed within domestic spaces. The ability to host feasts and construct monuments, along with associated practices such as timber post with display of butchered animal horns or a wood carved in the shape of a banana flower stalk (peduncle) and placed over his grave, serves as material indices of economic and social standing.

iii). *Acephalous governance and collective organisation*

Zeme villages reflect a strongly communal mode of organisation in the absence of centralised political authority. Labour-intensive activities such as house-building, agricultural work, and monument construction are typically coordinated through close kins, clan-based or *khel*-based cooperation. In Assam, a distinctive variation of this communal framework is evident in the *morung* system. Unlike in Nagaland and Manipur, where *Rehangki morungs* are generally associated with specific clans or *khels*, the Assam Zeme variant is inclusive, with membership determined through a customary ritual. In this practice, village elders symbolically induct a newborn male into the *hangseoki morung* by performing an egg ritual, thereby establishing a lifelong communal affiliation.

An illustrative case can be seen in Poilwa village, where individuals wishing to host a feast declare their intention during the *Milei Ngyi* festival before their clan members. With the consent and blessings of the clan, the individual proceeds with the subsequent stages of preparation. While any male clan member who have abundant economic resources, may undertake the responsibility of hosting such a feast thus reflecting the egalitarian ethos of Zeme society (Figure 32) as opposed to a more autocratic and stratified society like the Konyak Nagas, the role of the clan is central throughout the process.

From the initial act of animal slaughter to the distribution of meat and the eventual erection of monuments, the collective involvement of the clan is essential.

Thus, the stone monument tradition is not merely a cultural expression but is intrinsically linked to the socio-political organisation of the Zeme Nagas, embodying their values of egalitarianism, communal responsibility, and symbolic reciprocity.

iv). *Ritual authority and reciprocity*

The self-sufficiency of Zeme villages fosters close intra-village dependencies, particularly between ritual specialists *Tingnapei/Tingkupeu* and the general populace. Rituals conducted by the priest are reciprocated through gifts such as rice, pulses, and chillies, demonstrating a mutual dependence that reinforces the cooperative structures of the community. Additionally, when a member of the village successfully returns from a hunt, it is customary to offer the leg bone of the animal to the *Tingnapei* as his designated share. This reciprocal framework extends to feasting practices, where solidarity and resource-sharing are integral to the success and social value of the event. Within Nagaland and

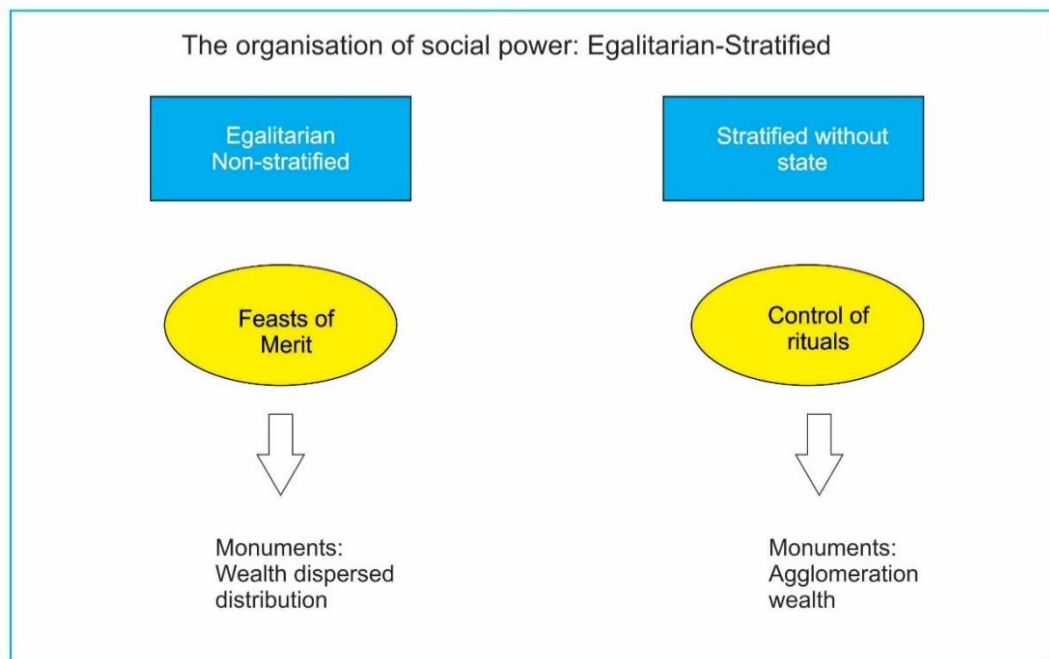


Figure 32: The organisation of social power between egalitarian and stratified society (after Muller & Jamir, 2025)

Manipur, the feast of merit is a cornerstone of individual prestige and community cohesion.

v). *Sanctions and social norms*

Social control in Zeme communities is maintained through a combination of customary laws and symbolic mechanisms. In Peren village, for example, oath stones are used as instruments of conflict resolution. When village-level mediation fails, disputing parties are required to swear an oath upon the stone a process imbued with spiritual and communal gravity (see Chapter 2). In Benreu village, an extreme form of social sanction known as *Whui lwa* was historically employed in the most exceptional cases involving serious transgressions of established village norms. This punitive measure was enacted only after multiple consultations and warnings were issued to the individual concerned. If the defaulter persisted in violating village rules despite repeated interventions, the act of *Whui lwa* was ultimately performed as a final recourse. This practice involves a group of village youth assembling at the residence of an alleged defaulter and collectively uttering the phrase "*Whui...*"—a performative act believed to invoke spiritual or social consequences. According to oral testimony, individuals subjected to this act may experience immediate or delayed repercussions depending on their perceived spiritual resilience. Those considered to possess a "low spirit" are believed to succumb immediately, while others may endure a prolonged period of misfortune effectively resulting in a cursed existence. Due to the severe and adverse implications associated with this ritual, its enactment is reportedly rare. Notably, the informant emphasized that he had not personally witnessed the practice but had received knowledge of it through oral accounts from village elders (H. Nsarangbe, personal communication, August 25, 2025).

Importantly, while the ability to host feasts and construct monuments brings significant social prestige, it does not translate into political power or influence within decision-making bodies. The reward system for successful feast hosts is primarily symbolic and material manifested through architectural elements such as house posts, pond *Tekwa/Tekoa*, grave decorations, and monuments.

6.5. Stone Monuments and the Zeme Worldview

In a survey of twelve Zeme villages, one of the most consistent and salient observations concerns the spatial and symbolic prominence accorded to stone monuments. These structures are never placed in marginal or inconspicuous locations, such as backyards or peripheral zones. Instead, they are deliberately situated in highly visible and strategically significant sites either within the central areas of the village, where they are encountered by all members of the community, or along prominent pathways leading to agricultural fields, ensuring their visibility to all passersby (Figs. 7, 9 & 17). This deliberate spatial positioning raises an important question: is it merely the outcome of environmental or landscape considerations, or does it reflect a deeper cultural reason behind? The latter appears more compelling. The spatial logic underlying monument placement reflects a cultural ethos in which visibility serves as a key marker of prestige, social status, and public recognition.

