
Funeral Rituals and Megalithic Tradition: A Study on Some Ethnic Communities in South-Western Part of Odisha

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Abstract: *The study of mortuary practices give us information about past human life style, and their adoptive milieu in different environmental conditions, thus it is helpful for us to unfold the history of early Iron Age communities. It would also enable us to trace out the antiquity of those communities who follow megalithism presently. The present study discusses about the living megalithic tradition of Gadaba, Bondo and Gond community settled in hilly regions of Odisha as well as a comparative study was conducted to understand their tradition, custom, rituals, belief on the life after death.*

Keywords: Megalithic Tradition, Mythological Beliefs, Funeral Rituals, Gadaba, Bondo, Gond, Odisha

Introduction

From the very beginning of eighteenth century many ethnographers and anthropologists have carried out investigations on the tribal people and have published many reports. The reports not only focus the socio-economical status of tribal groups but also cover other aspect viz., mythological beliefs, funerary custom, megalithic tradition, food habits, traditional knowledge and their settlement pattern in different eco-zone. However, research on living Megalithic tradition is one of the most important chapters of their work. Megalithic building is one of the most interesting traditions found among the tribal groups, it is spread over different parts of the world including Indian subcontinent (Mohanty and Selvakumar 2002:313-351, Marak 2012:45-53, Mendaly, 2015:1-6, 2016:1-4). However, the means of the practice show a discrepancy from region to region. The studies have provided various information about the prehistoric societies and there past way of life, it includes, socio-political (Braun 1979: 66-79) economic and ideological believe (Cannon 1989, Little et al., 1992, Gruber 1971).

The burial structures were also used to obtain data on the environment in which the deceased lived and their adaptation strategies during the time of environmental

changes (Fox 1950:53-73, Glasbergen 1954). Majority of these studies are concerned with how they played an important role in the beginning of early agricultural communities, and the creation of complex polities (Renfrew 1976:198-220, Chapman 1981:71-82). In addition to this many researchers have discussed how megalithic monuments in Neolithic Europe acted as territorial markers, which were in turn controlled by kinship-based corporate groups. Some time they represented themselves as, elite class people (Flemming 1973: 178-93, Sherrat 1990: 147-67, Nelson 1999: 147-65), whereas some of them concentrate on how they represent a symbiotic tie between the natural and human world (Hodder 1990, Thomas 1993: 73-97, Bradley 1998, Tilley 2004). In Indian subcontinent, we have the evidence of two unique traditions of megalithic building; their context is, quite different from each to other. The first category found in a Prehistoric context, which is profusely found in south India, in association of iron implement and black-and-red ware pottery and the second category, found in Northeastern and central part of India, shows a living form of megalithic tradition within different tribal groups; those are, settled in forest area, with strong cultural implication. These two groups clearly had no connection at all (Haimendorf 1945:73-86, Ramachandran 1971). These megaliths in northeastern and central India show a morphological as well as functional variation, and diversification of beliefs in present-day megalithic cultures therefore it is very difficult to categorize them. However, the state of Odisha has revealed many living megalithic sites (Haimendorf 1943; Mendaly 2015:1-6, 2016; Basa 2015:751-770; Mohanty, 2015:732-50; Mahanta 2015:700-31), but no one has attempted to compare this culture in a regional framework. In this study, we are trying to present a comparative analysis, which will give us some new information.

Present Area of Research

The state of Odisha has occupied a unique position in the field of ethnographical research in India for housing different varieties of tribal communities. According to the Constitution of Odisha, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes order (Amendment) in 1976 has enlisted 62 types of tribal communities. However, the present research concentrates on Bondo and Gadabas tribes of Koraput-Malkangiri district and the Gond of Nuaparha District in Odisha (Figure 1).

