

AROUND THE PETIT-CHASSEUR SITE IN SION (VALAIS, SWITZERLAND) AND NEW APPROACHES TO THE BELL BEAKER CULTURE

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Anthropology of the Megalith-Erecting Societies¹

† Alain TESTART

Abstract

Although the megalith-erecting societies apparently cannot be defined as a social group, they nonetheless share important traits. Ethnographic examples are numerous, and the descriptions that are made of these societies are generally of outstanding quality. Four of these societies still erecting megaliths during modern times are the focus of this publication: the Naga of the Assam region, in the north-eastern part of India, the Nias island south of Sumatra, the “Oromo” south of Addis Abebba in Ethiopia, and the Merina of Madagascar. The in-depth analysis of these examples leads to consider megalithism as being the most ostentatious display of wealth, of the power generated by wealth and therefore it appears secondary to know if the megalith was destined for one man or for a community.

Keywords: Megalith-erecting societies, ethnography, anthropology, ostentatious display, Naga, “Oromo”, Nias, Merina.

Résumé

Anthropologie des sociétés à mégalithes – Si les sociétés à mégalithes ne semblent pas se définir comme un type social, elles semblent avoir des traits importants en commun. Les exemples ethnographiques sont nombreux, et les descriptions qui en sont faites sont en général d'excellente qualité. Quatre sociétés élevant encore des mégalithes dans les temps subactuels sont développés dans cette publication : les Naga dans la région d'Assam au nord-est de l'Inde, l'île de Nias au sud de Sumatra, les « oromo » ou oromoïdes au sud d'Addis Abebba en Ethiopie, et les Merina de Madagascar. L'analyse détaillée de ces exemples amène à considérer le mégalithisme comme la manifestation la plus éclatante de la richesse, de la puissance que confère la richesse et qu'il est dès lors secondaire de savoir si le mégalithe était destiné à un seul homme ou à une collectivité.

Mots-clefs : sociétés à mégalithes, ethnographie, anthropologie, démonstration ostentatoire, Naga, « Oromo », Nias, Merina.

Introduction

As a social anthropologist and although this paper is primarily addressed to archaeologists, I will first of all mention some ethnographic cases. I am indeed convinced that they contain some valuable information. I am not certain whether it would be appropriate to speak of “megalithic societies” as a social category, as if the fact to erect megaliths would be sufficient to define, at least broadly, the type of society we are dealing with. That is why I have preferred the title “megalith-erecting societies”, which simply means societies that erect megaliths and that are of various types. I am, however, convinced that they have important traits in common and it is precisely these traits I attempt to define hereafter.

To start, a comment on the relevance of our sources and the state of reflection on the issue. Yet ethnographic descriptions of societies still erecting megaliths in modern times are quite rare. However, detailed descriptions are reported from Asia and Indonesia, primarily referring to the Angami Naga tribe discussed here, the Assam region in general and the Nias island. The phenomenon is also reported from Vanuatu, the Toradja (who erect standing stones in memory of the deceased), Easter Island, Tahiti, distinct populations of Ethiopia, for example the Konso or the Arsi, and finally

from Madagascar, most particularly the Imerina for whom exists abundant literature. Social anthropologists have been little interested in this phenomenon the prehistorian Alain Gally (2006: 45-76) is the only one who has published a holistic comparative study which is welcome.

Four ethnographic examples

I have chosen the following four examples according to the high quality of the descriptive record and their diversity.

Naga

The Naga tribes live in Assam; most of them exhibit strong village organisation with substantially varying terms designating the chiefs and their power; only one of these tribes has formed a kingdom of “hinduised” type. Within this particularly complex group, the Angami Naga are not the only ones erecting megaliths, but they are the best documented (Hutton 1921: 232-3, photographs between pages 270 and 271; on the megaliths of the Assam region in general: Hutton 1922a; 1922b). Megaliths are erected during ceremonies during which a wealthy enough family funds its covillagers to pull the boulder (fig. 1 and 2) and provides feasting for the village over several days. This is typically a “grade-taking ceremony”, the

1. This contribution takes up an argument presented in a book that will be published by Gallimard: *L'évolution des sociétés, de Lascaux à Carnac*.

ranks being defined by the custom (including the list of the required expenses) and they are graded according to a fixed hierarchy wherein a distinct level of rank can only be claimed once the previous level has been reached. Only the top ranks, the most difficult to be reached because they require important expense, involve the erection of a megalith. Obviously, we deal here with a kind of meritocracy, which is highlighted by the term of “merit feasts” stemming from the Indian world (including its beliefs in reincarnation or in the escape from the cycle of rebirth *achieved through the accumulation of merit*), the aforementioned rank-taking ceremonies.

