

SOME REMARKS ON "PHILIPPINE MEGALITHS"

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ALTHOUGH IT WAS SAID RECENTLY THAT THE MEGALITHIC PROBLEM of Eastern Asia is now considered by most people to be a waste of time, so frequently studied *ad nauseum* as to be avoided like the plague (Fleming, 1963, p. 153), I have no scruples in dealing with it once again since, much studied as it may have been, this problem is still far from being resolved, while its importance for our understanding of the proto-history of this region becomes increasingly obvious.

The reason for the suspicion with which research on eastern megaliths is still viewed is well known: in the past too many fantastic speculations have been connected with it, and they continue to haunt the imagination at the very mention of this theme. The most urgent task of research in this field thus seems to be to de-mystify the subject and to supplement our somewhat fragmentary knowledge of it by precise, comprehensive, and multiple regional studies upon which future works of synthesis may more safely rely.

I

As far as the Philippines is concerned, this lack of detailed studies on megalithic cultures is particularly regrettable since, on account of its geographical situation, bridging East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the Philippines may well hold the key to many problems concerning pre- and proto-historic migration movements within this entire area, including the spread of megalithic cultures.

But while a good deal of research has been done in the last forty years or so on megaliths in mainland Southeast Asia and the Indonesian Archipelago, no attempt has yet been made to survey systematically the megalithic cultures of the Philippines. Here

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is not the place to define the term "megalithic" or to discuss the difficulties connected with recognizing and evaluating the sometimes elusive elements of a megalithic culture. This has already been done (Heine-Geldern 1928 and 1959; Schuster 1960), and there is not much to be added at the present stage of research. It should be pointed out, however, that most likely the relative scarcity of information on Philippine megalithic elements does not come from the scarcity of those elements themselves, but from the fact that too often they have not been recognized as such or simply overlooked.

According to the available information, it seems that megalithic elements are only to be found in northern Luzon and are most numerous among the *Igorot* tribes in the central-western part of it. Unfortunately, some confusion as to what exactly is understood by the term *Igorot* does not help clarify the matter ("Mit dem Namen *Igorotes* wird viel Unfug getrieben", said Blumentritt as early as 1882). However, the centre of gravity of the megalithic complex as hitherto known, which is apparently connected with the system of the division of large communities into separate wards (*ato*), undoubtedly lies in the *Bontoc* and *Lepanto-Igorot* area, from whence it shades off into that occupied by the tribes surrounding it to the north, east and south (Eggan 1954). It is generally this limited complex (Vanoverbergh and Heine-Geldern 1929) which is referred to when "the megaliths of the Philippines" are mentioned and when they linked with the megalithic cultures of other parts of Southeast Asia or the Pacific (Fleming 1963, pp. 157, 159; Jensen 1960, pp. 265-268; Kolb 1942, p. 140, 143, 146, etc.).

Not much is known about megalithic elements in those areas surrounding the Bontoc-Lepanto. Eggan (1954, pp. 331-332) does not agree with the opinion expressed by Barton (1946) and Keesing (1934) that they have to be viewed as mere "degenerations" of those of the Bontoc-Lepanto. Using mainly linguistic evidence,¹ he shows that, on the contrary, "elements of the stone platform complex are thus widespread and in this sense the Bontoc-Lepanto area loses its uniqueness", and suggests that, instead of being the origin, "the central area has [only] incorporated these elements

¹ As supplementary evidence could be added the explanation given by Barton (1938, p. 31) that *atul*, in Ifugao, can mean anything from a simple boulder or bench to an entire stone paved platform, "at which the folk sit, gossip, and look out over the valley below".

into a more highly organized complex". One of the aims of this paper is to back up this view with special reference to the Banaue region of Ifugao.

II

Ethnologically speaking, the Ifugao are, of course, by no means unknown. The works of Barton, Beyer (unfortunately only partly published), Lambrecht and Villaverde, to name only a few authors have, on the contrary, made the Ifugao one of the best known mountain peoples of northern Luzon.

But sparse indeed is any information about megalithic elements which might exist in their culture. Besides the mention and sometimes complete descriptions of various head-hunting rituals and *Feasts of Merit* (*Prestige Feasts*) which, although not constituting megalithic elements *a priori* in themselves, do nevertheless point towards a megalithic culture, the only information available is the little summarized by Eggan (1954, p. 332) on *lookout and gossiping places*; a photo in Barton (1930, pl. IV) showing an absolutely "classic" megalithic gathering place, complete with stone seats, upright stones and wooden posts (though, being labelled "on the Bontoc border", it is uncertain whether it really belongs to Ifugao; the cap of the man on the rights would rather suggest a Bontoc); and finally a photo of a stone-paved place with an upright stone in Christie (1961, p. 281, photo 12), together with a few sentences to the effect that the Ifugao were a megalithic people (*ibid.*, p. 296).