The Bondos and Gadabas communities are, settled in hilly area of the Koraput and Malkangiri district. The Gadabas community is spread over a large part of the area while the Bondo Community is settled within a block of hills, which lie between the great plain of Malkangiri and the Machkund River. The Bondos and Gadabas both speak an Austro-Asiatic tongue but their language is different from each other, which is hard to understand. However, the Gond tribes belong to Dravidian linguistic family and had settled down in the low land area of Nuaparha district, which is very close to the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state. The tribal communities have organized shifting cultivation as well as they are semi pastoralism, they collect different type of forest products and goods. Buffaloes and oxen are, kept for plugging; goats as well as hen are purely for meat. They collect honey, roots of the different types of medicinal plant, and

hunting and fishing contribute, but sparsely to the food supply. The female members of the family engage themselves with spin yarn from the bark-fiber of a deciduous flowering shrub, colorings with vegetable and other natural dye, and weave clothes, which are both durable and artistic in effects. They also prepare different types of handicraft products such as bamboo jar and earthen pots. The local markets are favorable to sell their products to earn some money.

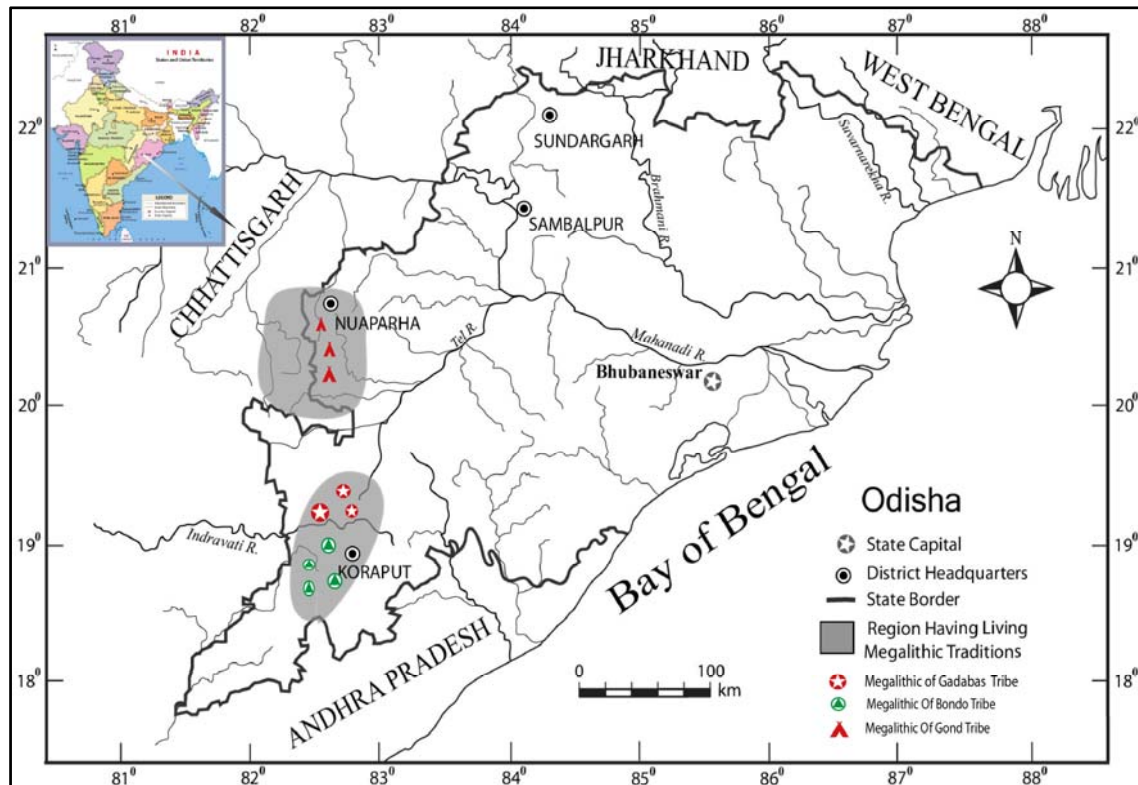


Figure 1: Distribution of living Megalithic Sites in southwestern Part of Odisha

Death Rituals

The death rituals refers to the entire process, which is conducted after the death of a person and continues up to the end of the erection of a memorial pillars. Generally, the entire process takes some twelve to fifteen days, but in some of the cases they take two to three years (Haimendorff 1943:149-178). The entire process of the death ritual covers many ceremonial customs that have been followed by previous ancestors and present family members of the deceased.

