

## Thori: The Memorial Post of the Mara

Malsawmliana\*

### Abstract

*The practice of erecting a wooden post for memorials instead of stones, sometimes both may likely be important features of the megalithic cultures. The tribal people living in northeast India and even in the Chin Hills practiced such kind of erection of memorials once in the early years. Particularly, the Mara people in southern parts of Mizoram also erected such a post 'Thori' in memorial to a prosperous deceased person in the village. But the Thori was no longer used in the Mara society. This paper tries to explain the meaning and significance of the Thori in the Mara society.*

**Keywords :** Thori, Seluphan, Mara, Lophei, Pura/Phura, Athipatyukhei, Kima.

### I

The practice of erection of a wooden post or sacrificial post for commemoration of a feast of merit as well as in memorials to the dead was one of the common features of some of the tribal cultures. Some of the tribal people living in northeast India particularly amongst the Garos and the Maras prevails a custom of setting up of a wooden memorial post at the grave for memorials to the dead while the practice of erecting sacrificial post (i.e y-fork) was prevalent among certain Naga tribes and the Mizo in their early society which were mostly connected with a feast of merit. The Chin groups in Burma also have a custom of erection of such sacrificial post in their early society. Besides, a

similar practice of erecting such wooden post was also made by the Sadang Toraja of Sulawesi (Celebes in Indonesia) for sacrificial purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The practices of erecting a wooden post for memorials instead of stones, sometimes both may likely be important features of the megalithic cultures. Some of the Chin groups in Burma have also used a wooden plank or post for memorials to death instead of stones. Some of them were rudely cut and decorated with carving of pictures etc.<sup>2</sup>

Since the erection of wooden memorial post and sacrificial post was connected with a feast, only the chief and a prosperous person were able to do it. Apart from the memorial post, performance of

\* Associate Professor, Department of History, Govt. T. Romana College, Aizawl, Mizoram

a feasts and setting up of a sacrificial post is intended to enhance the prestige of the donor in the society. In the early Mizo society, the sacrificial post (i.e. *seluphan*) was erected during the performance of *Sedawi chhun*, one of a series of a feast of merit.

## II

The Maras, also called as the 'Lakher', occupied a large hill tract of the southern part of Mizoram and the whole region inhabited by them was known as 'Marara' in their local language meaning 'the land of the Maras'.<sup>3</sup> The area is bordered by the long international boundary with Myanmar in the east and south while the north and west is flanked by the Lawngtlai district of Mizoram.

The Maras constitutes a tribal group and called themselves as 'Mara'. It is a generic term for the whole Mara people composing the different territorial tribal groups of the Mara living in the Mara area of Mizoram and the hill tract of the Haka Sub-division of the Chin Hills of Myanmar. The Maras were also called the 'Lakher' particularly by the Lusei, meaning 'the plucking of cotton' (la-cotton, pluckher'). The Christian Missionary RA Lorraine concludes that 'the Lakher is a Lushai name for the Mara tribe, the spelling and pronunciation is absolutely foreign to the language. Mara is the correct name for the people in their own language.'<sup>4</sup>

There are various derivations for the word 'Mara' and the most plausible deri-

vation is that the term 'Mara' is a Mara transliteration of the word '*mawra*' meaning 'bamboo land' (Maw –bamboo, Raland).<sup>5</sup> The word '*mawra*' is purely a reproduction of the Haka word 'Mauram' meaning 'bamboo land.' The term 'mara' is defined as 'dwellers of the alien fertile land'.

The Maras are believed to have moved from the Chin Hills of Burma to their present habitat during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>6</sup> Many of the clan members also settled in the present Chin Hills of Burma particularly the Haka Sub-division where they are known as the 'southern chins'.<sup>7</sup>

## III

The Maras customarily erected memorials only for those people who died a natural death *pithi*. The various kinds of memorials erected for memorials to the death may be stated as follows -

The *lobo* was the cheapest and ordinary memorial stone, which the widow and the poor families could afford.<sup>8</sup>

The *lophei* was a funerary stone; it was ordinarily erected in memory of the dead on the grave. A *lophei* is a plain flat stone which is laid on top of the grave, supported on all four sides by four stones of the same length planted on their sides. The size of *lophei* varies from village to village or person to person, depending on the prominence of the deceased person in the village and the prosperity of the family.<sup>9</sup> The wooden post called *Thori* is also erected over the grave along with the

*lophei*. The Mara perform *Athipatyukhei* ceremony, which means 'sitting with the dead,' the idea being that on this occasion the dead man's spirit will visit its home for the last time before going off to the final abode of the dead.<sup>10</sup> The funerary stones were planted on the day when the *Athipatyukhei* is performed.