III

Had not various signs indicated the probable presence of megalithic elements in the Ifugao culture, it would have been rather surprising to find a wide range of megalithic stonework in Ifugao villages, even in those in the immediate vicinity of Banaue. And if it is true that, as a rule, Ifugao villages are not as large as the Igorot ones—a fact which is sometimes stressed in order to explain the *ato*-system and certain associated megalithic elements in Ifugao one only needs to go on a day or so's hike from Banaue to find Ifugao villages of several hundred houses (the village of *Kambulo*, for instance, is said to comprise about 2,000 houses—1,500 family dwellings and 500 granaries or bachelor houses); and although these houses are not all huddling together in one com-

compact community but present more the aspect of a loose cluster of smaller villages or of long lines of houses sloping down a mountain ridge, this is far from the common image of Ifugao settlements consisting only of micro-villages of two or three houses each. These latter do exist of course, but the former are not uncommon, and it is in them that most of the megalithic elements of the Ifugao are found.

(1) Many house platforms are completely or partly stone-paved; the ones on the lower part of a mountain slope are more often completely paved than those higher up, since all stones must be brought from the river bed in the valley and are, naturally, difficult to transport.

If the platform of a house is not entirely stone-paved, then that part directly under the house is so, or at least there is a row of stones under the line of drainage from the thatched roof.

(2) The paved platforms are generally surrounded by a stone wall about 60 cm. high which serves as an enclosure as well as a back-rest when sitting or squatting. These stone walls may either consist simply of a row of flat upright stones, or of a wall in which upright stones are incorporated. Nowhere did I see such a wall consist only of round pebbles like the terrace walls.

(3) Upon the house platform (whether entirely paved or not), either near the line of drainage or near the outer rim of the platform (if there is no wall), very often one or more upright stones are situated as back-rests (*handagan*), sometimes combined with a flat stone as seat.

(4) More often than not, in addition to the *handagan*, an upright stone, which can be anything from 20 cm. to 1.50 m. in height and of all imaginable shapes, is planted somewhere on the platform. An explanation of the purpose of these stones is no longer available. Huge flat stones, on which people love to squat, are also occasionally found there.

(5) In some villages there exist one or more communal stone-paved platforms as distinct from mere house platforms. Their size and construction varies considerably, but they are always surrounded—either partly or entirely—by a stone wall. Here, too, occasional upright stones are found. However, no close and regular association of these platforms with other communal or religious constructions (council or sleeping houses and the like) as found

among various Igorot tribes (Eggan 1954, p. 33; Keesing 1934, p. 51; Roger 1949, p. 144) could be observed.

(6) The communal stone platform may sometimes take the shape of a more elaborate meeting and council place for the whole village or of part of it. That is, it may consist of a number of stone seats arranged in either a square (similar to the one shown in the above-mentioned plate IV in Barton 1930), a triangle, or one or two circles. These places which were formerly used for formal deliberations, judgments, and in some instances religious rituals, where men only were admitted, have now become lounging and gossiping place for everybody; people even sleep there occasionally, and a fire is kept burning in the centre on chilly nights.

(7) At strategic points on the trails between villages are situated resting stones, either in the form of a simple large stone bench or complete with back-rest. As a rule they are bigger than the stone seats of the meeting places and the *handagan* and not so well—or not at all—worked.

(8) Within the village compound, and also outside it in the ricefields, heaps of stone or single upright stones can be found; so far no explanation has been obtainable as to their purpose.

IV

Thus there are among the Ifugao—at least in the sub-division of Banaue—signs of a megalithic culture which, on the evidence of its material aspects alone (the relations of which to the life of the group need much more investigation), seems to be hardly less pronounced than that of the Bontoc-Lepanto, hitherto taken as being practically the only group of tribes to which such a culture could be attributed.

It is obviously still too early to make any definite statement as to the way this megalithic culture may have spread into the Ifugao region, whether brought by the present inhabitants themselves or transmitted to them by somebody else, their neighbours for example.

Though far from ruling out entirely this latter possibility, I would nevertheless say, in particular considering the rather elaborate construction of some meeting places, that a "degeneration" of a neighbouring megalithic complex is difficult to imagine, even if

these meeting places do seem less well integrated into the social organization of the village than those of the Bontoc-Lepanto:

V

As for the connection of this megalithic complex of Luzon with those outside the island, the picture is also far from being clear. The general anthropological and ethnological kinship between the mountain tribes of northern Luzon and those of Assam, Vietnam, Sumatra, Borneo and Formosa are too well known to need stressing once again.

So far as the megalithic stone work in particular is concerned, the near identity of the stone-paved platforms, meeting-places and the like found among the Naga and the Niassans with those of the Kankanay and Bontoc Igorot has already been observed several times (summarized by Vanoverbergh and Heine-Geldern 1929, pp. 319-320; and Eggan 1954, pp. 333-334). The same is true with regard to the stone work of the Ifugao, although this has not yet found mention. Stone-paved house platforms, apparently as common among the Ifugao as among the Igorot, are also known among the aborigines of Formosa and Botel Tobago (Hungtou Hsu). (See Kano 1956; Ling 1958). Kano (1956, pp. 72-73) attests to the presence also of backrest stones among the *Yami* of this latter island, and gives a description which could be applied to many an Ifugao village without alteration: "In the foreground of each main dwelling are two or three standing stones, about 1 m. in height. The *Yami* enjoy leaning back against them while resting but their ethnological significance, which may have been very significant, is now forgotten."