The death ritual of tribal communities is vary from group to group, but ultimately it signifies that all the communities' inhabitant in forest areas and associated with megalithic tradition, believe in life after death. They believe every human being has two souls: the life spirit and the shadow (Elwin 1945:78-133). However, they believe that after the death of a person, the spirit of the deceased wants to stay in the village to watch over the moral character of the people, and if anybody disobeys the tribal law then the spirit has the power to punish them.

The Ceremonial Feast of Gadaba Community

The Gadaba communities organize two types of ceremonial feasts viz. *Gotamela* and Crab festivals or *Ongongota*.

The Gotamela

After several years of the death of a person, his successor may decide to hold a "*Gotamela*" to provide sufficient amount of wealth to defray the costs. The Gadaba spent two to three years to collect sufficient cattle, foodstuff, and cloth to organize a *Gotamela*. The "*Gotamela*" is, celebrated during the month of "*Magha*" (i.e. January to February). The individual informs his paternal relatives of the neighboring village and they instruct a search for wood for feast and search for four stone, two for Menhirs and two for '*Sador*' (Horizontal or circular Stone slabs). The elder person of the village takes responsibility to dig holes while the younger person takes charge to erect the Memorial pillar or *Silbirel* and lay the flat stone *Sansarabirel* in front, then they write the name of the deceased above the stone in whose honor the feast is celebrated. After erection of the stone pillars, they distribute rice beer to drink and they spent the whole night drumming and drinking. The '*Gotamela*' not only demonstrates the social bondage among the people but also indicates the socio-economic status of the people. This festival is not necessarily compulsory for all the people of Gadaba community. However, they erect megalithic structure at the same place where the dead body is buried. Besides, once in a year the head of the family performs a ritual, they clean this cremation ground and offer some country liquor to the spirit of the deceased.

The Crab Festivals

The crab festivals or *Ongongota* is one of the most important ceremonies, when the Gadaba community erects their Menhir. This ceremony has been celebrated annually after the rice harvest at (i.e. November- December). The arrangement is very much important for unmarried boys and girls because this day they have a chance to plan their matrimonial relation. The leader of the village youth '*bise*' is responsible for all kind of possible arrangement for grand success of this ceremony. A few days before the crab festivals, the village youth search for a suitable stone to erect as a Menhir, and if they found it then they consult with the village headman to look and approve of their choice. After sunset on a full moon day, the village head men goes to the forest area to select the stone, in company of '*bise*' and other members of the village. Before selecting a suitable stone, they examine it with their criteria, if it is found to be qualified then the headman places some rice husked, mixed with turmeric and says, "*Oh stone , to the ancient sitting- place , we will take you, be light stand up easily, oh stone, food offered in leaves we will give you during the time of festivals*". Then they salute with folded hands and carry the stone with the support of *bise* or head of the village youth, and unmarried boys and other villagers. After the erection of the Menhir the villagers disperse to their own houses for food. Sometimes they erect these pillars, outside the village in the immediate vicinity of rice fields when their beliefs are, connected to agriculture. During this ceremony the Gadabas catch crab and cook them in earthen pots and distribute in leaf pots with rice and beans of the fresh harvest and offer this

foods to all the *Duma* (spirit of the dead) of their kinsmen. Thus, they believed there is a relation between crab and spirit of the dead so they celebrate the crab festivals or *Ongon-gota*. Generally it is believed that the ancestor is seated on these pillars and protect his clan and that he is also responsible for good agricultural produce. It is also believed that if the people disobey the ancestor then they would suffer different kinds of hazards.

Ceremonial Feast of Bondo Community

The memorial feast of Bondos is not as expensive as *Gotamela* of Gadabas community; the latter demands a considerable expenditure of wealth and the sacrifice of at least one bull. The Bondos burn their dead and believed that the shadow or '*saiрем*' of the deceased remain close to their earth, where it joins the company of all the *saiрем*; at the same time the soul (*sioрем*) goes to the land of dead, which according to them lies somewhere in the sky or *Kitung*. The Bondo's have a strong faith on life after death, also they say when a person dies there *sioрем* or his soul is reborn on this earth in a child of the same clan. After the third day of the funeral ceremony a leaf cup or '*Dana*' with some food are taken to the burning place, (*raising-bo*) and it is believed that the spirit of the dead person consumes the food.

