

## SPIRITS OF THE STONE, FROM LANDLOCKED LAOS TO SABAH, INSULAR MALAYSIA

*(SEMANGAT BATU, DARI PEDALAMAN LAOS KE SABAH, MALAYSIA)*

Lia Genovese

### Abstract

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This paper stems from data collected during fieldwork in the Laotian provinces of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang and in Malaysia's Sabah province. It compares and contrasts the stone jars of Laos and the menhirs of Sabah, with particular focus on the supernatural qualities ascribed to stone. Jars and menhirs are expressions of a wider megalithic art, the former sculpted from a single boulder and the latter generally set vertically into the ground, plain and undecorated. Shape does not impact the stone's perceived unearthly powers, whose spirit can manifest itself as easily from a jar as from a menhir. The relatively young age of the Sabah menhirs, estimated at 300 years, has been instrumental in assembling testimonies about their functions and ways in which communities interact with, and react to, their perceived paranormal qualities. The date of the Laotian jars is Iron Age.

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**Keywords:** Plain of Jars, Laos, megaliths, Iron Age, Sabah, menhirs, stone, spirits

### Abstrak

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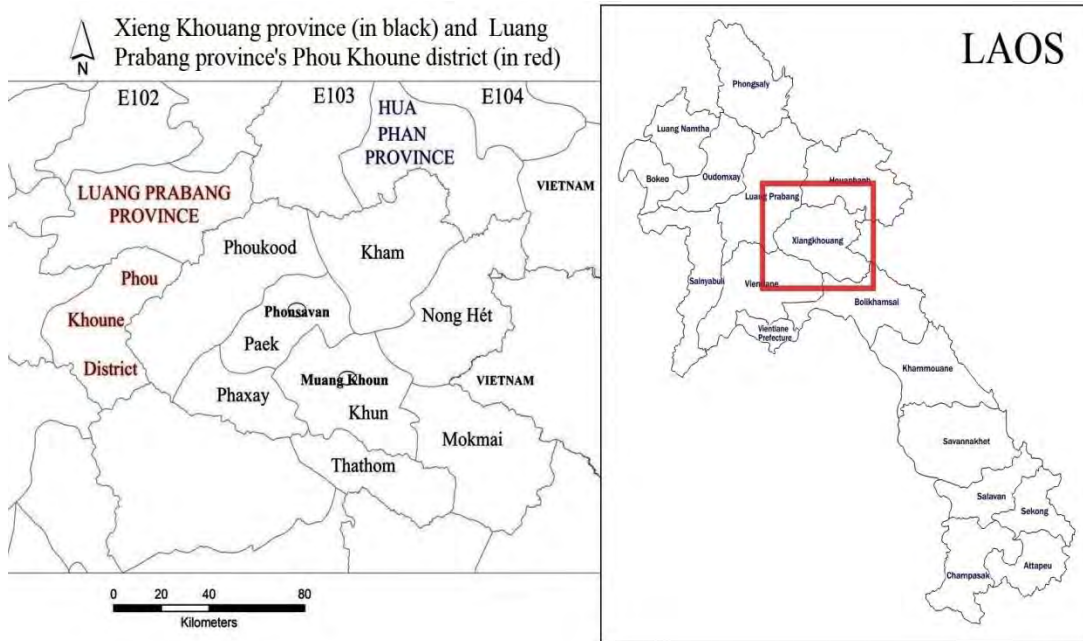
*Kertas kerja ini merupakan sebahagian daripada data yang dikumpul melalui kerja lapangan di daerah Xieng Khouang dan Luang Prabang, Laos, dan di Sabah, Malaysia. Kajian ini membandingkan dan membezakan antara guci batu Laos dan menhir Sabah, terutamanya ciri-ciri ghaib yang diasosiasikan kepada batu tersebut. Guci batu dan menhir merupakan sebahagian daripada kebudayaan megalitik. Guci batu diukir daripada batu tunggal manakala menhir biasanya diletak berdiri tegak atas tanah tanpa hiasan pada permukaannya. Bentuk batu tidak mempengaruhi kuasa ghaibnya, memandangkan semangat atau roh boleh menunjukkan kekuasaannya sama ada dalam guci batu atau menhir. Pentarikhkan menhir Sabah yang secara relatifnya muda, iaitu sekitar 300 tahun, memainkan peranan yang penting dalam mengkaji fungsi menhir, dan cara komuniti berinteraksi serta bertindak balas terhadap ciri-ciri ghaib yang dipercayai dimiliki oleh menhir. Guci batu Laos dipentrikkan kepada Zaman Besi.*