Since stones as material components of a megalithic culture are particularly resistant to any dating and analysing method, and may look alike over considerable distances in time and space, means other than typological comparisons have to be exploited in order to obtain any meaningful answer to the question of the interrelation of these cultures.

The rice-terraces so characteristic of the Igorot and Ifugao have been thought to constitute an integral part of their megalithic culture. And since it is by now quite well established that the art of terrace building for wet rice cultivation reached Luzon from southern China (Beyer 1948, p. 55 and 1955, p. 397; Spencer 1964, p. 106),

in this case megalithic elements would have come from there too. Unfortunately, southern China — apparently a key region for the development and spread of megalithic cultures (Fleming 1963) — is not yet well enough known to enable us to draw any conclusions in this matter.

However, it seems too hazardous automatically to link rice-terraces with megaliths and consider their spread only in terms of this combination. The possibility of the Ifugao having a lowland origin, as suggested by Keesing (1962, p. 338 seq.), and the fact that in the myths of the Ifugao no indication of an association of megalithic elements with terraced ricefields can be found whilst in those of the Formosan aborigines megalithic elements do play a role but wet rice cultivation is not mentioned at all (Pache 1964, p. 256), would rather point towards the origin of the megalithic elements in Ifugao culture being independent of that of their rice-terraces.

VI

There is still no agreement as to whether the development of megalithic cultures in Southeast Asia should be seen as having taken place in the Late Neolithic or the Early Metal Age. Important as this question may be, it does not matter for the present argumentation, since there are in Luzon cultural elements from *both* periods that, according to present knowledge, have *not* come from southern China, at least not directly; indeed, many of them are thought to have come from the Indo-Chinese peninsula. That the Philippine Late Neolithic in general had its closest connection with *Indo-China* has been sufficiently stressed (Beyer 1948, pp. 71, 82); equally close connections during the Dongson period are, if not proved, at least probable; and the central Philippine Iron Age is now also seen as having originated in Vietnam (Solheim 1964, pp. 204-205). Thus, in whichever of these periods megalithic elements may have been transmitted to the Philippines, the possibility of their coming direct from the eastern coast of the Indo-Chinese peninsula should be taken into consideration—once one admits that they may have come independently of rice-terraces—and should be investigated more thoroughly.

Solheim's thesis (*loc. cit.*)—i.e. that it may have been the political developments in Vietnam between the fourth and first centuries B.C. which made people seek refuge in the central Philippines, bringing an Iron-Age pottery complex with them—seems to be of

particular interest in this respect, since it could possibly also apply to the bearers of the megalithic culture in Quang-tri province, north of Hue, who vanished so mysteriously (Colani 1940). This province became indeed a border region as soon as a Vietnamese state (under Chinese overlordship) was consolidated in the last centuries B.C., and thus a region of unrest and often of violence resulting from the constant clashes between indigenous Cham and expanding Vietnamese. It is therefore not inconceivable that either individuals or groups of these megalith-builders left the country, sailing straight east, and took refuge in Luzon, exactly as others did in the central Philippines. It is established that the megalithic remains in Quang-tri province are not the work of the Vietnamese, and Mlle. Colani herself has already suggested that some of their builders may have migrated to "Indonesie", which could also mean the Philippines (p. 191).

There can be no doubt about the technical feasibility of such a journey at that time; the distance between the central Vietnamese coast and Luzon is not much farther than that from the rice-terrace region around the mouth of the Si Kiang on the south Chinese coast, while the Paracel Islands provide convenient stop-over places. Moreover, the prevailing summer monsoon winds could have made this journey possible even for unskilled seamen in mediocre craft. And unskilled seamen they probably were, since, if anybody at all, it could only have been the *Cham* or *Moi* who made this trip to Luzon as seekers of political asylum and bringers of megalithic ideas, and neither of them is known of as normally being a seagoing people. And since the distinction between these two is primarily a matter of historical convenience and not of a basic anthropological difference, one could as well term this hypothetical movement simply a *Moi* migration or, even better, *Moi* infiltration.

However, this thesis is put forward only very tentatively and would still need considerable backing by archeological, ethnological and linguistic evidence. No detailed and comprehensive comparative study of mountain tribes of Luzon and Vietnam has yet been made, thus means of proving or disproving anything are scarce: but whoever happens to have personal experience of both peoples would not be surprised one day to see a *Moi* influence on Luzon mountain tribes proved, since the similarities between the two appear to be particularly striking. This, of course, is not a scientific argument, but it reduces the improbability of such a theory.

Unfortunately, prospects for profitable research in former or present *Moi* regions in the Indo-Chinese peninsula are not too bright for the near future, neither would it be easy to work in southern China; so research should be concentrated on Luzon itself in the effort to find out—by precise local investigations into the material and social aspects of stone work and its context—more about the origin and spread of the Philippine megaliths.

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