The *lodo/lodawh* is regarded as memorials restricted only to the chiefs and wealthy persons in the society. It was a large in size usually measuring about 2m in length, 2m in width and 1m in height, is usually located at the entrance of the village. Each platform (*lodo*) is made up of a number of stones each of which measure 2 feet in length and 1 foot in breadth. Thus the *lodoh* takes the form of a square enclosed by four stones walls about 3ft high, and the empty space in between is then filled up with soil and a flat stone placed on it.<sup>11</sup>

The *tliatla* was a very simple memorial stone. It was ordinarily a platform of about six to eight feet, two feet wide and two feet high. It was erected for the memory of both the deceased men and women.<sup>12</sup>

Another type of memorials was a heaped up stone rubble (or cairns) i.e. *Pura/Phura*. They are pyramidal in shape. It was a memorial to deceased chiefs and wealthy persons in society. The heights of these monuments are usually about 2 to 3 meters and its bottom is a circle base of about six feet wide in diameter. It may be noted, that cairns are raised as memorials only for male members in society. This

type of memorials was a heavy and expensive in its constructions which require many labours and feasts, therefore, only the chiefs and wealthy families could afford it. The Maras calls such types of stone monuments as *Phura* and they are usually erected at the entrance of villages on one of the approach roads. Since the erection of *phura* is associated with the memorials of dead chiefs and wealthy persons of the Mara clans, they are concentrated only in the Mara inhabited area within and outside Mizoram particularly in the Haka area and Thantlang range in the present Chin Hills of Burma.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

The *thori* (also calls *Thangri* by NE Parry in his 'The Lakher') was a wooden memorial post, usually erected near the grave or memorial stone *lophei* or *lodo*. It was a traditional practice erected in memorial to the deceased person, who was economically wealthy in the village.

It was of about nine to fifteen feet high, erected along with the stone monuments near the grave.<sup>14</sup> It was very typical and was the most beautiful decorated memorial tablet. The *Thori* was made of *avy* tree (*Gmelina arborea*, Linn), ritually it was considered *ana* or taboo to use other trees.<sup>15</sup>

Its upper parts of about six feet was hewn into square shape having four straight sides, and its design was divided into four sections such as body, neck, head and hair. Each part or section was decorated with geometric designs indicating

certain heirloom goods and other possessions.

The lower parts of the post represent a body which is surmounted by a head. If the deceased was a man, the *thori* has no neck and the body runs straight up to the head while a woman's *thori* has a sort of lozenge-shaped neck. The post is carved with chisel and conventional ornaments, but may vary in different villages. The carvings are dyed a dark colour with a mixture of pig's blood pounded with ashes from the leaves of the *bahru* palm (*Calamus erectus*-botanical name) or the *thi-ahra* palm (*Borassus flabellifer*-botanical name). The *thori* was carved with the figures of materials or ornaments which may reflect the possessions or the wealth and status of the deceased person in the society. For instance, the bands at the bottom of women's *thori* indicate the metal belts she had possessed and a figure of gun is carved if he possessed a gun. If she or he possessed *pumtek*<sup>16</sup> necklaces, it is carved round the neck of the post. It is also said that if a deceased person while in his lifetime had succeeded in seducing another man's wife, a plume of white cock's feathers is tied on to his *thori/ thangri*. The *thori/thangri* of chiefs and nobles were adorned with a plume of red goat's hair or horse hair,<sup>17</sup> meanwhile on the *thori/ thangri* of young men and girls, a round piece of looking glass and coin are inserted on the neck. In this particular case, we may assume that the practice of inserting looking glass and coins on the post may not be much earlier than the advent of the British into the Lushai hills.

In case of warrior, another wooden post which was about three feet high was specially erected by the side of his *thori*. In such a post, holes are made through the top and a peg is inserted through each hole for each human head taken by him and for each slave captured in a war or raid. Thus, the wooden post of the warrior who had taken four human heads and captured five slaves would have nine pegs running through the top. The decorations or carved figures on such memorial post, all have definite names. In this connection, NE Parry has pointed out such definite names<sup>18</sup> -

‘.the horns on the top represent the hair and are called *hrong*. The lozenges on the head are called *athei hmong*, meaning cucumber seeds. The circle hanging round the neck is *sisari*, the *pumtek* necklaces; the lozenges and triangles of the upper part of the body are *kei ongpa*. The small lozenges inside large lozenges are *athei hmong*(cucumber seeds); below these come zig-zags(*kiameichei*), and again lower come triangles enhanced by internal repetitions, all those on one side having the same base, called *keiongva khangpi*, and lasts of all bands *ahra*, to represent a woman's belts. The decorations vary somewhat...but those most commonly found.”