After ten days of the funeral ceremony, they organize another ceremonial feast, where they invite all the members of the village as well as their relatives from other villages, sometime their friends as well and the relatives are responsible for the arrangement. this time, they sacrifice a black chicken, goats, pigs, or sometimes even a buffalo. The head of the village or sometimes the head of the family takes some food in a leaf cup and offers it in the burning ground by placing it besides the deceased's ashes, and saying '*meet the relative of your clan, oh spirit eat it*'. Before the evening of the feast ten to twelve people, go out of the village in search of table stones for the Dolmen or "*Gunom*". Generally, the Bondo people take a gap of two to three year, between the funeral ceremony and the erection of a memorial pillar.

The Bondo believe that Menhir is the seating place of deities and have been existing since the beginning of the world (Figure 2). Many of them are seen as sacred to a deity called '*Baanumpa*' or "branch deities". When Bondo people goes outside the village for some important work and if such a wall or Memorial Pillars comes across his way, he often places a small branch on the upright stone in the doorway, and says "*On my way, may I meet to danger, protect me, my hands and legs, remain unharmed*". During the occasion of annual feast, which is, called *Diali* festival they sacrifice a red chicken to the *Biredevata* or stone deity. As well as every year they worship this pillars during spring season, by organizing a communal fast, sowing ceremony, where the villagers and the village priest sacrifice two pigs and four chicken at the spring and sprinkle, their blood on the seed -grain laid out on the stones. They believe that, the worship of their ancestors provide security to their families and crops; if they don't celebrate this ceremony then the spirits will wander this earth and cause damage to their crops and create problems in their families.



Figure 2: Menhirs of Bondo Community (Haimendorff 1943)

Ceremonial Feast of Gond Community

On the third day after the death of the deceased, they invite their village headman and their relatives to discuss the further procedure of death rituals, such as searching and erection of a memorial pillars, and arranging a grand ceremonial feast. On the tenth day, they organize a feast; in this event, they invite villagers and their relatives. The importance of the day is that, on this particular day they go to the forest in search of a 'Menhir' or Uraskal in Gondi (Elwin, 1945), with the proper direction of their tribal head (*Jatirmukhia*). During this time of burial ceremony, if they do not find any suitable stone in the forest, then they procure a pillar like stone from the foothill area, and it is up to eight to fourteen feet tall. This practice has different varieties. The Gonds sacrifice a sheep, goat or black cock at the time of erection. The size of Menhirs depends upon the socio-economical status in the society as well as sometimes it depends upon the character of the person (Figure 3). The common belief of the Gonds is that their ancestors live in this pillar and they protect their clan; and if they stop the tradition, it is a kind of disrespect to their ancestor and they may face problems. Usually, they worship these Menhirs, on some selected days. (i) The day of *Amabasya* and *Purnima*, because they believe that in that particular day the evil spirit is more powerful. (ii) Before, harvesting their agricultural produce (iii) Before going for hunting and gathering (iv) at the time of a marriage ceremony (v) when a child is born in his family

(vi) during the time of natural calamity and (vii) if they face any kind of serious problem, which, cannot be solved by them or their village headman. The maximum period of worshipping the pillar is twenty to twenty five years.



Figure 3: Menhir of Gond Communities

On the twelfth day, they invite their relatives and friends from other village, as well as other castes from the respective villages to join and participate in this ceremonial feast. The headman goes towards the burial complex (*Matha*) followed by other people of the respective village, with huge crowd and drumming of different kind of musical instruments, to select an area for erection of a Menhir. Generally, they fix these pillars closer to the burial of the deceased. However, the projection of the burial is basically in north-south direction (Figure 4). After the ending of the entire process, they move to the village and slaughter a sheep or a goat in honor of the deceased, and distribute the meat among the village people and eat at the feast, but before that, they offer this meat to their village deities and their ancestors. They believe that the animals killed in this occasion are supposed to become the property of the deceased in the world of the spirit and there is the belief that, if this ceremony is not organized then they shall face serious problems throughout the year. The ceremonial feasts is not confined to the Bondos, Gadababa or Gond communities, but are common to many other caste of Hindu religion and aboriginal tribes in Odisha as well as in peninsular India.