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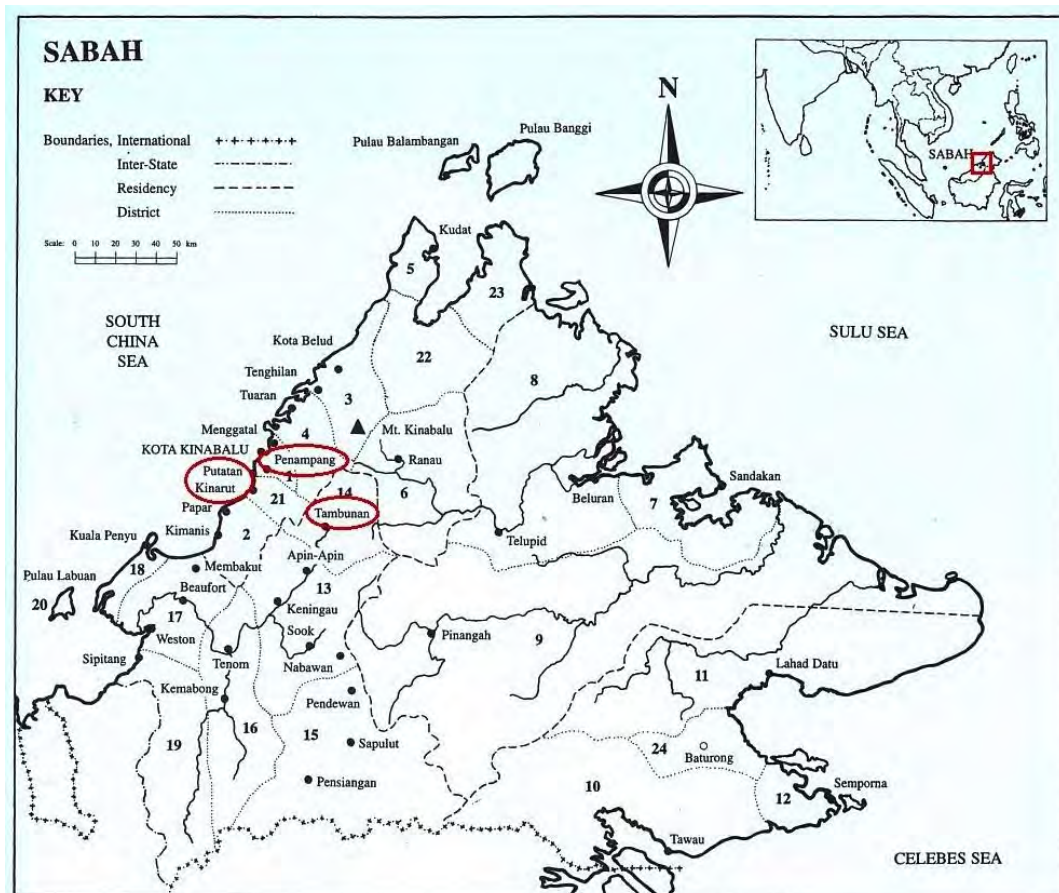
**Kata kunci:** Dataran Jars, Laos, guci batu megalitik, Sabah, menhir, batu, semangat

## INTRODUCTION

The areas discussed in this paper are illustrated in Map 1 and Map 2 respectively.