Historically, status competition among the Zeme has been enacted through elaborate cycles of feasting, in which wealth was not only accumulated but publicly displayed and ritually redistributed. While the practice of such feasts and the practise of stone monuments have significantly declined, the idea have been transposed into the domain of monumental placement. Individuals and families select conspicuous and commanding locations for their commemorative stones. This shift from ephemeral performances of prestige, such as feasting, to the durable visibility of stone monuments, suggests a transformation in the modalities through which social excellence is articulated and remembered.

Even decades after the discontinuation of large-scale feasting and monument construction, this memory culture persists. Interviews with elders some of whom participated in these feasts or inherited narratives of them reveal a distinctive tone when recounting these events. They often recall, with vivid specificity, the number of animals slaughtered by a particular individual during a feast, underscoring how ritual generosity and public spectacle remain embedded in collective memory. Given this cultural backdrop, the motivation to construct enduring monuments in highly visible locations can be seen as an extension of the desire to have one's achievements publicly recognized and remembered across generations. Among the Zeme, personal achievement is not regarded as a private or introspective endeavour, but as something

realized through public acts that invite lasting recognition. This cultural orientation is encapsulated in Jamir's (2019) observation, "The stone must be set up in a place where all can see, thus acting as a personal biography of their lifetime achievements" (Jamir, 2019, p. 17).

In this sense, stone monuments function not only as public testaments to individual or familial accomplishment, but also as semiotic markers of wealth, legacy, and social capital qualities once demonstrated through ritual feasting and now crystallized in the physical and symbolic permanence of stone. Monument placement is thus not merely commemorative; it is constitutive of a broader Zeme worldview, wherein visibility, permanence, and spatial centrality operate as vital instruments for articulating identity, memory, and prestige.

6.6. Conclusion

The present study significant findings on the socio-economic formation of pre-colonial Zeme society, as interpreted through the analysis of stone monuments in conjunction with oral traditions. The integration of archaeological and ethnographic data particularly oral histories has proven mutually reinforcing in reconstructing past social dynamics, despite the inherent limitations of oral sources. The decline of traditional knowledge, exacerbated by the passing of elders and dwindling interest among younger generations, highlights the urgency of preserving oral traditions as a critical component of indigenous historiography.

Given the paucity of detailed archaeological investigations in Zeme-inhabited areas, the methodologies developed for both archaeological and ethnographic surveys in this study may provide a relevant basis for future research in the region. The study documented a wide range of features, including stone monuments, significant landscape markers, and built structures across twelve Zeme villages in three states - Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. Simple statistical analyses of the stone monuments were conducted, and a preliminary distribution model of stone monument structures in Zeme villages was proposed. Although preliminary, this model has considerable potential for refinement through expanded and systematic mapping efforts.

While the material record and spatial data alone were insufficient to fully elucidate the social dynamics behind monument construction, ethnographic evidence

offered valuable insights. Among the Zeme communities in Nagaland and Manipur, monument building practices are closely linked to the tradition of the "feast of merit", wherein monuments are erected to mark the completion of various stages of ritual feasting. Although similar practices were observed in Assam, variations in ritual intensity, scale, and eligibility criteria were notable. For instance, in Nagaland, monument erection typically follows the completion of the fourth stage of feasting, whereas in Manipur, it begins after the third stage *Kerei Zaulu*. In the two states (Assam and Nagaland), the digging of ponds is commonly associated with the feasting but not necessarily the completion of the entire merit feast series, and ethnographic data suggest that the act of digging of ponds may occasionally precede the mortuary rituals especially in Assam.

In Assam, most monuments take the form of slab graves, and while feasts are held in conjunction with stone placement, the scale of resource investment is comparatively modest. Traditionally, those involved in the physical act of stone transportation are compensated with rice beer or valuable items such as conch shells during pre-colonial times before the introduction of modern currency. In contrast, in Nagaland and Manipur, the entire *Rehangki* 'youth dormitory' of the host plays an active role in monument erection, and celebrations following stone placement are more elaborate, involving meat and rice beer.

The village of Poilwa in Nagaland stands out as a locus of particularly elaborate feasting traditions, underpinned by the village's noted agricultural surplus. Ethnographic data suggest that Poilwa historically functioned as a centre of exchange, with neighbouring Zeme communities bartering goods such as pulses and chilies for rice. Architectural variations in the village's megalithic structures further reflect these socio-economic dynamics. Notably, the presence of numerous standing stones with platforms made with stones beneath the standing stones distinguished by the completion of standing stone series and the use of mud on certain platforms appear to correspond the construction of standing stones without completion of the stages of feast.

A recurring observation across surveyed villages in Nagaland, and Manipur challenges assumptions regarding monument size and socio-economic status. Ethnographic data suggest that in regions such as Poilwa, the symbolic meaning of

commemorative monuments particularly standing stones is not primarily determined by their size but by the materials used in the construction of the platform, which reflects the completion of ritual feasting sequences. In Assam, funerary monuments, especially slab graves, dominate the memorial landscape. Oral sources from villages like Hejailo and Laisong indicate that the size of these graves is shaped by factors such as the deceased's age and status, as well as the resources available to those responsible for the monument's construction—most often the son-in-law locally known as *Hameime napeu*. In other Zeme villages such as Hejaichak and Hangrum, economic capacity appears to partially influence the monument's scale, with wealthier individuals able to procure and install large slabs with the help of kin or morung members, while others rely on smaller or composite stones. Overall, the findings complicate a direct correlation between monument size and individual wealth, emphasizing instead ritual completion, social roles, and community support.

The initial hypothesis proposed that the size of stone monuments is linked to power, competition, labour mobilization and social networks through various layers of kinship relations. Therefore, while elements of the hypothesis hold true in some cases particularly in communities where wealth enables access to labour and material resources, the overall findings reveal a more complex picture. The data reveal that monumentality is culturally encoded, and its meaning must be understood within the specific ritual, relational, and ecological frameworks of each community. Rather than serving as a universal proxy for power and wealth, monument size emerges as a versatile symbol shaped by ritual sequences, kinship roles, and localized forms of social valuation.

The feast of merit served not only as a mechanism for social mobility and prestige but also reinforced communal cooperation. Villagers assisted the feast sponsor in various tasks, such as cutting firewood and brewing rice beer, and these efforts were often reciprocated during subsequent feasts. Thus, rather than serving the interests of an individual alone, the feast of merit facilitated reciprocal obligations and social cohesion, functioning as a mutual benefit system within the community.

Sponsors of the feast were conferred enduring social status and were entitled to construct specific markers of prestige—such as *ngga tsing* central timber posts, decorated homes with animal horns slaughtered during the feast, and distinct burial

markers. Ethnographic evidence also indicates that there existed elements of intra-community competition in both feasting and monument construction. Although the intensity of such competition remains difficult to quantify, it is likely that public displays of wealth through monumentality and feasting played a role in social stratification.

The cooperative network comprising immediate family, extended kin, clans, and the wider village was instrumental not only in facilitating feasts and monument construction but also in broader socio-economic activities such as cultivation, harvesting, and house building. It is within this network that social capital was accumulated, displayed, and redistributed, reinforcing the egalitarian ethos of Zeme society, even as hierarchical distinctions emerged through ritual achievement. One significant finding, especially among the Zeme of Nagaland and Manipur, is the importance of the wife's role. Informants consistently emphasize that, regardless of a man's wealth, he cannot host or perform major social responsibilities without a spouse. They explain that every aspect of life from preparing the field to harvesting and even hosting feasts revolves around the couple working together. The wife's presence is seen as essential in maintaining the household and fulfilling communal duties.