Nias

The island of Nias (south of Sumatra) is well-documented, particularly with regard to its southern part (showing a very different social organisation compared to the central and northern parts) thanks to the seminal work of Schröder (1917; completed by Schnitger 1939). The social configuration is very close to the one of the Naga, but exhibits an additional social stratification into nobles and commoners, only the nobles having access to top ranks. Yet the whole context is very different from the one associated with the Naga in that the rank system provides the deposit and the type of political power, the village chief (the political unit) being the person who has reached the top rank. The function of the megalith and its technique of erection (slipping on a wooden sledge) are however the same as for the Naga.

Oromo

The “Oromo” (or “Galla”, a branch within the cushitic family) are several tribes in Ethiopia found south of Addis Abebba, on the fringes of the literate Christian Amhara civilisation. Different groups can be distinguished, each with its own tradition. Some erect megaliths and megalithism here is – in contrast with the preceding cases – exclusively *funeral*. This



Figure. 1. Angami Naga: a couple standing in front of the megalith they ordered.

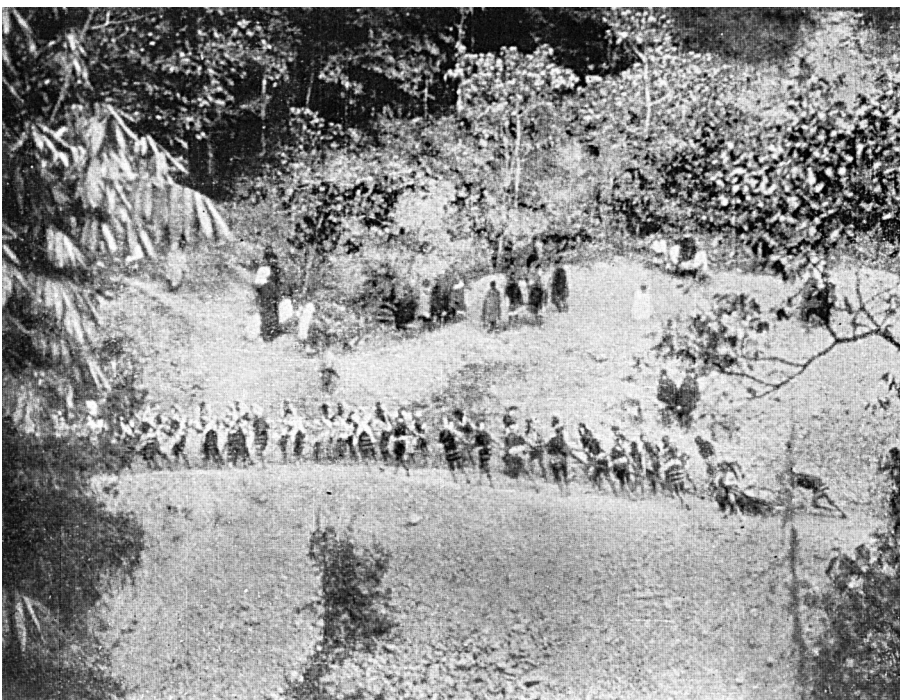


Figure. 2. Angami Naga: the transport of the megalith.

is the case, with slightly different modalities, of the Konso and Gewada farmers, and the Arsi shepherds.

Despite differences in aspects, techniques, functions etc. compared to Asiatic megalithism, traits are recognised in the Horn of Africa that strongly evoke the Asiatic cases with megaliths: the stones are erected for “meritorious” persons (those who excel through heroic actions, typically warfare, but not exclusively).

In general, these societies have not been described in detail except for ancient and partial ethnographic studies; the matter will thus be referred to recent studies (Hallpike 1972; Joussaume and Bekele 2007; Bekele 2007) that present various disadvantages, such as being undertaken in a substantially modified context².