Map 1. Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces, Laos. *Source:* Lia Genovese.



Map 2. Sabah province. The red circles identify the districts of Penampang, Putatan, Kinarut and Tambunan, where most of the menhirs are located. *Source:* Phelan 1997.

Stone can be used in its natural state, carved or decorated, with the underlying aim being to retain the rock's natural form. In working stone into a recognisable form, masons express “the soul or spirit of a rock” (Jaffé 1964: 233), which approximates the human body into the two separate and parallel manifestations of ‘shape’, created by human intervention, and ‘content’, intrinsic in the

stone. The symbolism encoded in a stone creation can attract acts of violence, as when protesters vent their anger at the stone personification of a tyrannical leader, because monumental architecture makes power visible and hence becomes power itself rather than “being merely a symbol of it” (Trigger 1990: 122). For pre-literate people, megaliths provided answers to the eternal anxious search “for an earthly gesture towards immortality” (Harrisson and Harrisson 1971: 131).

## MEGALITHS OF LAOS AND SABAH: COMPARATIVE DATA

Table 1 summarises the main features of the megaliths in Laos and Sabah.

| Table 1 - Laotian jars and Sabah menhirs: main features |  |                              |                                 |
|---|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|   | Description                                    | Laos: Jars                   | Sabah: Menhirs                  |
| 1   | Shaped by human hand                           | Always                       | Rarely                          |
| 2   | Human or animal figures                        | Rarely                       | Rarely                          |
| 3   | Aquatic figures                                | No                           | Rarely                          |
| 4   | Biomorphic decorations                         | No                           | Rarely                          |
| 5   | Geometric patterns                             | No                           | Rarely                          |
| 6   | Dating   | Iron Age (300 BCE-CE 300)    | 300 years (est.)                |
| 7   | Size   | 1-3 metres                   | from a few cm to several metres |
| 8   | Rock type                                      | Five main rock types         | Sandstone throughout            |
| 9   | Quantities                                     | > 2,000 jars                 | < 200 menhirs                   |
| 10  | Production criteria                            | Supply-driven (hypothetical) | Demand-driven (documented)      |
| 11  | Distribution                                   | Two provinces in North Laos  | Several districts in Sabah      |
| 12  | Stone associated with supernatural powers      | Yes                          | Yes                             |
| 13  | Secondary burials/grave goods                  | Yes                          | Yes                             |
| 14  | Male-female binary system                      | Not known                    | Yes, in some contexts           |
| 15  | Feasting during stone selection/transportation | Not known                    | Frequently                      |
| 16  | Loss of relevance/damage/relocations           | Yes                          | Yes                             |
| Source : Compiled by Lia Genovese                       |  |                              |                                 |

### Carving and decorations

The stone jars of Laos are shaped from a single rock boulder, in a process that includes trimming the stone, carving, hollowing out, transporting the jar from quarry to final destination, balancing and installation. The first comprehensive study of the jars was carried out by the French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1866-1943) in the mid-1930s and published in a two-volume monograph (Colani 1935), together with her study of other megalithic sites in Laos.

Without exception, the jars are barrel-shaped but variations in detail, like the style of the lip rim, have been observed. At any one site, most of the jars are carved with a flat rim (Figure 1), with just one or two jars finished with a rebated rim (Figure 2). The only exception is Site 43-Ban Pakhom in Xieng Khouang, where most of the 35 jars in sandstone or limestone are carved with a rebated rim.



Figure 1. Flat rim on sandstone jars at Phu Da Phor, Luang Prabang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 2. Rebated rim on a sandstone jar at Site 32-Ban Sieng Khieu, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

Paek district, in Xieng Khouang, hosts two locations with inventories greater than 300 jars: Site 1-Ban Hay Hin and Site 52-Ban Phakeo. Diversity centres on the size of the megaliths - up to 3 metres in length - rather than in the details. Towards Phoukood, in the northwest of the province, some jars measure 140-160cm in height, carved to a shallow depth and a narrow mouth. In this district we also find two double-ended jars, carved with one aperture at each end. Further west, jars in Luang Prabang province's Phou Khoune district tend to be small- to medium-size, their height rarely achieving 200cm. Jars in this district frequently feature a narrow mouth and shallow cavity.