Among the surveyed villages, Ze village in Manipur is recognized by informants as one of the oldest and most culturally significant Zeme settlements. However, due to time and resource constraints, the study was unable to comprehensively document all historically important villages of Zeme. Nonetheless, the data gathered thus offers a foundational resource for future investigations.

The declining transmission of oral traditions driven by younger generational disinterest, modernization, and the death of knowledge keepers represents a critical threat to the preservation of Zeme cultural history. A poignant example was shared in Hejailo village (Assam), where an elder lamented that younger generations are abandoning traditional practices due to the complexity and labour associated with rituals. This underscores the urgent need for systematic documentation and scholarly engagement with oral histories before they are irrevocably lost.

Despite the challenges of dating stone monuments in Northeast India, efforts in both earlier and more recent excavations have begun to yield radiometric dates that provide chronological data for select sites. For instance, Marakdola—a post-Neolithic

site in the Khasi Hills excavated by S.N. Rao in the 1970s—produced a radiocarbon date of calAD 1213-1442 (Rao 1977: 202). More recently, excavations at Lawnongthroh have yielded dates assigned to the 5th century AD, while the site of Myrkhan has been tentatively dated to between the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, suggesting an early phase of megalithic activity in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills (Mitri et al. 2015; Mitri 2019b: 15). Additionally, the sites of Nongkrem and Raitkteng in the Khasi Hills have produced dates of calAD 386-1015 and calAD 882-1015 respectively, further corroborating the antiquity and temporal variability of the region's megalithic landscape (Prokop & Suliga 2013). In Nagaland, the Kachari megalithic ruins at Rajbari (Dimapur) have been among the earliest to undergo radiocarbon dating. Neinu's (1983) excavation at this site yielded two radiocarbon dates derived from charcoal samples: calAD 122-886 and calAD 403-1155 (Hurst & Lawn 1984: 212, 240). Subsequent investigations have added to the chronological framework of sites yielding evidence of stone monuments. At Jotsoma, a wood sample was dated to dates of calAD 997-1261 and calAD 776-1217 were obtained (Jamir 2014; Jamir et al. 2014a), the latter associated with the origin myth of the "six stones."

Further excavations at other megalithic sites in Nagaland—such as Khezakeno, Movolomi, Khusomi, and Phor—have produced additional radiocarbon dates of calAD 1312-1478, calAD 1420-1637, calAD 1317-1448 cal AD, and cal AD 1499-1906, respectively (Jamir et al. 2014b). (All dates calibrated using OxCal 4.4). While these dates suggest a chronological span primarily between the early first millennium CE and the early modern period, they also reflect considerable regional variation and the persistence of megalithic practices well into the historical era. In sum, although the chronological framework for Northeast Indian megaliths remains incomplete and uneven, the growing corpus of radiometric data when combined with ethnographic and oral historical sources offers promising avenues for constructing a more nuanced temporal and cultural understanding of the region's megalithic heritage.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted among contemporary Zeme communities yields consistent oral narratives tracing their migratory routes through a sequence of locations, beginning at Makhel and proceeding through Kieza (also referred to as Khezakeno), Nkuilongdi/Makuilongdi, Heriere, Ze, and subsequently Mnuire. According to these accounts, Mnuire in Manipur serves as a pivotal dispersal point for

the establishment of present-day Zeme settlements in Nagaland such as Poilwa, Benreu, Peren, Punglwa and Nsong as well as those extending into Assam, including Laisong and Hejaichak etc. Given the convergence of oral traditions around Mnuire, currently an abandoned site, it constitutes a significant locus for potential archaeological investigation. Although the present study did not undertake excavations at Mnuire due to constraints of time and resources, future systematic archaeological research at the site is expected to generate critical data to understand the chronology of Zeme migration history movements and advancing an understanding of the beginnings of their megalithic cultural practices.

This study has demonstrated the value of integrating archaeological evidence with oral traditions in reconstructing the social dynamics of megalithic practices among the Zeme. Despite criticisms of oral tradition as subjective or unreliable, in societies such as the Zeme—where pre-colonial history lacks written documentation—it remains an indispensable tool. As Wickler (2002) notes, “While oral traditions have limitations, they provide thought-provoking models that can guide archaeological inquiry” (Wickler 2002, p. 45).

Furthermore, ethnographic data revealed the richness and emotive power of oral narratives, as elders recounted past feasts with clarity and enthusiasm. Their memories provided a vivid, experiential understanding of how social status was attained through feasting. In a society that values egalitarianism, achieving recognition through feasting may be likened to attaining a high bureaucratic office in modern contexts. At the same time, gendered norms were clearly evident in the practices surrounding monument construction. These practices consistently prioritized male lineage and authority, particularly in the ritual and commemorative sequencing of feasts and monument erection. For instance, the initiation of a series of feasts often began with what is known as *Pepei Gala*, which denotes the commencement of the feast cycle in the name of the host’s father. Similarly, in the domain of monument construction especially in the case of stone platforms, the structure is typically first constructed in memory of the host’s father, followed subsequently by the construction of a platform for the mother. This ordering underscores the patrilineal emphasis embedded within Zeme tradition and the broader cultural valuation of male ancestral authority in public commemorative practices.

While this research has met its objectives, it is not without limitations. Nevertheless, the present study represents the first systematic attempt to examine the Zeme community across the three geographical regions of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, with the aim of understanding the socio-economic formations of the pre-colonial period through an integrated analysis of stone monuments and oral traditions. In doing so, it lays a foundational framework for subsequent research to engage with the complexities of Zeme society in a more nuanced and comprehensive manner. The findings highlight the critical need for further archaeological investigations, particularly at the proposed site of Mnuire in Manipur, in order to understand the chronology of the community. Moreover, there is a pressing need for systematic documentation, public sensitization, and heritage preservation initiatives aimed at safeguarding the Zeme's stone monuments and oral traditions for future generations.

In conclusion, the study of stone monuments among the Zeme Nagas has remained largely under-explored despite its rich potential for archaeological and ethnographic inquiry. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to addressing the existing lacuna in Zeme historical writings and stimulate further research in this culturally and historically significant but academically neglected region.

GLOSSARY

Bam/Bamdum: A stone structure of varied shape primarily intended for sitting.

Bamsak: The seventh day of *Mileingyi* wherein male members engage in wrestling where a winner from the previous day wrestling can be challenged for a rematch.

Besau: The thirteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, involving the dismantling of old houses in preparation for new construction.

Bungtak renet: One of the most sacred ritual practices among the Zeme community, characterized by such reverence that the term "Bungtak" is avoided in everyday discourse.

Choloine stone: A sacred or magical stone believed to be imbued with spiritual potency. It is considered taboo to touch.

Dwak: A ritualistic practice involving the ceremonial chasing or pursuit of animals like mithun or pig by men during feasting/festival events.

Gaipie/Gaipia: The first day of *Heriak tingna*, symbolizing the official suspension of agricultural activities.

Geuteu: A marital custom wherein a bride provides monetary gifts to her brothers and a maternal uncle, symbolizing familial bonds and ceremonial guardianship.

Gwapa/Raptui: A handwoven bamboo basket.

Hameime napeu: Son-in-law.