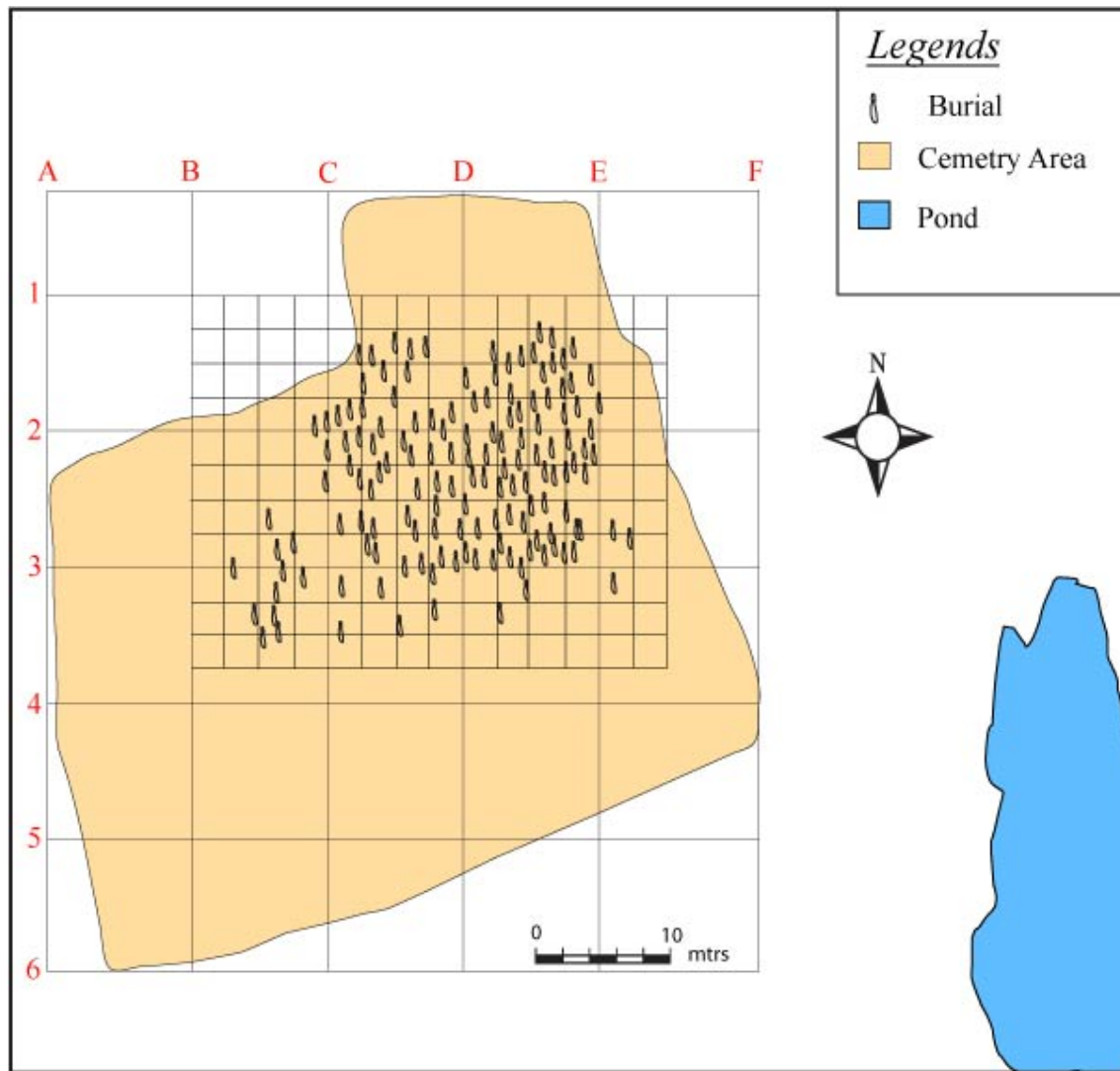


Figure 4: Graphical Representation of Distribution of Burials in Bhella Village, Nuaparha District

Megalithic Types

We have found different varieties of megalithic structure, dwelled by ethnic community in Odisha, and it varies from region to region. Sometimes the megalithic building depends upon the resources available in that particular area.