Although the Laotian jars are rarely decorated, human or animal effigies have been discovered on jars or discs, or as statues. For the former, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic carvings have been documented on fewer than ten stone artefacts, be they jars or discs. Colani reported the first instance of a human figure on a sandstone disc at Site 2-Ban Na Kho, which she surveyed in October-November 1931. In 1994, more than 60 years after Colani left the field, the Japanese archaeologist Eiji Nitta discovered a carving at Site 1-Ban Hay Hin, depicting a human figure on Jar no. 217, with "both hands" (Nitta 1996: 16) extended upwards, in a spread-eagled position.

In August 2009 I discovered a zoomorphic carving (Figure 3) on a sandstone jar at Site 2-Ban Na Kho, Phaxay district, Xieng Khouang. The latest image was discovered early in 2017, on a sandstone jar (Figure 4) at Ban Pha Thai, also in Phaxay district.





Figure 3. Zoomorphic carving on a sandstone jar at Site 2-Ban Na Kho, Xieng Khouang, discovered by the author in 2009. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 4. The latest image to be discovered at the Plain of Jars, a carving on a sandstone jar at Ban Pha Tai, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

To date, only two statues have been discovered. The first discovery, in May 1932, brought to light a 9-cm tall bronze figurine buried in a clay pot at Thao Kham, a cemetery of funerary stones in Luang Prabang province. The statuette, with child-like features and bulging eyes, is decorated with spirals (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 201-204).

The second discovery, in 2011, was unearthed by the Lao archaeologist Viengkéo Souksavatdy at Nam Phat, a field with two sandstone jars in Luang Prabang province. Souksavatdy found some sandstone fragments buried in a pit at the base of one of the jars. When assembled, the fragments resulted in an anthropomorphic figure in a pensive pose, aptly nicknamed ‘The Philosopher of Nam Phat’.

The Sabah menhirs are rarely impacted by human hand, save for harvesting the stone, transportation and installation. We owe to studies by Harrison and Harrison (1971), Phelan (1997) and the Hongkod Koisaan KDCA Cultural Unity Centre (2016), among others, most of our knowledge regarding these stone monuments. Generally devoid of decorations, notable exceptions are the rich carvings respectively at Bakuku (Ulu Tomani, Tenom district) and Long Pasia (Sipitang district), and the notches incised on some units in Pogunon (Penampang district), to indicate the number of heads claimed in an enemy raid. For Phelan (1997: 4), the absence of decorations on the

Sabah megaliths is not due to lack of knowledge or inability, but rather the artist's decision to leave the monuments "in their natural state" and allow the stone "to speak for itself".

### Dating

The Laotian jars are dated to Iron Age, based on the grave goods collected from clay pots and burial pits in their vicinity and through stylistic comparisons with similar finds in the region, particularly the material culture of the Khorat Plateau, in northeast Thailand: "A date in the region of 300 BC-AD 300 is consistent with the material found in and around the stone mortuary jars" (Higham 2002: 184).

In the mid-1990s, a test excavation raised the prospect of Xieng Khouang having functioned as a burial ground in an earlier phase, in Neolithic times. Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood (2000: 106-108) reported that an AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometry, a carbon dating technique suitable for small samples of carbon) analysis on a fragment of human skull (OZD 770) from a test pit at Site 1-Ban Hay Hin, pointed at burial activity in the site having commenced perhaps as early as "3000 years ago, but cultural materials definitely from this date, which would obviously be pre-iron, have not yet been identified".