Hangsiu Bam: A rotational system in which village clans' alternate responsibility for security.

Herautsu: Refers to a grave marker in the form of a slab grave stone, traditionally placed over burial sites.

Hew/Hau: Two primary moieties (dual social divisions) within Zeme society. These moieties play a critical role in structuring marriage rules, ritual responsibilities, and clan organization.

Hebak pih: Pig spleen.

Hekaune pepi ketu: A term referring to four-legged animals such as mithun, cow and pig.

Hechen/Hecheu: Cowrie shells, historically used as currency.

Hechingkwak pwa: A festival honouring parents and special uncle by the married sons and daughters.

Hedau: A distinctive traditional sport involving leaping and stomping onto an upright stone.

Hedi: A designated portion of meat given to the host's daughters and sisters during ceremonial feasts.

Hedwa: A circular arrangement of stones symbolizing a rice barn.

Hedua Ketip: Ritual dedicated to protecting grain storage.

Hega: Precious stone translated as 'luck stone' this object is likely imbued with symbolic or ritualistic significance relating to fortune or protection.

Hegwet: Refers to age-group cohorts or field companions.

Heluikieswang Bam: *Heluikieswang* stone platform.

Hekak: A ritual fast-day within *Ncui ngyi* cycle, during which the village refrains from eating until midday.

Hekak tam: A ritual day (*genna*) marked by the slaughtering of animals associated with Ncui ngyi.

Hekui hera/cheha tei kelume: A designation for individuals who have completed the *Feast of Merit*.

Hemang ndi: Revelatory dreams that are spiritually significant. Such dreams are often consulted before undertaking major decisions, especially related to agriculture or ritual life.

Hengyi nna/Hengyi sah: The declaration and the beginning of the *Mileingyi* festival.

Hengyira: The third day of *Heriak tingna*, during which participants collect construction materials from the forest.

Hepa/Kapa: A large wooden block with carved holes used for pounding rice and other grains or substances, forming an essential component of domestic food preparation.

Hepaulia: Annual village protection ritual.

Hepie: A stone platform used primarily as a vantage point to observe the surrounding environment. Its function may include surveillance, defence, or ritual observance.

Hepui hedung: khel.

Hepwa: Wrestling.

Hera: Spirits or spiritual beings that are believed to inhabit the natural and ancestral realms.

Heragua: Literally translated as ‘chasing the spirits.’

Herah: The fifth & twenty-second day of *Heriak tingna*. The former regarded as auspicious day to invoke blessings for physical well-being while the latter is observed for collective wellbeing of the village.

Heraa: Pulses, a type of leguminous food crops.

Herahba: The eighth & ninth day of *Heriak tingna*. The eighth day involves rituals restriction into the village, and the ninth day involves slaughtering of animals for house construction.

Herahekam: The sixth day of *Heriak tingna* marked by collection and transportation of construction materials.

Herakum: Refers to a period of famine or acute food scarcity.

Heram: High jump.

Heram leu sum be: This phrase signifies a designated location where relational ties between men and women are memorialized through the erection of a standing stone.

Herap/Karrap: A wooden tray suspended above the hearth, traditionally used for drying rice, grains, firewood and other consumables.

Herapui: The final day of the *Ncui ngyi* festival.

Herasam ngyi: A ritual marking the commencement of planting season.

Heratei: Healing ritual targeted at chronic illnesses.

Herei/Kerei Zau: The third stage of feasts of merit.

Hereu: Denotes warfare or inter-group conflict.

Hereupeutsu/Tangpoirau: A large natural boulder utilized as a protective cover or shield during head-taking rituals.

Heria keyi/Kemci ria: An intricate term describing an auspicious marriage not only between individuals of *Heu* and *Hau* moieties but of a bloodline who are competent to perform the most revered rituals.

Heriak nna: The seventh day of *Heriak tingna*, a day dedicated to the collections of firewood.

Heriak tingna: A period dedicated to the communal construction of new houses, characterized by reciprocal labour among villagers spanning several days.

Heroizau: The eighteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, a day of preparation of rice beer for the forth coming celebrations.

Heroikielie: The nineteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, marked by ritual observances including the killing of a rooster and communal meals involving male morung members.

Herui kai: An act of howling and ululation, by the male members of the community performed especially during festivals.

Hetui zau: The fourth stage in the ritual sequence of *Feasts of Merit*.

Hetum ga: A standing stone where *Hetum* denotes ‘cow’ and *ga* refers to the ‘luck’. This suggests a symbolic connection between cattle and ritualized fortune.

Herumedoi/Heruimedeu: Refers to as world of the afterlife.

Hezwa: Long jump.

Hezwa kie: The designated pit for long jump.

Hezwa/Hejua Tekung: A large boulder utilized by men during recreational or ritualistic long-jump activities.

Kannai: The eleventh day of *Heriak tingna*, focused on the physical construction of houses.

Kaudi: Large game animal.

Kecingme/Hangkiamé: The village elders, who serve as custodians of oral tradition, arbiters of customary law, and leaders in social and ritual matters.

Keha benai: The day of renewal for bereaved family members

Kehie: Stag.

Kelwa/Kelo: Handwoven bamboo baskets used for carrying rice and other food grains.

Kering ngyi: The ceremonial occasion on which a gravestone is formally placed over a burial site. This event marks the ritual closure of the mourning period and affirms ancestral veneration.

Ketsai/Ketsaibai: Death and associated funerary rituals.

Ki: Denotes the house or dwelling unit.

Kigu: An open porch within the traditional Zeme domestic structure.

Kilung: The main interior room used for cooking and sleeping.

Ki nlut: The seventeenth day of *Heriak tingna*, signifying the ceremonial entry into a newly constructed house, traditionally occurring at dusk.

Kirie: The fortified village gate, marking the formal threshold between the settlement and its surrounding environment.

Kiswa/Kisoa: Open space in front of the house.

Kitak: The sixteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, involves in the construction of the roof.

Kitangnungsung: A central multipurpose room within the household, functionally utilized as a place for rice barn, pigsty, and chicken coop.

Kit-sai-nkua-ki: The rearmost room in the traditional Zeme Assam house. It may function as a guest room, a storage area, or a living space for elderly parents or widowed daughters.

Kizem: The fifteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, dedicated to framing house structures, particularly roofing components.

Kwakpwa ngyi/Lamsim ngyi: The first harvest festival.

Kwakpwa: The main day of the harvest festival.

Lakrum: Denotes a term where the entire families perishes.

Laksi: A woman who is either divorced or whose husband has died.

Laktak: Marriage ceremony.

Lamsim sim: A ritualized communal path-cleaning event combined.

Langsung/Nsung: A traditional cane-and-bamboo woven basket used to store valuable or sacred items, including conch shells, ceremonial garments, and the family's *hega*.

Loikei: The twelfth day of *Heriak tingna*, characterized by ritual sowing of seeds.

Loikeilou Chang: The fourteenth day of *Heriak tingna*, marking the initial field visit of the season.

Loikui: A pre-sowing ritual specifically for millet and job's tears cultivation.

Ludeu: A pre-harvest ritual.

Mbung: A significant Zeme spirit associated with *Bungtak renet*.

Ma-npet/Hera hepau: Spirit offering rituals.

Miekeirai: The concluding day of the *Mileingyi* festival, marking the transition of brides to their husbands' households, signifying the commencement of married life.

