

## Megalithic Work in Assam.

By Dr. J. H. Hutton, C.I.E., D.Sc., Radnor.

MEGALITHIC work in Assam is important not only as bearing on the cultural and racial relations between Assam and the adjoining regions, but also as bearing on the whole question of Indian pre-history, and of her cultural and racial connections with the Mediterranean and with Oceania.

Megalithic work in Assam has definite associations with the dead and with their *post mortem* future, and this probably applies also to the Megalithic work throughout India. At the same time such work is, at any rate in Assam, also definitely phallic in certain aspects. These two sides of the culture are interdependent and go together to constitute a fertility cult of the dead.

The souls of the dead are associated with crops and with life in general. The underlying principle is well illustrated by the Karen doctrine that the soul consists of some sort of life-matter emanating from the body so to speak, when the body dies, and entering the crops and so imparting life to them and thence in a recurrent cycle to beasts and men. This idea of life as a finite material substance limited in quantity is common in Assam and may be illustrated by the Lushei conception of it as rising from the body and falling to earth as it were dew. This conception is possibly connected with its association with water and with the remains of a dual fertility cult which conceives of the sky as male and fertilising a female earth. This material conception of the soul or life as a substance has also led to the practice of providing receptacles for it after the death of the body, in the shape of wooden statues or of stones, generally, but not always, in the form of rough stone monuments, sometimes phallic in shape. For some stone menhirs are definitely phallic, while others replace wooden emblems which are phallic. All have definite associations with the fertility value of the individual for whose life-matter they are provided, and generally with the fertilisation thereby of the community for which purpose the phallic shape of the monument may have a sympathetic magical value. (It may here be pointed out that the confusion between the magical value of the phallic emblem and the value of the statue as a receptacle for life-matter is assisted by the fact that both the phallus and the human body when reduced to the

minimum of individual design are hardly distinguishable from one another. In any case the practice of erecting statues of the dead to house their life-matter impinges very closely on the magical phallic fertility cult.)

This cult of the life-matter of the dead appears in Assam in varying forms. The well-known monoliths at Dinapur are similar in design to the wooden emblems used at a fertility ceremony by the Angami Nagas, who, however, use simple menhirs differing merely in size to represent the two sexes, or to house their life-matter. On the other hand they are traditionally believed to occupy the site of an ancient market place or meeting place such as is associated with rude stone monoliths at Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills. Here, however, as in the stone monuments of the so-called Kachha Nagas, the female principle is represented by a flat stone dolmen while the male is again an upright menhir. It seems likely that this method of representing the male and female principles has been forced on the Syntengs by the nature of the material used, as they appear to have migrated from the North Cachar Hills, and to have left behind them their typical clan mortuaries with twin waterpools like those still associated in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills with the cult of the dead clan, but having huge phallic urns of sandstone (some still containing remnants of burnt bone) instead of the rectangular cists now used by the Khasis and Syntengs for that purpose in their present country in which only an unworkable gneiss is available for the construction of receptacles for the bones of the dead. Even in the north Cachar Hills sites, however, the use of a menhir and a dolmen (of the type for which Mr. Perry uses the term dissolith) is found by the side of the twin tanks which are still spoken of by the present inhabitants as the "dancing places" of their predecessors. The pre-historic mortuary urns of these sites are in some cases definitely female and in others definitely male in form, suggesting the stone cists still used by the Konyak Nagas which take the form of the sex of the individual whose skull is found within, the life-matter being accommodated immediately after death in a wooden statue pending the removal of the head from the corpse when putrefaction

has facilitated its detortion. Some other allied tribes, however, content themselves with a wooden statue of the dead with horns projecting from the head to receive and protect the skull of the deceased which is conceived as passing downwards from the skull into the figure below. Menhirs and dolmens, however, are found in the villages of these same tribes, though their precise significance has not yet been determined, and much resemble those put up by some Angami Nagas. The latter also erect memorial menhirs which rise from a stone platform which is trapezoid in form, one of the two parallel ends being always shorter than the other while the two sides are of equal length. It seems likely that this platform is so shaped to represent the female principle and the whole construction is analogous to the *lingam* and *sakti* of Hinduism.

It would seem that from being of individual value as a receptacle for life-matter, virtue has attached to the use of great stones in general, particularly in association with the dead or with water. Thus, they have been used in the erection of forts by the Angami Nagas, these forts usually occupying sites under which the founders of the village have been buried. No doubt the life-matter of the deceased gives strength and perpetuity to the building. Megalithic bridges also occur in Assam, and monoliths are very frequently erected on the banks of rivers, particularly at bridge-heads. Megalithic temples and paved approach roads are found associated with fertility cults, and in two such cases at any rate temples of this kind have been associated with human sacrifice or fertility cults; it may be observed that Assam has been a stronghold of Tantric worship.