The Malaysian menhirs are a relatively young development in the megalithic culture of Southeast Asia, with Harrisson and Harrison (1971: 131) placing their age "after the advent of iron in Sabah". Their age, estimated at 300 years, has been instrumental in informing our knowledge and understanding of their meanings and functions through recent testimonies, both oral and written.

### Size

For the Laotian jars and the Malaysian menhirs, the upper limit is a height of around three metres but some of the stones at the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) Cultural Centre, Penampang, exceed these measurements. Significant variance is observed in the lower range, however. A few miniature jars in Laos measure around one metre, but the smallest Sabah menhirs, like those in Pogunon dedicated to infants, measure just a few centimetres. Most jars are found upright but the heaviest units, like the 3-metre long sandstone unit in Phoukood, with an estimated weight of 31 tonnes (Baldock 2008: 5), are in a recumbent position.

Rank has been suggested for the massive jars found on prominent positions at a few sites, for their hypothetical attribution to elite individuals. Colani (1935, vol. 1: 150) argued that our understanding of burial customs at the Plain of Jars should be shaped not by the jar's size, "which can vary according to the importance of the deceased", but by the depth of its cavity, for its direct relevance to the burial method. This question has vexed researchers in their efforts to rationalise the wide apertures and deep cavities of jars in Xieng Khouang, in contrast with the shallow cavities and narrow apertures on jars in Phou Khoun, Luang Prabang.

In their study of Sabah megaliths, Harrisson and O'Connor (1970: 93-95) note that shape and size, rather than "texture, hardness, color", influenced stone selection, within the limits of possible transportation, with the boulders secured to a frame with the skin of young bamboo as ropes. There was no prerequisite for stone to be sourced from a quarry, as illustrated by the events in the village of Kampong Sunsuron, Tambunan. While digging for defensive structures, the villagers of Kampong Sunsuron found a large, flat stone and decided to install it in the village. The ceremony was officiated by two female *bobohizan*, spiritual specialists and divine-human stewards of the Kadazandusun. A pig was sacrificed and lustral water poured over the menhir "to bring to life the spirit of the stone" and to keep away from the village "any sickness or disease" (Phelan 1997: 70). The Kadazandusun, native to Sabah, over the centuries have evolved unique heritage worldviews, spirituality and cosmology, as well as notions of ecological wellbeing and life-coping practices that have "profound relevance to the current global effort to help heal the ailing earth and humanity itself" (Topin 2017: 22).

The Sabah menhirs are generally set vertically into the ground but shape and size dictate the position, as in the massive stones at the KDCA Cultural Village (Figure 5), in Penampang. Whereas the natural state of the Sabah menhirs has enabled the inclusion of stones barely larger than pebbles, the Laotian masons were compelled to employ stones large enough to result in a jar after the considerable waste generated by the carving process. While the jar concept constrained the Laotian tradition, the use of plain rocks in Sabah allowed for the inclusion of stones varying in size from a few centimetres to several metres.



Figure 5. Massive stones installed in May 1989 at the KDCA Cultural Village, Penampang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

### Rock type

The Iron Age craftsmen in geologically-rich Xieng Khouang employed five different rock types to manufacture jars. In order of frequency they are: sandstone, granite, limestone, conglomerate and breccia. The skilled masons adapted their carving technique from soft sandstone and limestone to conglomerate and granite, which tested a mason's ability to the full. Studying the South Indian megaliths in the Deccan north of Hyderabad, Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1890-1976) remarked that where the rock is difficult to craft, the megaliths are barely carved or coarsely shaped, with the granite monuments "rough-hewn, if hewn at all", in contrast with the "relatively trim and shapely" laterite monuments (Wheeler 1968: 153). In Laos, some granite jars display a misshapen rim but it is impossible to tell whether this is due to difficulties in the carving process or as a result of weathering.