Mileingyi: Festival of purification and sanctification. Characterized by the ceremonial lighting of fire through traditional means.

Mimang/Mang: Hearth

Miepet nli: The first day following house construction when individuals return to fieldwork.

Mna/Kemna: Birth.

Mpak pai: A variant of hand-woven shawl used during death rituals.

Namsung: The first or outermost room in a traditional Zeme Assam household, generally functioning as a transitional space between the exterior and the more private interior areas.

Naurang: The mediation process conducted for marriage.

Nchougwet/Ncheugwet: The ritual cleaning and scraping of nails.

Ncui ngyi: A 13-day festival observed by the Zeme community of Assam, typically held in November or December, during which gravestones are placed over burial sites.

Ngwaraime: Newly inducted male members into the *Rehangki* (traditional male dormitory).

Ningsum rai: A dream ritual employed to determine the appropriateness of proceeding with planting.

Nkai zau: The fifth and final stage of the *Feasts of Merit*, culminating the ritual series with maximum social and symbolic rewards.

Nkan: A day designated for village protection activities.

Nlau: A child blessing ritual invoking longevity for the youngest child.

Nlauhet: The preparatory phase preceding *Nlau* ritual.

Nlau dui: Specially drawn water for *Nlau*.

Nlau Zaw: Rice beer for *Nlau*.

Nlwak: The procedural practice of extracting stone from a natural outcrop.

Nnit benai: The initial day of *Rekak*.

Nnuunggi: A culturally specific meat dish prepared during feasting ceremonies.

Nrou: The twentieth day of *Heriak tingna*, observed by men to invoke prosperity and well-being.

Nruirak: The designated area or structure for housing poultry, particularly hens, within a domestic setting.

Nsebekie: Name of a person.

Nkam/Kikam: Door.

Paucana: Clan.

Paupai sie: Customs and traditional practise of forefathers.

Paupai renet: Traditional religion.

Pecit reu: A customary abstention from labour observed during the period of mourning following the dead of a relatives, clan members, or village priest.

Pehaime: Extended family members of both the spouses.

Peki nkwet: A helpers or ritual assistant, typically involved in facilitating communal feasts and ceremonies.

Pekiname: Refers to blood-related siblings or kin.

Pepam: A small stone placed beside or in association with a larger standing stone.

Pepei gala: The first stage of the *Feast of Merit*, conducted in the name of the host's father.

Pepei mmi: The men's group participating in ritual or feasting activities.

Pepui gala: The second stage of the *Feast of Merit*, conducted in honour of the host's mother.

Pepui mmi: The women's group in ritual contexts, typically responsible for complementary functions in feasts and communal rites.

Peulikwak: Stone wash basins used in domestic or communal contexts.

Pumzwa/Mpumzwa: A communal fishing event or practice, reflecting collective labour and shared resource use within the village.

Rasam: A post-planting ritual.

Raukap: A flat slab stone placed over burial sites.

Rau kuda: The *Rau khel* stone platform.

Rausam: A large flat stone placed on a raised platform after the completion of ritual feasting.

Regole hang: An event involving forest excursions, specifically designated for both married and unmarried female members of the community.

Rehangki/Hangseuki: The male dormitory, a traditional institution for the socialization and training of adolescent males.

Rejaikam: A lake located in Ziumi village, historically used as a repository for human skulls during the era of head taking period.

Releiki/Releuki: The girls' dormitory, analogous to *Rehangki*.

Rehangki Kemduime: The couple responsible for overseeing and acting as caregivers of the male dormitory.

Releiki Kemduime: The couple who act as caretakers of the girls.

Rekak: The final death ritual.

Rekieba: The fourth and twenty first day of *Heriak tingna*. The fourth day is characterized by the blacksmithing and sharpening of tools necessary for building activities. And the twenty first day is designated for recuperation from labour.

Renam teigo/Teigwa: Community-organized village hunting expeditions.

Renei/Hekoa: Sitting platform.

Resu tsu/Reset tsu: Oath-taking stone.

Reu: Abstention from work.

Rwadi/Rodi: The principal day of the festival marked by physical competitions including long jump, high jump, and wrestling among male participants.

Seutwa: Mourning practices observed by bereaved families following a member's death.

Tak hetip: The final day marking the conclusion of a series of feasts of merit.

Tambau: A species of tall wild grass stem.

Tambauhia: An early morning gathering of men at an elevated site to perform the ritual of throwing *Tambau*.

Tamen: Wild raspberry plant.

Tampeï: A type of bamboo used within various cultural contexts.

Tamram: The communal sharing of curry with family and close associates.

Tanggai/Nsie: Thatch.

Tanggaiko henei: A day observed by the entire village to celebrate and utilize abundant thatch resources for house construction.

Tanghoi nna: A culturally significant day wherein the bride-to-be hosts her female friends.

Teila: The culturally prescribed distribution of meat during feasts.

Teisie: A stone structure placed at the entrance of a village gate, used by hunters to display a part of the game animals they have hunted.

Teko ping/Tekeiping: Bamboo tubes used for collecting and transporting water. These are often crafted from hollowed bamboo segments and serve as sustainable water containers.

Tekwa/Tekoa: A water tanks excavated to commemorate feasting and the completion of a *Feast of Merit*.

Tingna: A term denoting a designated day of communal feasting.

Tingnapei/Tingkupeu: The designation for the village priest, a ritual specialist responsible for conducting religious ceremonies and maintaining spiritual order within the community.

Toilak: The third day of the *Mileingyi* festival, characterized by the ritual slaughter of animals for communal feasting.

Tsami: Extended patrilineal family units, typically forming the core of household and kin-based ritual obligations.

Tsehi: A yeast used in the fermentation process of rice beer.

Tsubau: A heap or pile of stones, often used as a marker or commemorative feature.

Tsugi: Shot-put stone.

Tssumbe/Tsuum: Refers to an upright standing stone.

Zautau/Tuktau: The second day of the festival, dedicated to the preparation of traditional rice beer.

Zau la: A traditional storage container for rice beer, crafted from a dried and hollowed bottle gourd. It is used by the Zeme for the preservation and transport of fermented rice beer during social and ritual occasions.

Zau nsi: The ceremonial tasting of rice beer.

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Megalithic Monuments of Zeme Naga in Peren District, Nagaland

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Abstract: The present paper is an outcome of an ethnographic study conducted in the two Zeme villages old poilwa and old peren under Peren district, which is located in the southern part of Nagaland. The study was undertaken to examine the typology of various stone monuments and their archaeological relevance, associated meanings, functions of the stone monuments and to examine the socio-economic formation of the Zeme pre-colonial society and to understand the location pattern of the stone monuments. The erection of Zeme monuments is associated with feast and various stages of feast held and the monuments erected are a result of competitive feasting activities and surplus economy of the community. However, there are indicative of recursive relations of mutual aid and solidarity among families, clan and *khels* being highly practiced among the Zemes. It is interesting to find out that almost all the megaliths are being erected in prominent places around the village vicinity or on their way to the field where it is widely visible by the passerby. The tradition of erecting monuments and the practice of megalithic culture has been an important tradition among the Zemes in the past and is still in practice albeit in smaller scale and in Christianized ways.