Memorial Pillars or Menhirs

The 'Menhirs' or *memorial pillar* is a unique feature in the world of Megalithic builders, and they have their individual tradition and belief regarding the erection of memorial pillars. The beliefs vary from place to place. Generally, all the above tribal communities followed same type of procurement techniques in the quarry site. They used different type of weapon made of Iron. After the quarry of a stone as a Menhir the local people carry this to the burial ground. At times they use bullock cart for transportation. The Menhirs of Gond is smaller as compared to Gadaba and Bondo. During the time of

exploration in Nuaparha district I have located some stone quarry sites, which is very closer to the burial ground (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Stone Quarry Site from the Nuaparha District

The Stone *Sodor* of Gadaba

The stone *sodors* are, found almost in all the Gadaba dominated village, generally it is a horizontal stone slabs and boulders, those are, often piled one on top of the other, form a raised platform, with menhirs, standing more or less haphazardly amidst those sitting-stone. There is no permanent or fixed shape that has been described for stone *Sodor*, with in the Gadaba communities, but the stone must be 1-3 square feet, which is usable for seating. Generally, the stone query site found within a distance of 1- 2km from the burial ground.

The Stone Circles of Bondo

The stone circles (*sinibor*) of Bondos are used as a sitting platform, also used as a place of general assembly. The construction of stone circles depends upon the area and density of the village and population. Some time an individual person can build a small stone platform. In consideration of shape and size of the stone circles, it is different from the *sodor* of the Gadaba Community; Menhirs are, occasionally found in association of stone circles but never in large numbers.

The Stone-Walls of Bondo

The Stonewalls or '*Runungbor* ' belonging to the Bondos are found across the jungle paths, linking the village. The height of the wall is four to six feet and width is three to four feet, with gateways. These gateways flanked by upright stone slabs and sometimes built as walls. Comparatively the Stonewall is much bigger than other Megalithic monuments so they were bound to use bullock cart for transportation of this megalith to their respective place.

Dolmen of Bondo

The miniature dolmen, found in many parts of the village consists of a table stone supported by two or three smaller stones having at least two to three feet height. Moreover, the erection of dolmens of the Bondos has two reasons. (i) They believe it is the seating places of their village deities or deities of crops as well as fertility (ii) The wealthy person erect in honor of the deceased relatives.

Burial Stone of Gond

After the selection of cemetery area and preparation of burial ground the village headman complete every necessary rituals. The relatives of the deceased bury the dead body with the proper guidance of village headman. Meanwhile the villagers collect the burial stone under the guidance of the village headman, which is used at the burial ground (*Matha*). At the time of the burial, if there is any shortage of stones it is immediately compensated by taking stones off the other burials. In order to do this, the village headman (*Jatirmukhia*) performs certain rituals to the village deities and pays homage to the other burials in order to acquire their permission. During the time of exploration, some stone quarry sites have been noticed nearby the foothills area, which is especially used for quarrying stone to use during the burial ceremony. The distance of the foothill is nearly one and half kilometer from the burial ground, So that they can easily procure and transport the raw material from the quarrying sites to Burial ground (*Matha*). With the help of iron objects, they quarry the stone block from the hill rocks, which not only indicates the efficiency of raw material procurement technology but also it indicates their socio-cultural bondage.

Grave Goods

The term 'grave goods', are used by archaeologists, to simply denote anything found in a grave in addition to human remains and it encompasses a variety of items, from the remains of dress to deliberate depositions of objects in graves, as well as sacrificial offerings (Harke 2014). During eighteenth and nineteenth century, for the first time the European antiquarians involve themselves on the study of grave goods. In the later nineteenth century with the development of archaeology into a scientific discipline, grave goods provided one of the most important means for constructing chronologies, giving a temporal framework to a past of hitherto unknown depth (Graslund, 1987, Jensen, 1975). It does provide information about the ethnic and social inferences among the different tribes and people (Childe, 1929:4-13) and social hierarchies (Reinecke, 1925; Veeck, 1926).