Despite the uniform use of soft sandstone and their placement more than a millennium after the jars of Laos, the menhirs of Sabah are almost never impacted by human hand, except for stone selection and transportation to destination. This factor points to a drastically different *raison d'être* for the two types of megaliths: the imposing jars, often set in isolated locations close to quarries, and the menhirs, modest in their dimensions, installed in towns and market squares as inanimate witnesses to communities' trading practices, conflict or bereavement.

### Quantities and production criteria

The quantities involved present material differences. In Laos, rich sources of stone contributed to the creation of over 2,000 extant jars (Genovese 2016: 130), with the 200 or so Sabah menhirs accounting for around 10 percent of the jars. It seems reasonable that at least some of the jars were created as stock, in part due to the long carving process and transportation to final destination. Trimmed blocks and partially-carved jars have been documented at several quarries (Figure 6).





Figure 6. Partially-carved jar at Site 21-Phu Kheng, a sandstone quarry in Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

The absence of stock in Sabah confirms the linear trajectory that sets in motion the search for a suitable boulder to fulfil a specific function. The Sabah menhirs are thus demand-driven, ensuing from a reaction to a perceived situation which requires the installation of a stone to act as guardian in fair trading, as impartial arbiter between feuding people or as the case may be. Since the menhirs are almost never incised, the process from stone selection to installation is significantly shorter than for the production of the jars.

### Distribution

In Laos, the stone jars are found in six districts in Xieng Khouang (Paek, Phaxay, Phoukood, Kham, Khun and Nong Hét). In Luang Prabang, the jars are concentrated in the district of Phou Khoune. The quantities vary from one single jar, as at Site 37-Ban Si Khoun, to 371 units at Site 52-Ban Phakeo. The largest deposits of jars are located close to a major source of sandstone, the rock from which 80 per cent of surviving jars are carved. Sites populated with granite jars are found in the vicinity of granite outcrops or river beds. In one rare instance, a medium-size jar has been carved on the limestone rock face (Figure 7).

The menhirs in Sabah are spread over several districts, with the largest deposits found in Penampang, Putatan, Kinarut and Tambunan. Due to installation being demand-driven, they tend to be in relatively small quantities, from the one unit in Monsopiad (Putatan) to the 38 at Pogunon (Penampang).



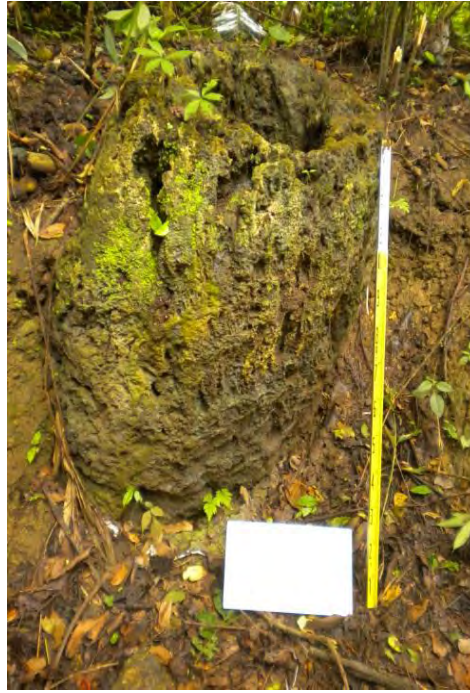


Figure 7. A jar carved on the limestone rock face at Site 74-Phou Huay Xang Khane, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

## STONE AND SUPERNATURAL POWERS

From time immemorial, stone has been associated with the supernatural, as in the legend of Jacob, a progenitor with whom God signed a covenant. While travelling through the ancient Canaanite city of Luz (Bethel, or nut tree), one evening Jacob rested his head on a stone and dreamt of a ladder stretching from the ground to the sky “and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28). In revealing his divinity, God reassured Jacob that the land on which he slept would be his and his descendants’. The stone used as a pillow became integral to the divine revelation and assumed symbolism by mediating between God and Jacob. The following morning, Jacob set up the ‘pillow’ as a memorial stone and anointed it with oil to symbolise its association with the house of God.