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INTRODUCTION

Nagaland located in the Northeastern part of India and is known for its numerous megalithic structures from different parts of the states. The complex tradition of megalithism has been practiced by most of the Nagas in prehistoric times and some of which ended very recently. The Zemes are one such tribe inhabiting the southern part of Nagaland, known for erecting megaliths which are still in practice albeit with the coming of Christianity in the region it is now done without complex rituals and ceremonies. The Zemes of Peren district have a rich tradition of megalithism however apart from few other aspects like society, culture, religion and politics, no attempt has been made to study the megalithic tradition. The present study is a preliminary ethnographic work from the two Zeme villages of old Peren and old Poilwa, which shows in brief the different aspects of megalithic tradition practiced by the people. The tradition of erecting huge stone structures is found around the village vicinity. Strewn in the grass around were ancient relics, stone rows, and monoliths, the weathered remains of a century's occupation, and perhaps of settlements still earlier (Bower 1952). The megaliths were erected for different purposes like commemorative, memorials, village boundaries, village gates, warheads, rituals, etc. Among the Zemes, descent is traced patrilineally and marriage is patrilocal. Polygyny is not prohibited but occurs only in special circumstances but in practice the Zemes are monogamous. The smallest unit of the

community is the family and each family in the village is a member of a clan that of closely knitted which is seen till today.

PREVIOUS WORKS

The Zeme tribe have been mentioned sporadically in the work of the colonial administrators and ethnographers by Hodson (1911), Hutton (1922, 1926, 1929, 1965), Mills (1926, 1930) Haimendorf (1945), Bower (1950, 1951), Jacob (1990), which brought light on some few megalithic sites and briefly mentions the different types of megaliths in Zeme villages in Nagaland and North Cachar Assam. And after a gap of decades local scholars like Z Venuh (2005), Longkumer (2007), N Venuh (2014), Mepusangba and Changkiri (2019) through their work reported on some rituals involved in erections of megaliths, classified the different types of Megaliths, highlight on the social, religion cultural history of the Zemes of Nagaland.

STUDY AREA

The study area is located under Peren district in the southern part of Nagaland, bounded by Dimapur district in the west, Kohima district in the east, and Tamenglong district of Manipur in the south. It is located at Latitude- 25.5 and longitude-93.7. The altitude of the district varies from 800 meters to 2500 meters above sea level. The area is a sub-tropical mixed forest characterized by broad-leaved evergreen trees and deciduous trees abounds. It is a strip of mountainous territory having fertile foothill valley plains in the northwest and northeast. Metamorphic rocks, particularly quartz is the most commonly found rock in the district. During the fieldwork, in the two Zeme villages each monument was measured, photographed, and marked using GPS.



Figure 1: Map of Nagaland; showing Peren district

TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF MONUMENTS

Functionally, the megaliths of Zemes can be divided into six types:

Chusum/Menhir: These are standing stones in single or in pairs, the larger or taller one representing the man and the smaller vertical stone representing the wife. It is mainly commemorative and sometimes memorial and is associated with a feast of merit. There is a huge difference in size where the biggest one has 389 cm height, 157 cm breadth, 50cm thick and the smallest one has 11cm height, 59 cm breadth, and 34 cm thick.



Fig. 2 (a): Menhir erected after completion of the whole feasting series in old Poilwa village



Fig. 2 (b): Menhir erected without the completion of feasting series in old Poilwa village.

Renei/Stone platform: It comes in different shapes like circular, rectangular and trapezoidal. In Poilwa village the platforms are associated with a series of feasting. The structures are constructed for memorial and also the commemorative purpose. Whereas in old Peren village it is mostly associated with memorials, one significant thing was the multiple burials being associated with the platform. The interviewee from old Peren mentioned that the circular platforms are constructed after proper rituals are performed and it applies the same when during the time of repair. It is built by individuals and also by clan/*khel* collectively. The platform serves as a resting place for the people coming from the field and also serve as a gathering place for peer in the village. On an average, the structure has 600 cm in circumference, 495 cm in diameter, and 208 cm in height.



Fig 3(a): Circular structure constructed after the completion of feast of merit in old Peren Village



Fig 3(b): Sitting platform constructed on the way to the field in old Poilwa village.



Fig 3(c): Sitting platform constructed in memory of a mother by a son in old Poilwa village.



Fig 3(d): Platform associated with burials in old Peren village.

Hedwa/stone circle: It is a circular stone structure made in a shape of a barn (where rice is stored), constructed by an individual who acquired the highest yield in rice that year. The structure is found only in old Peren. Altogether 5 such structures have been documented. And the average size of the stone circle is 914cm in diameter and 2871 cm in circumference.

Dolmen: A huge slab placed over piles of smaller stones in old Peren known as *Meurielecukwan* named after the wife of the feast donor in Peren village, a similar stone slab was placed outside a morung in old Poilwa known as widow stone or *Luigwamlie Rausam*. These stones are pulled after feasting with the village. During *Mileingi* festival the young lad fully dressed in traditional attire display their tactics over the stone.

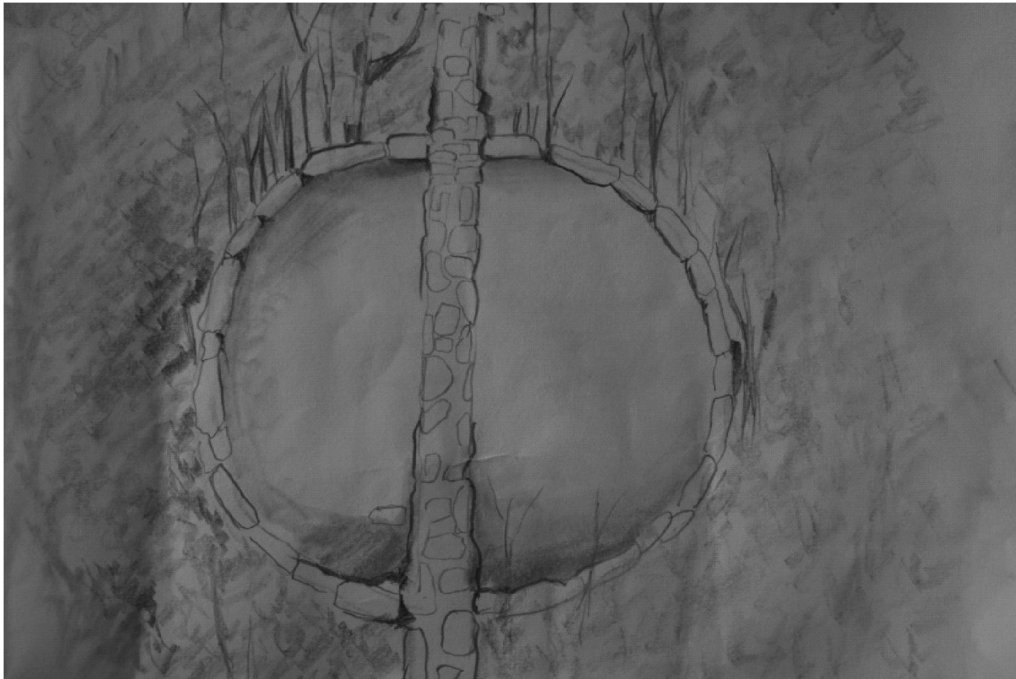


Fig. 4: Sketch showing the circular structure *Hedwa* constructed on the way to the adjoining village in old Peren village



Fig. 5: Dolmen over cairn erected in the name of feast donor's wife *Meurielecukwa* in old Peren village

Kirie/Herie: These are well-Fortified village gates, made of huge stone boulders and pebbles from the nearby river and a huge plank of wood to close the gate. It is pertinent to have well-fortified stone gate to defend the villagers from enemies during the headhunting days and the gate are close during bad times and *genna* in the village. There are two village gates in old Peren and four village gates in old Poilwa village.