Merina

On the contrary, the Merina, dominant tribe of Madagascar and providing the rulers of the kingdom prior to 1800, are very well known thanks to abundant documentation, both the outstanding ethnographic presentation of the megalithic phenomenon by Joussaume and Raharijoana (1985) and the important historic studies including the multi-volume translation of the speeches of the great king Andrianampoinimerina (Reverend Père Callet 1958). The fact to be in the presence of a kingdom is sufficient to ensure that we are dealing here with a completely different case. There is no advantage in erecting megaliths, which in this case are exclusively funeral, but one simply complies with the tradition, moreover when belonging to the upper social stratum, the one of the nobles, in stark contrast with the one of the commoners. One number indicates the amount of this funeral investment: the constructions built in the 1960s costed 350 000 FMG (Malagasy francs) at that period, whilst a house was worth 5 000 FMG on average and up to 100 000 FMG in exceptional cases only.

None of these societies exactly matches to what we call lineage societies

To be clear, let us keep in mind the minimum definitions. A lineage is an unilinear group descending from female or, on the contrary, from male ancestors, but not from both. Concerning what is labelled a lineage society in social anthropology, this is not a society constituted by lineages – which is found almost everywhere, whether in Athens or during the Early Middle Ages in Europe. This is a society entirely organised by lineages

and by lineages exclusively. This is most particularly the case with regard to politics: political life results from the balance of power and the equilibrium between lineages allying or fighting each other; whilst the chiefs hold their function according to their position within the lineage, i.e. within the kinship group.

As such, this first argument (societies with megaliths are not lineage societies) appears to be twofold, on the empirical level and through the reasoning. Let us outline the facts first.

The Naga societies are typically matching what is labelled a “ranked society” by anthropologists: the individuals acquire wealth and thanks to wealth they purchase “grades” which are titles that exhibit their wealth and provide them prestige (not necessarily rights, given that this may be only the right to display a distinct insignia, etc.). The entire society is oriented towards the acquisition of “grades” of which the number and the means to reach them are determined. The society of Nias – in fact southern Nias, the only one we are well-informed about – is similar, including in addition the political dimension, given that the one who obtains the top rank becomes the chief of the village. This is a formal structure, or rather an *established* one, permitting to endow the most wealthy individuals with the greatest power. Through these ostentatious feasting, complicated and expensive, as are the rank-taking ceremonies, such a social organisation aligns political power and economical power – this is why I used the term *ostentatious plutocracy*, power of wealth and ostentatious display of wealth³.

Similarly, the Oromo societies are not lineage societies as they are the best examples in southern Ethiopia of the large group of age class societies centered on Kenya. These systems, which vary significantly from one tribe to the other, have nonetheless in common:

1. to implement highly formalised and extremely sophisticated systems which allow to adjust distinct cycles (age classes or promotions, generation systems) destined to make automatically progress the individuals according to the year of their birth (or their initiation) into the higher class;
2. to differentiate the holders of political power, since the class defines the functions: the one of a warrior (taking part into warfare but not into the decisions), of a leader (who has the right to vote in the sovereign assembly) or of a retired (without any function nor power).

In other terms, the age class systems regulate politics and equally limit the extent of the power each person can dispose of. Permanent and irrevocable personal power is impossible as the supreme leader is chosen within a class (and thus automatically deprived after a certain number of years). The democratic aspect of the system is highlighted in all the studies, the whole group of villagers (except the young and the aged persons) constitutes a collective political unit: each of the political units (being centered on one village) is administrated by councils and sovereign assemblies (deciding about peace and war), each of these villages being sovereign – exactly like greek city-states (polis). In conclusion, (political) power is defined according to the age classes and/or generations within highly complex systems and not according to the lineages.