If stone is revered for its durability and alleged superpowers, documentation exists about deliberate damage inflicted by distrusting communities. Surveying north Laos in May 1900, Alfred Raquez (1865-1907) learned that fear and superstition prevented villagers from damaging the stone jars in Xieng Khouang, which were deemed “sacred” (Raquez 1902: 379). Thirty years later, however, Colani encountered deliberate damage in Luang Prabang province. Late one afternoon in the spring of 1933, Colani reached the remote site of Kéo Tane, where the Kmhmu villagers showed her an area hosting stone artefacts decorated with zoomorphic figures. Returning the next morning for an inspection in better lighting conditions, she noted that, overnight, the artefacts had been smashed to pieces (Colani 1939: 98).

Formerly, in Sabah the spirit in a pot had to be pacified with frequent offerings, which made pottery an expensive commodity, as recounted by Ivor Evans (1886-1957). A Dusun villager from Tempasak, near Kota Kinabalu city, informed Evans that all the *tompok* jars (typically around 1.2m high and of greenish-brown translucent porcelain) had been sold to Brunei traders, who in turn sold them to the Dusun of Tuaran and Papar in the southwest of Sabah (Evans 1923: 18). The mass sale was made purely for financial reasons, due to a preference for cash in lieu of pottery, since some spirits remain neutral only if propitiated with constant sacrifices (Evans 1923: 52).

## Secondary burials

Grave furnishings are another area of affinity between the jars and the menhirs. In Laos, the richest grave goods have been documented in Xieng Khouang, at the larger sites in Paek and Phaxay districts, followed by those in Phoukood. Among the objects excavated by Colani in the mid-1930s were jewellery, beads, spindle whorls, net weights, iron knives, implements, pottery and sherds (Colani 1935, vol. 2: 34 fig. 157). Recent excavations at the Plain of Jars have brought to light pottery as well as hammerstones, carnelian beads and ceramic vessels (Shewan et al. 2016).

Between 2000 and 2008, excavations conducted by the Archaeology Division of the Sabah Museum Department in Pogunon, Penampang, uncovered lidded burial pots and grave goods. Some of the pots were glazed (Figure 8) and others of distinct Chinese manufacture. From the pots were recovered human remains (Figure 9), jewellery and decorated ceramics (Mohd. Rapi and Molijol 2018: 80).



Figure 8. Glazed burial pot excavated at Pogunon, Penampang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 9. Human remains from pot burials in Pogunon, Penampang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

## Binary system

In Southeast Asia, equilibrium in the male-female binary system is maintained by assigning gender-specific roles that reflect the dualistic nature of the universe. The female world is associated with the left side, the moon and the Earth, life, textiles, lizards, crocodiles and pigs. Conversely, the male world relates to the right side, the sun and water, death, metals, birds and horses. In the Indonesian

island of Sumba, replicas of the omega-shaped *mamuli* (female element) are purchased with an ornamental chain (male element), to fulfil the binary system.

At this stage in our research, we ignore whether Laotian jars were gendered. Some details in their morphology may provide clues in future, perhaps supported by parallels with regional similarities like the Neolithic burials at the West Mouth of Niah Cave, Sarawak, Malaysia. Studying the manipulation of a deceased person after death, to reflect gender or identity, Brooks and Brooks (1968: 68) reported variety in the position of the hands and forearms of these extended Neolithic burials, where “the arm position style was patterned[,] rather than erratic, and the possibility of correlating the sex of the individual with arm position was conceived”.

In Sabah, the 25 menhirs located within the compound of the Pogunon Community Museum, Penampang, are classed as ‘male’, ‘female’ or ‘child’. In general terms, the ‘male’ menhirs are elongated, with angular contours, while the ‘female’ stones show a smooth curvature at the top. The ‘child’ menhirs are often a few centimetres in height, to commemorate an infant (Note 1).