Fig 6(a): A well-fortified village gate in old Peren, ditch dug in front of the gate to defend the villagers during war



Fig 6 (b): Similar gate in old Poilwa village. The gate has wooden door carved out of a huge tree and well-fortified with stones

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STONES

Stone receptacle: A cist-like structure constructed beside the village path and on the way to the field, a sacred place for the hunters to cut a small piece from the game and place it inside the receptacle as ritual.

War headstone: stone slab placed over the buried heads, brought by the head hunters during the headhunting days.

Oath stone: Stone slab placed over piles of small boulders. Whenever there arises any incident where it becomes difficult to solve the case like theft or land dispute etc. An oath is taken by both the parties over the stone.

Putting stone: Spherical boulder called *Tsugi* kept in each morungto display strength during festivals.

Pig and Tortoise stone: A pig brought for a wedding is believed to be transformed into stone in old Poilwa, and a tortoise believed to be transformed into stone in old Peren village. Both of which are located outside the village vicinity.

Fetish stone: A stone boulder placed near the village gate in old Poilwa village. It is believed that death befalls a person/animal when comes in contact with the stone.



Fig. 7: Stone receptacle with animal skin seen inside the structure in old Peren village



Fig. 8: A tortoise believe to have turned into a stone in old Peren village



Fig. 9: A pig believed to have turned into stone in old Poilwa village



Fig. 10: Oath stone placed besides village path in old Peren Village

LOCATION PATTERN OF THE MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS

In course of interview, it was mentioned that monuments can be erected as per the builder's preference. However, permission had to be obtained from the landowner, and normally such request is not rejected by the landowner. In that case, builder after the construction presents a token of gratitude to the landowner in lieu of the land given to them.

In old Peren, menhirs singly or in clusters are mostly erected in conspicuous location inside in the village. And stone platform in different shapes like circular, rectangular, and oblong structures,

associated with burials are constructed with the house compound or *khel* proximity. Whereas, raise platforms and stone circles constructed to commemorate surviving members or in memory for the dead are constructed in the connecting paths to the neighboring village where people frequently pass through.

In the case of old Poilwa, monuments which are not associated with feast of merit are mostly located in the vicinity of the village. However, monuments (mostly menhirs) associated with the feast of merit are all located besides the footpath leading to the terrace fields.

Aleida Assman (1991) mentions that “monuments are that part of a culture which stage-manage it: they want to be seen, preserved and remembered by contemporary and later generation. The monument is an erected sign, which encodes a message in a permanent way for communicating with people that are (possibly) millennia away: a monument is designed to survive the present and to enable cultural communication with the distant future” (Assmann 1991:13, cited in Holtorf 1997:47). Therefore, monuments act as a personal biography and it is possible to sustain through generations due to the permanence and durability of its material.