On this issue, the risk of too rapid generalisation has to be pointed out: although prestige race focuses on the erection of megaliths for the Angami Naga, it does not in Ethiopia. On

2. The book edited by Hallpike on the Konso has the additional disadvantage of being exclusively interested in awareness and sensations, there is consequently no information about wealth, its type, the inequalities of wealth, etc. (the term *wealth* does not appear in the index). Some sparse information on the issue can be gathered from the doctoral dissertation of Bekele (2007: 65, 66, 68): a division into two social strata, farmers and craftsmen, considered to be inferior persons who are buried in the adjacent forest; the confirmation by the informants that the “father of drum” and other traditional administrative authorities have only been elected because they were quite wealthy. This general lack of information on wealth (according to social anthropology much more preoccupied with the description of formal modalities of the age class systems than with their economic rootedness) makes it much more difficult to identify the role of wealth in the case of these societies in Ethiopia than in the Asiatic cases.
3. Testart 2005: 45 sq. In this book a detailed presentation of the notion of lineage society follows (ibid. 109 sq.).

the Nias island, megaliths and feastings are one of the conditions of power whilst this is not the case in Ethiopia. Here the erection of megaliths rather serves as a confirmation, albeit a late confirmation (megalithism is funerary) of the greatness of a leader or a warrior. In addition, this erection is submitted to the agreement of the councils and assemblies which clearly mirrors the demographic aspect of these societies but also shows a different role of megalithism. Whether prestige or power race for the Naga or the Nias people, in Ethiopia it takes on little more than a registering role.

Everything is very different for the Merina. They represent a classical African kingship with strong tendency to despotism in addition to social stratification which is rather an Asiatic trait. Like in almost any African kingship, there are lineages (with the heads of the lineages who are administrative relays of the power), but it is a royal state society, at the opposite of a lineage society.

Moreover, ethnography cautions against the spontaneous idea to consider dolmens and gallery graves that resemble so much our family vaults: one may tend to think that these Merina megaliths belong to lineages and that only the members of this lineage would be buried in it. This is however completely erroneous, according to the opinion of two ethnographers, Bloch (1971: 114 *sq.*) and Razafintsalama (1981: 187 *sq.*, 194), who have inquired in detail on family links. Convergently and undeniably their studies show that *the family vaults are not managed by the lineages*, but by much more flexible family groups permitting each person to choose either the tomb of his mother or his father.

The megalith-erecting societies, at least those for which we have consistent ethnographic information is available, are not at all lineage societies, nor, more generally, societies based on kinship. This conclusion can be put forward through simple reasoning. A lineage society attributes the power (power of the head of the lineage) to the eldest within the generation, and generation after generation; it grants power based exclusively on kinship, and this power is generally undisputed (except for the case of lineage segmentation which defines a new

leader for the segment that has split off) and does not require confirmation. By contrast, the megalith, the way it functions in our four examples, provides the opportunity to obtain what was not determined by birthright. It is opposed to the lineage system (and to the legitimacy it supposes) as the acquired position is opposed to the inherited status.

All these societies with megaliths are ostentatious

It is difficult to discuss the megalith phenomenon without speaking of ostentatious display. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the meaning of ostentation is “*the pretentious or showy display of wealth and luxury, designed to impress*”. It is obvious that any judgement qualifying a practice as being ostentatious constitutes a value judgement and thus is tarnished by subjectivity. It is however noteworthy – at least I think so – that the huge menhir of Locmariaquer or the Saint Michel tumulus are ostentatious constructions. The small standing stones erected by the Toradja in the “field of remembrance” appear not to be ostentatious and nobody speaks of “megalithism” concerning these stones which are not large enough to warrant the term.

When attempting to detail what makes us speak of ostentatious display with regard to megalithism, we will first point out that these are important constructions compared to the modest houses. Consequently, this would mean that the megaliths on the island of Nias are only little ostentatious because the houses, primarily the one of the leader with its huge planks serving as piles or transversal beams, are much more impressive than the stones erected outdoors. The second characteristics that incites us to speak of ostentatious display is the fact that none of these societies uses animal traction or sophisticated technical means such as a crane or a pulley etc. With regard to the technical level, these megaliths appear quite ostentatious, more so in their mode of transport from a distant origin (or the fact to turn several times around the village on the island of Nias) than in the erection itself.



Figure. 3. Nias: upright and unerect stones in front of the chief's house.

If we admit this trait – obviously with some reservations or nuances – we also agree that it characterises a distinct number of societies, but not all societies. In ethnography the societies of the north-western coast, with their important potlatch feast, their sumptuary distributions can be easily highlighted as perfectly ostentatious societies. The people of the Trobriand islands with their kula exchange during which considerable energy is spent on the acquisition of distinct necklaces or brassards known for their ancient and through their reputation, is also a good example. But there are also societies which are not ostentatious, such as the well-known lineage societies of the Nuer in Sudan or the Tiv in Nigeria.