A number of parallel instances of this belief in a material life-substance as noticed in other parts of India will be found in chapter eleven of the *Report on the Census of India, 1933*. It will be enough here to give a brief reference to the brass images made by Kolis, who collect them till they have an inconvenient number and then consign them to a stream; to the metal image of the dead, placed in miniature dolmens and periodically worshipped, of a tribe in Travancore in Southern India; to the Munda and Oraon practices of putting up stones in honour of the dead, such stones being in the case of Mundas collected in clan or tribal groups. In some cases there seems to be a connection between stone monuments and pot burial, as the

Konyak Nagas who use stone cists have an alternative method of burying the head of the deceased in a pot the mouth of which is covered by a second pot or bowl inverted. The use of wooden life-receptacles has a close parallel in the Nicobarese practice of interring the bones in a wooden statue with the skull as a head. The west coast structures in the form of stone chambers with a circular cap, mushroom dolmens they might be called, have no close parallel in Assam but it is possibly significant that both the chessmen monoliths at Dinapur and the stone urns of N. Cachar have their domes incised with cross lines like the caps of the mushroom dolmens, while the Khasi monoliths sometimes have a round stone superimposed. It may be added that there was a close parallel to Dinapur chessmen to be found in one or two of the carved pillars at Lohazdagga in Chota Nagpur. The holed dolmens of Southern India have no directly corresponding parallel in Assam, but it is possible that the reason for the existence of the hole is to be inferred from the Kuki custom of inserting a bamboo into the grave (sometimes stone lined) to provide for the ingress and egress of the soul, a custom which appears again, also in association with monolithic work, in Madagascar. There is, however, no known parallel in Assam to the stone cist burial described from Jewurgi in Central India which is apparently not dissimilar from some South Russian burials possibly of some proto-nordic association. Nor is there anything in Assam that corresponds to the baked clay cist and capstone of the Hyderabad burials, though parallels can be found to the ring of stone that surmounts the grave and the occasional menhir of the Hyderabad burial areas. There is no precise parallel to the circle of menhirs of N. India in which marriage processions stop to dance, though circles of flat stones are put up to commemorate deceased persons who have been particularly rich and prosperous and have therefore high fertility value, and at Gwilong or Togwema in the Manipur State (for instance) dancing, swimming and wrestling take place inside a group of menhirs in honour of the dead at one of the agricultural festivals of the year, and in Angami villages it is common for the "pullers" of phallic wooden to stop and dance in what are known as "pools", open spaces of the village often associated with stone monuments.

The theory is advanced that all these customs are associated with a conception of life as a material and finite substance, a conception which leads logically to head hunting, cannibalism and human sacrifice as means of obtaining life-matter. It is well known that primitive languages are exceedingly poor in abstract terms; abstractions are therefore almost certainly foreign to primitive thought. It is suggested that the first conception of life is likely to have arisen from an attempt to comprehend death and the obvious but not easily explicable difference between a living man and a corpse.

By a savage, unable to grasp any conceptions but those of concrete and finite matter, life would naturally be regarded as a finite material substance separable from the body and hence a wide field of speculation leading on the one hand to the practice of human sacrifice and other such means of obtaining life-matter, and on the other to the Vedantic philosophy which regards the body as a mere shell to house the soul, and only one of many such. It is suggested that this philosophy of life originates in the pre-Aryan civilisation of India, probably of Mediterranean or Syrian origin.

### Letters to the Editor.

#### Hydro-Electric Schemes in India.

I WAS very much interested to read a letter by Dr. H. E. Watson on Hydro-Electric Schemes in India, in the August issue of the *Current Science*.

In general, the note appears to have been based on certain illusory defects. But, however, in the following brief note a few explanations have been given which will show that the adoption of 25 cycle frequency by the Mysore Government is not handicapping them as pointed out. In fact, it will be clear that it is no handicap at all.

The chief points raised in the note referred to are:—

- (1) Defects regarding linking Mysore in future with the rest of India in case a grid system develops.
- (2) The handicap which Mysore will be having in case railway electrification is taken up.
- (3) Effect of 25 cycle lighting on the eyes of the villagers.

1. No doubt most parts of India are adopting in general 50 cycle system for the power generation and distribution system. The existing 25 cycle system in Mysore is due to the fact that the scheme was started long before any other scheme in India had been taken up. But this does not isolate us from the rest of India. There is machinery available to link the 25 cycle system with 50 cycle system if we want to do so and the object of such a linking in general is to utilise the spare power available during off peak-loads from one station to other stations where the load demand is more and the station by itself is incapable of meeting

it. In the case of Mysore, such a spare power during off peak-load hours to the extent of about 25 per cent of its capacity can be made available for other systems when the grid system is adopted by such a machinery. The cost of such a machinery will be about one per cent of the cost now involved in changing the whole system to 50 cycles. In view of the above flexibility available it is but natural that it would be wasting money if an attempt is made to change the equipment so that the general supply becomes 50 cycles.

The next important point which prevents any such scheme being adopted is the point of view of the consumers who have purchased motors and other machinery suitable for 25 cycles whose equipments will have to be replaced at departmental cost if such a frequency change is adopted and the cost of such an arrangement obviously is prohibitive.

2. The difficulties, enumerated by the writer, that Mysore would be experiencing in case A. C. electrification of railways is adopted are not real. It is an established fact that the use of direct current for traction purposes has many distinct advantages and many of the electrifications in India have adopted D. C. system. From a perusal of the recent advancement made in the design and satisfactory operation of mercury arc rectifiers it will be seen that the recent experiment on A. C. electrification, which claims almost equal flexibility with the D.C. electrification, is further set back by the advantage gained in the natural characteristics of the rectifiers which, probably, will permanently claim superiority for D. C. electrification over A. C.