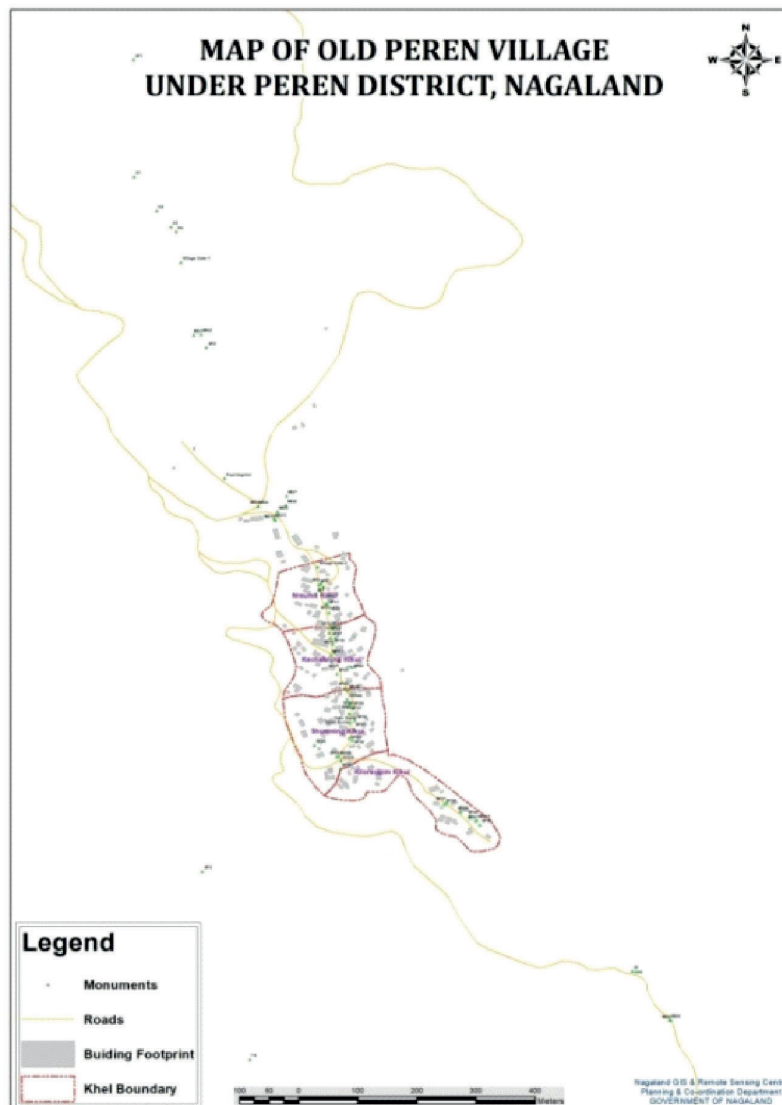


Fig. 11: Map of old Peren showcasing the distributions of Monuments

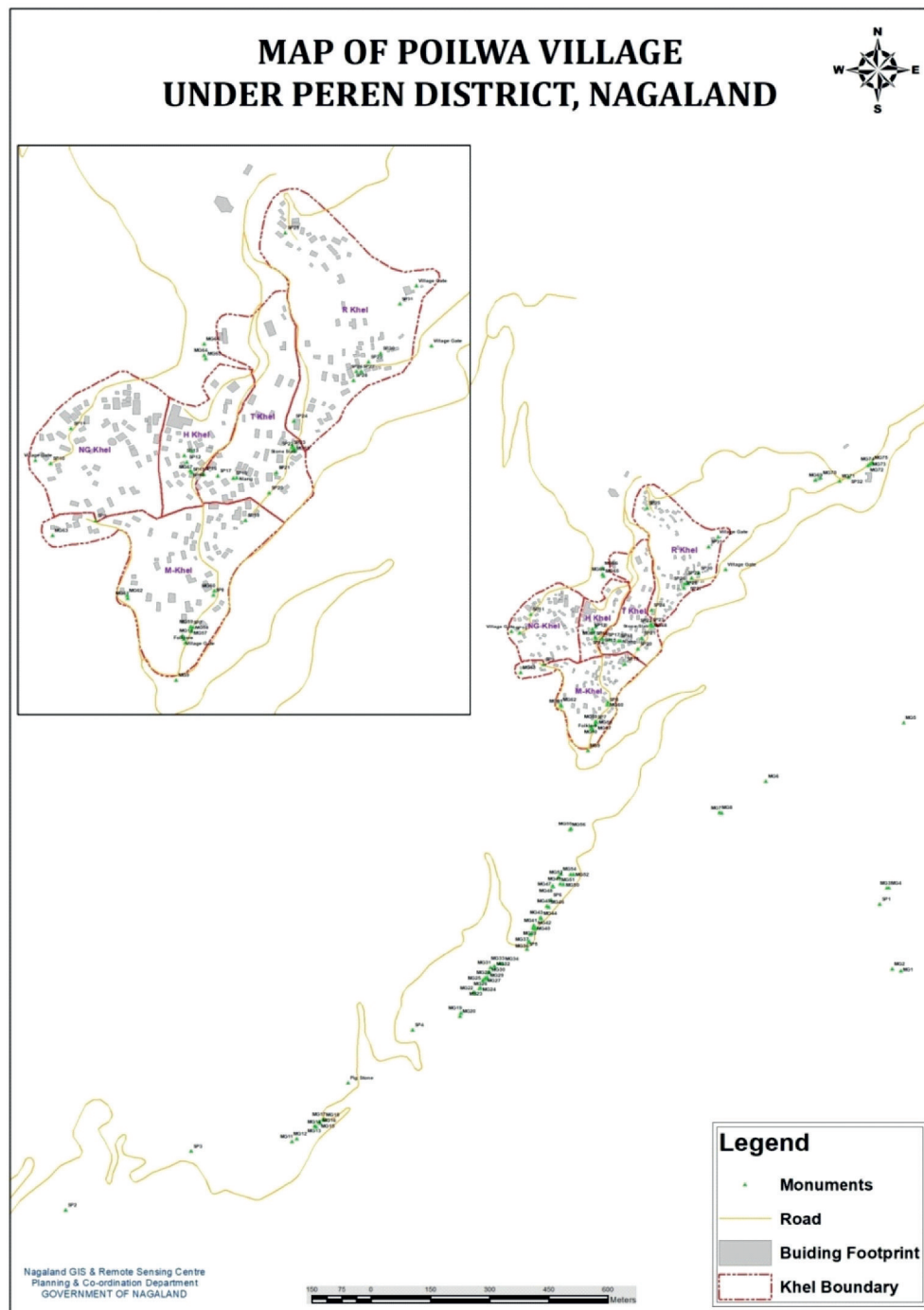


Fig. 12: Map of old Poilwa village showcasing the distribution pattern of the monuments

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FORMATION OF THE ZEME PRE-COLONIAL SOCIETY:

The primary unit of the social organization among the Zemes is the nuclear family *kelak* which comprises of the father, mother, unmarried children, and sometimes the grandparents. And is the lineage and the clan which traces to their common ancestry. The different lineages come together to form a clan. Like most of the Naga tribes, the Zeme trace their descent patrilineally, and marriage is patrilocal. Within the clan, there is a cooperative and reciprocal help being meted out in agricultural

work, economic assistance in times of need and also in a festival or assisting in the feast of merit, in times of building a house, also in matters of concerning the defense of the village. Each clan has its totem which is usually derived from birds, trees, and animals. Among the Zeme each clan have their dormitory which is looked after by the eldest member of the clan. The next unit which comprises an important part is the *khel*, which not only acts as a spatial place subdividing the villages but also helps in the proper working agent of the village. A *khel* could be an amalgamation of different clans or a few clans from the village. And in each *khel* there exists one common dormitory and normally in a large village, the *khelis* divided into upper, middle, and lower *khel*. Probably the most important aspect of *khels* was that they provided a communal framework for the socialization and education of children. In addition to that, on occasions like festivals, different *khels* form groups and compete with each other in games, dance, and singing, etc to keep a close attachment with one another. The morung which no longer held its importance like it was back then, constituted an important institute in Zeme society as it is here that youngsters are imparted with traditional lessons like folktales, folklore, folksongs, and various dances and certain life skills like crafting, various arts, spinning weaving, etc. There are two types of morung namely, *Rehangki* (boys' dorm) and *Releiki* (girls' dorm) a separate dormitory for the girls and boys. The family entrusted to look after the clan morung *Peiname ki* acts as the patriarch of the clan dormitory. In cases of dormitories attached to private houses, the owner act as the patriarch and matriarch of the dormitory. The dormitory plays a pertinent role as it inculcates the young minds the sense of responsibility and cooperation among themselves which sustains the tribal community life (Venuh 2014:832-834).

The economy of the Zeme depended mainly on agriculture. And the method of cultivation can be divided into two-Terrace cultivation (wet rice cultivation) usually begins in mid-February every year and harvest in October and jhum/shifting cultivation begins in the January and harvest begins in August. As for the Jhum field, unlike the terrace field, the land is utilized for two years and left fallow for about ten years. The main crop planted in the former is the rice whereas in jhum along with rice other crops like millet, jobs tears, maize and other vegetables like taro, beans, squash, are also grown. Work-gangs are made up of kinsmen, neighbors, or simply of men whose fields adjoin which is characterized by cooperative, reciprocal, and recursive in practice (Betts 1950:85). Animals like dogs, fowls, cats, pigs, cows, and mithun are also domesticated. The higher number of animals like mithun and cows enhance the prestige of the owner. The villagers are engaged in different professions like pottery making, weaving, basket making, carpentry, etc. There was also the practice of barter system between the neighboring villages. Though few coins were in circulation, it was not accessible to all especially the poor masses so in the absence of money the villagers used various type of conch shells, animal bones, horn and tusk, baskets, pots, grains, metals, cotton, vegetables as their means of exchange. The villagers with their goods travel far and distant places for days for the exchange of rare articles especially salt.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Megalithism has been a prehistoric practice among the Zeme tribe of the Peren district and is still prevalent in the community without the complexities of rituals involve in it. Even if there are differences in stages of feasting and the process of erection varies from one village to another, the concept of fertility, prestige, memory, procreation, solidarity among members remains the same. The different types of megaliths like the standing stone and stone platforms depicts the economic status of the Zemes as it involves various stage of feasting, so as to erect the monuments. However, it also shows the cooperative character as the relatives and clan members contribute the resources as well as

their time and energy to the feast. Also, the cooperative behavior and the recursive help among the clan members and the relatives further strengthens solidarity among them, the multiple burials associated with the clan platform shows the strong clan solidarity even after one's death. Besides strengthening clan solidarity by hosting the feast, the location of the erection of megaliths plays a major role as the megaliths are not constructed anywhere randomly, but if erected inside the village it is being placed within the clan compound or on conspicuous places where everyone can see. Most of the megaliths are erected on the way to the field or along the path where it is seen by the passerby easily. As to when ask why the megaliths are erected in a certain place, the answers is immediate and prompt 'the stones are erected for others to see and praise them' which acts as a personal biography of the person in whose name the stone has been erected. With the coming of Christianity in the region and the introduction of western education, the rituals involve and the erection of megalithic in its original form is not in practice anymore. However, the stone erection has taken a collective form such as commemorating jubilees celebrations, village founding stones, or in a simpler and Christianized way.

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