These societies with megaliths exhibit: wealth

In order to introduce the third trait, I would like to ask the following question: through ostentatious display, through the erection of megaliths, one exhibits, but what exactly? The object, of course, the construction, certainly. But not exclusively. In order to understand, we have to raise the question, not what were the technical means required for these constructions (which does not constitute an important problem, a substantial number of men, cords and some experience being sufficient), but how they were funded.

A priori, two types of funding can be taken into account:

- the workers are not paid, and we have two sub-cases:
 - either they perform this labour on a voluntary basis, without being paid
 - or they perform this labour by constraint and it is forced labour;
- the workers are paid by the sponsor, a private person, king, chief acting within his function or a village group, regardless.

But neither the public nor the academic opinion imagines that the slightest form of labour payment may have existed in these ancient civilisations; it is however willingly thought that ancient men acted spontaneously or by constraint. During the 19th century, influenced by romanticism, it was for a long time believed that the Gothic cathedrals would have been constructed based on a strong impetus of popular faith. Inversely, it is commonly believed that the Egyptian pyramids have been constructed by slaves. These two opinions are erroneous. With regard to the cathedrals it is known that these were projects thoroughly planned and organised by the Church, and all the workers that participated into the constructions were paid as are nowadays workers in public building sites; one part of the funding stemmed from the Church's own resources and an other part from donations by corporations or by nobles, often depicted in the stained-glassed windows as generous benefactors. With regard to the pyramids, labour contracts have been found, indicating that they were constructed by employed workers. In what do these two examples inform the case of the megaliths? We tend to believe that they apply to these cases. They are the first two explanations that spring to mind. According to the first, the erection of these huge boulders supposes strong political power, able to mobilise a sufficient number of men. In the case of the second, feasting atmosphere can be imagined, a joyful ambiance, enthusiasm sufficient enough for the volunteers to accomplish the project⁴.

It is likely that these monuments have been constructed during feasts and not with whiplashes. But it is often ignored, or

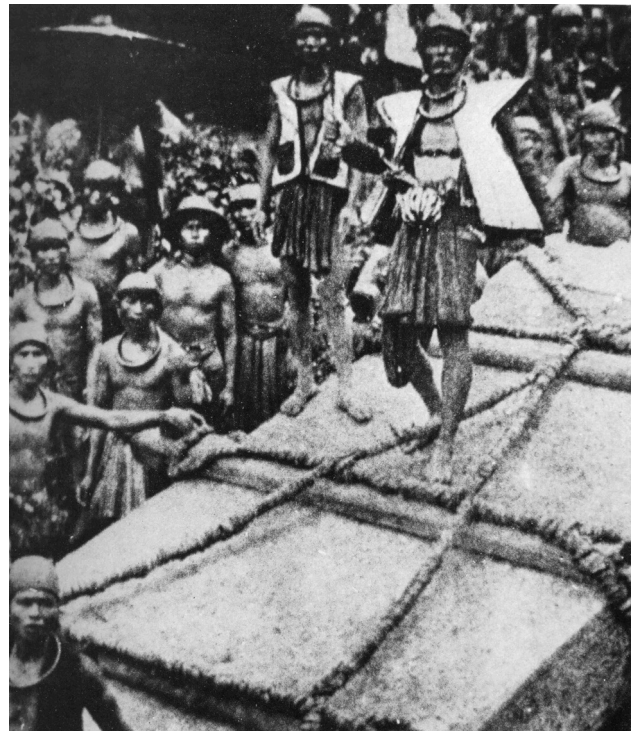


Figure. 4. Nias: transport of a boulder (only the sponsor has the right to dance on it).