The funerary stones and the wooden post *thori* were planted on the day when the *Athipatyukhei* is performed. The Mara perform *Athipatyukhei* ceremony, which means ‘sitting together with the spirit of

the dead,' the idea being that on this occasion the dead man's spirit will visit his home for the last time before going off to the final abode of the dead.<sup>19</sup>

The ritual ceremony called '*Lopheiparai*' which means 'erection of the memorial' was performed in honour of the deceased and this kind of ceremony was also known as *Athipatyukhei* meaning '*sitting together with the spirit of the dead.*' It was a ceremony which closed the mourning period observed by the deceased family after the funeral. It was believed that the spirit of the deceased visit his home for the last time before proceeding to the permanent abode. It was usually held after a year from his death or in some case, within a year. The family prepares memorial stone and *thori* for erection on the appointed day for ceremony. The family prepares a grand feast for the villagers by killing several domestic animals including mithun, cow, pig, fowls etc. and a huge amount of rice-beer. Some foods and drink were put in a tray and set aside for the spirit of the deceased which was believed to have come and eat with his friends and family. K. Zohra comments that 'all women had partaken in the feast inside the house while men and children also took outside or in the verandah of the deceased's house.'<sup>20</sup> Thus all the men and women drank rice beer '*sahma*' after the feast which was considered the 'farewell drink' shared between the deceased spirit and his families.

To perform the *Athipatyukhei* ceremony/ritual, it requires a huge labour and a

huge amount of rice-beer, several numbers of domesticated animals, so only wealthy persons and the chiefs could afford it. The whole village was involved in the ceremony and actively participated in the erection of the memorial stone and the *thori*. The erection of memorial post *thori* was allowed only to those belonging to chiefly clans or wealthy and important persons in the village. No ordinary person other than the family members of the chief or wealthy persons were allowed to erect such kinds of wooden post.

Therefore, the erection of such wooden post indicates the prosperity and ability of the person who erected it. It was used not only as memorials to the dead, but also used as one kind of showing the achievements of the deceased during his/her life time. The pictures carved on the woods reflect the material possessions and the status of the person during his/her lifetime.

## V

If we look into some other tribes in north east India and neighboring areas, which practice the erection of wooden post for memorials, we found that such erections indicates the social status during their lifetime in their society.

The Mizo used wooden posts, both, as memorials to the dead and as a sacrificial post. In case of memorials to the dead, the Mizo often used a thick plank of hard wood, sometimes accompanied by a long pole of about 5 meters high as memorials to the dead. The figures of human, ani-

mals, weapons etc. were carved on the hard wood. A similar practice was found among the Chins groups of the northern Chin Hills of Burma who erect a plank of hard wood as memorials to the dead chiefs. Such planks usually had the head of a man carved on top.<sup>21</sup> The head represents the deceased and on the plank is carved men, women, various types of animals, gongs, beads, guns etc. For instance, the Tlaisun(Tashons) clan while living in the Chin Hills of Burma set up wooden memorials for a dead chief which is accompanied by a long pole of about 4.58 meters high. It is said that the bottom 1.52 m of the pole is carved to represent the chief and the remaining 3.04m of the pole is carved to represent the turban of the chief, who is thus represented with 1.52m of the body and 3.04m of turban. Bertram S. Carey further states that there are other smaller wooden memorials around representing the wives and children of the deceased chiefs.<sup>22</sup>

The Ao Nagas of Nagaland also put up two posts as memorials to the dead, of which the upright represents male while the forked one female. Similarly, the *Kima* of the Garos was also used as memorials to the dead were erected in front of the deceased person's house or under the eaves of the house.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the use of wooden planks and posts as memorials to the dead was a common practice among the Garo, the Naga and the Mizo.

Other than memorials, wooden posts were also used for sacrificial purposes among the Mizo, Garos and the Nagas.

Both the Mizo and the Garos used the posts to tether Mithun or bulls before sacrifices. But while the *Kima* of the Garo was connected with death rituals, the *Seluphan* of the Mizo was connected with feasts of merit. The setting up of the *Kima* is closely linked with the concept of death, fertility, social merit, etc and they represented the external sign or object to which the soul of a dead person attaches himself before the spirits proceeds on its way to the after world.<sup>24</sup> Unlike *Seluphan*, the *Kima* was also used as a sign to help the spirits to find their way back home when they return to their earthly existence. It was also used to attach the horns of a bull sacrificed in the course of the cremation ceremony and sometimes a row of *Kima* indicate how many members of the family were victims of the disease and such kind of sickness.<sup>25</sup> But in case of the Mizo, the *Seluphan* was erected at the courtyard of the performer during the fourth stage (sedawi) in a series of feasts and the skull of the Mithun which was killed by him for the feast was attached at the top. To the Mizo, it is a status symbol, and the number of *seluphan* indicates the number of feasts given. For the Mizo, it is the greatest honour to have a long line of such posts in front of one's house.