However, all the three communities of Gadabba, Bondo and Gond deposit different types of goods in the graves during burials and cremation practices. The grave goods consists of personal objects to which the deceased might have been attached to or objects of necessity provided for his well-being and happiness in the other world. It includes bow, arrow, axe, spade, chisel, and different type of ornaments made of iron, silver, copper, gold and sometimes rice and rice beer is kept in the grave. If the person belongs to the higher class then the grave goods comprises of very rich materials such

as usable goods made on precious, semi-precious stone or metals, which reflect the social hierarchies within the community.

Miscellaneous Village Deities

An umbrella like stone lays beneath a tree at Bhella village from Nuaparha district and it is very close to the burial ground. According to the village headsman, the umbrella like stone is the seating place of their village deities, and they offer some sacred goods during the time of annual feast and other circumstances such as during the time of childbirth, marriage ceremony, and death rituals (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Umbrella like Stone from Chhata Village

Discussion and Conclusion

Mortuary practice of any society is determined by the *social persona* of the deceased as well as the composition and size of the social groups involved in this ceremony (Chapman 1981:71-82). One could expect a relationship between the complexity of social organization and the variability of mortuary rituals: an increase of the first implies that the number of social people in a society increases which will be, differentially treated in mortuary practice (Binford 1971:6-12). The present work suggests that megalithic monuments are not only erected for a funerary purpose, but also to commemorate feast of merit and other events coupled with various faith and beliefs. Sometimes the megalithic monuments are used as the seating place of their village deities or earth deities (Haimendurff 1943). However, the entire process of death rituals is an expensive affair, within some tribal community and they spend a huge amount for it. Therefore, it cannot be possible for every member of the family to organize such type of ceremony and it is prevalent only for the higher-class people of

the society and head of the family. It does indicate the social status of the people within the society and respect in family. the tradition and customs regarding erection of megaliths that is prevalent among other communities such as those inhabiting the northeastern part of India like Jaintias tribe shows that it is gender biased (Marak 2012, 2012a: 62-77, 2012b: 67-82). However, In Odisha, no such kind of tradition is present.

The most exciting feature of the megalith tradition is that it is connected with the matrilineal system. Later on it symbolizes the matrilineal kith and kin: those erected in admiration of the founding ancestress and her kin (Haimendorff 1943). Interestingly almost all the communities belonging to different parts of the world including India have shown evidence of practice of erection of menhirs though the reason and beliefs behind the erection of menhirs varies. However, in Bondo community, menhirs are erected as seating places of village deities and path stone or indicator of territorial boundary, where as in Gadabas and Gond community, Menhir are erected only as the memoirs of their ancestor or memorial purpose and they believe, it is the seating place of their ancestor. Sometimes it is known as 'ancestral stone'. Meanwhile, they organize different types of ceremonial feast in the honor of their ancestors, and this system is quite common in all the communities found in Odisha (Haimendorff 1943; Elwin 1945; Mendaly 2015).

If we discuss the death rituals and ceremonial feast, then one can find some similarities among all the groups but their ceremonial feast is vary from another. The Gadabas spend huge amount of resource, when they organize such kind of feast and it takes some two to three years for preparation, but the Gonds and Bondos they do not organize such kind of rituals, which need more wealth or take some two to three year for ceremonial preparation. However, the Gonds have continued to pay homage in front of memorial pillars up to twenty to twenty-five years. Projection or orientation of burials is one of the most important features of death rituals found within the Gond communities, those are not found in Gadabas and Bondo community. The Gonds have maintained North-South direction, because they are the worshiper of sun god and think that if they do not maintain this orientation then they face serious problem. For better understanding of the orientation, we have, mapping and recording of one burial ground. Apart from the Gadabas, Gonds and Bondos, there are many other tribes in Odisha that have strong attachments with lithic associations in burials and many other tribal communities have been strongly influenced by them. On the other hand, due to urbanization and landscape changing activity of different organizations, the megalithic builders face problems also in some of the places they have changed their tradition and custom due to the influence of other communities such as Hinduism and Christianity. The changing activities of megalithic builders in Odisha creates a problem in linking this tradition with early Iron Age people.

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