admitted without seeing the implications, that important feasts in pre-urban societies are resulting, as do modern feasts, from a decision taken by a group of friends, everyone contributing by providing some money. Whether we deal with the potlatch on the north-western coast or the erection of megaliths as this was done up until 1900 from Assam to Flores through Nias, these feasts were invariably formal events. They were announced by the person who intended to host them and all the people of the village or even the surrounding area, were invited. These feasts were celebrated in the name of the one who invited. And this person was the authorising officer and the sponsor. The authorising officer, because he directed the preparative work for the feast and the labour performed during the feast. The sponsor because he entirely ensured the funding. He was most particularly caring of the people assembled on the occasion, and this is why he would have (on the north-western coast), constituted important supply of smoked salmon, and (in south-east Asia), foreseen some buffalo to be sacrificed during the feast. He supplied the people with nourishment and the people worked for him within the aim he had fixed and under his direction. This was a kind of labour payment. It is, moreover the norm, the norm for labour hiring in societies without salary systems given that the people are not yet separated from their production means. When a wealthy man needs important labour force, he calls for a feast, the people come because they are fed, and they work for the one who provides them with food. This is what the Trobriand chief does when he wants to construct boats. This is what the *big men* in distinct Melanesian islands do when they plan to construct men's houses. This is still what the farmers of these societies do when they look for the reciprocal help of their neighbours. They do not establish

4. This is what Jean Leclerc described by a picture: men coming together at the occasion of a feast who decided amongst them "to go and pull the megalith".

contracts, they do not pay labour by counting hours spent in the fields. They organise a feast in their field, distributing beer, and those who come, work for them and with them.

Let us conclude. What is exhibited in these feasts or through the erection of these monuments? *It is not the political power* of a chief who would be able to “mobilise” the men as the Chinese sovereigns were able to mobilise their subjects for war or for building the Great Wall. *One exhibits the power of money.* One exhibits the sheer *economical* power of a man able to hire – I would like to say able to “pay” – all his co-villagers. Let us hear finally what say some of these men who erected megaliths, and whose words have been registered either by the ethnographs or by oral tradition. A man of the Kelabit tribe in Sarawak (Borneo), shortly before his death, having planned the construction of a large cairn, has left the following account: “The whole of the perishable food left, salt, rice, pigs, buffalo, as well as many other things to purchase, like tobacco, betel nut, eels and labour, I will expend after announcing a mighty feast after the next rice harvest. I am in a position to give a very big feast. Hundreds of people will come, including my relatives over in the Kerayan and Bawang to the east and as far as Pa Tik beyond Kubaan to the west. [...] Thus my own memory will stand to eternity. It [the cairn to be constructed] will be larger than any ordinary man’s can be, because so many will come to my feast and will be so well entertained — since I have nothing to keep and pass on, I can, I will spend the lot in one great final display; and in consequence they will make a mighty effort to do well by me, piling rock upon boulder upon pebble upon stone.” (after Tom Harrisson [Harrisson and O’Connor 1970; 107-8].

And let us conclude with the words of Andrianampoinimerina, king of Imerina (Madagascar, beginning of the 19th century), great expert of megalithism and whose long speeches are reported. He spoke to glorify this practice, ordering to all to “assemble in order to cart the stones” and to show in this way

their “reciprocal friendship”, the important families helping the small families, the wealthy helping the poor, in order to provide a large tomb for all of them; he also ordered not to be reluctant concerning the expenses: “Even if you put in all your wealth, if you use it for the construction of graves, it would not at all be wasted; this is, said Andrianampoinimerina, *wealth visible in the graves* [...]” (in italics in the text, the sentence is repeated later – Callet 1958, IV: 494).

The megaliths symbolised power, the kind of power born of wealth. What is shown is the capacity to spend – a term emphasised in the preceding text. Compared to this fundamental argument, the question of whether the megalith was destined for a single person or a group appears to be secondary. Ethnographic studies show that one glorifies himself by a selfish project as well as by a project of common interest: the Kelabit case corresponds to the first, as probably the major part of south-east Asia and the north-western coast, a potlatch being celebrated in order to glorify the name of the donor. The Melanesian *big men* correspond to the second, as illustrated by when they fund the construction of the men’s houses or when they fund, still by their own means, peace by compensating the victims including those of the enemy. But all aim at perpetuating their own memory or their reputation. All are proud to have spent so much, all have shown that they had the means of their ambition, as during several days, the days of the feasting, the entire village, the entire neighbourhood, depended on them. They supplied them with food and controlled their labour force. What the multinational companies do today, the sponsors of the megaliths did at their own scale.

To conclude in a more general manner: I interpret megalithism as the most vivid demonstration of wealth, and of the power provided by it.

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