Thus the erection of forked posts as memorials to the dead as well as for sacrificial purposes was a widespread practice among the tribal people living in north east India and those in the Chin Hills of Burma.

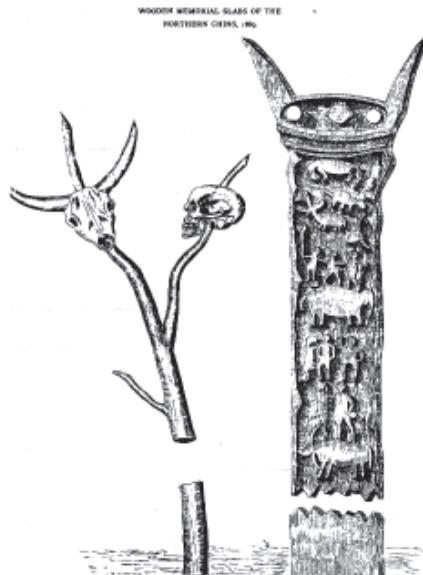
VI

In early days, the *thori* was customarily erected in memory of the deceased chief or any person belonging to chiefly clans or any important person in the village, and it was usually constructed near the grave or near memorial stone *lophei* or *lodo*. At present, the *thori* is no longer used in the Mara society.

Thus, the erection of wooden post or pillar for memorials as well as for commemoration of the events and at the time of the series of a feast of merit was one of the common practices among the tribal peoples living in the northeast Indian states. It was one way of showing the social status and to enhance their prestige in the society during the early days. The *thori* bears the wood carving indicating the status of the person in the society.



Thori



The wooden plank of the Tlaisun, of Chin hills

(These pictures were extracted from NE Parry's *The Lakhers*, 1976 (Repint) p.416 & Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol-I, Kolkata, 2008(Reprint).

**End Notes and References :**

- <sup>1</sup> Shadap Sen, *The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People*, Calcutta, 1981, p.40
- <sup>2</sup> Milton Katz, *Genna in South Eastern Asia*, as cited in *American Anthropologist (New Series)*, Vol-30, No. 4 (Oct-Dec, 1928), American Anthropological Association. p.593
- <sup>3</sup> K. Zohra, *The Maras : Indigenous Tradition and Folkculture*, Scientific Book Centre, Guwahati, 2013, p.1.
- <sup>4</sup> RA Lorraine, *Five years in Unknown Jungle*,
- <sup>5</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*, p.8.
- <sup>6</sup> B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Chanchin*, 2001, p.32; also see, NE Parry, *The Lakhers*, Calcutta, 1976, pp.1-2.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Shakespeare, *The Lushai Kuki Clans*, TRI, Aizawl, 1988 (Reprint), p.211.
- <sup>8</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*, p.94.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.96.
- <sup>10</sup> NE Parry, *op.cit.*, p.414.
- <sup>11</sup> Chawngkhuma Chawngthu, *Mara Khawtlang Nun*, Aizawl, 2005.,p.87.
- <sup>12</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*, pp.96-97.
- <sup>13</sup> B. Lalthangliana, *op.cit.*
- <sup>14</sup> NE Parry, *op.cit.*, p.415.
- <sup>15</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*, p.98.
- <sup>16</sup> *Pumtek* – it was prestigious and high -valued necklaces in the Mara society
- <sup>17</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*,p.98.
- <sup>18</sup> NE Parry, *op.cit.*, p.416.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.414.
- <sup>20</sup> K. Zohra, *op.cit.*,p.99
- <sup>21</sup> Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol-I, Kolkata, 2008(Reprint), p.193.
- <sup>22</sup> BS Carey and HN Tuck, *op.cit.*, p.194.
- <sup>23</sup> Milton S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos*, New Delhi, 1981, pp.252-253.
- <sup>24</sup> Cecile A. Mawlong, ‘Megalithic Elements among the Garos’, in Mignonette Momin(ed), *Readings in History and Culture of the Garos*, New Delhi, 2003, p.101.
- <sup>25</sup> Major A. Playfair, *The Garos*, Gauhati, 1975, p.113.