Gendered differentiation has been observed in other Southeast Asian contexts, as in some megaliths on the Sumatran island of Nias, where a pillar-shaped stone is “the typical monument for a man”, while the round, mushroom-shaped stone is dedicated “to a woman” (Schnitger 1964: 152).

### Feasting

In Sabah, the survey and stone selection were accompanied by a feast, a reward for the men’s efforts engaged in the “dangerous business” (Harrisson and O’Connor 1970: 95) of collecting stone, brave in the face of possible encounters with head-hunters.

On the island of Nias, the installation of megaliths was traditionally accompanied by feasts of merit known as *masa*, as memorials to the accomplishments of the living and to enhance their prestige, but also as the principal means of advancement in socially stratified parts of the island (Beatty 1991: 216-217), with the competition for power in areas with “several lineages of noblemen” (Ziegler and Viaro 1998: 46) resulting in the largest number of megaliths. Although the size of the stone was an indicator of the owner’s wealth and power, the opulence of the feast was commensurate with endeavour and consequently large stones elicited lavish feasts for the significant effort they demanded.

For Trigger (1990: 122), higher energy expenditure confers power and status, visible in monumental structures like temples, which “greatly exceed in size and quality of construction what their practical function required”. The case is recounted of an old Kadazan warrior who installed a large boundary stone at Kampong Gusing, Penampang, having travelled 14km to Pulau Gaya (Gaya Island) to collect the stone, because a rock from the hill at nearby Pogun Savat would have been “worthless” (Phelan 1997: 10).

One may question the motivation in dragging a massive boulder, over a long distance, only to be rewarded with a feast of buffalo meat or pork. Aside from the pomp that surrounds several dozen men inspecting and evaluating a stone, a mystical component has been suggested, where the actual stone and the spiritual relationship of moving it from one place to another “were bound up with deep feelings inside these peoples” (Harrisson and O’Connor 1970: 95).

Stones may have been moved without a specific purpose, for villagers to develop a spiritual connection with the stone. This may be the case with extraneous boulders found at the Plain of Jars, like the large blocks of andesite at Site 25-Ban Songhak, in Xieng Khouang, scattered among a few dozen sandstone jars. Unlike the jars, whose shallow cavities considerably reduced the weight in transportation, moving the andesite (Figure 10) from the quarry 10km away, entailed Herculean efforts. Some of the andesite has been lightly carved with superficial incisions, prompting suggestions that the hardness of this igneous, volcanic rock probably defeated masons’ efforts to carve a jar to completion (Baldock 2008: 11). If indeed there was an intention to carve jars from



andesite, which registers 7 on the Mohs scale of relative hardness, the task would have required an incremental adjustment, since the Plain of Jars masons had already mastered the necessary skills to carve conglomerate and granite, the latter registering 6.5 on the same scale.



Figure 10. Andesite boulders scattered among the sandstone jars at Site 25-Ban Songhak, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

#### **Loss of relevance/damage/relocations**

In Sabah as in Laos, megaliths have lost much of their original perceived efficacy, although we ignore any special qualities attributed to the Laotian jars in ancient times. In Laos, jars are viewed as trophies from a distant past, like the few units at the National Museum in Vientiane capital city.

Jars are being relocated for a variety of reasons, like the few units moved to higher ground to prevent damage from a hydropower station on the Nam Ting River in Phou Khoune, Luang Prabang. Within Xieng Khouang, jars moved in recent decades have been returned to their original archaeological site but others have remained in their new location, like the two sandstone units moved in the early part of 1985 from Site 2-Ban Na Kho to grace a foreign-built animal husbandry farm, located 5km away. A sandstone jar from Site 1-Ban Hay Hin, moved in the early part of 1970, remains in a storage facility in Maryland, offered to the President of the United States by Gen. Vang Pao (1929-2011), the Xieng Khouang native who led an army of Hmong soldiers against Lao communist troops, alongside American forces in the Second Indochina War.

The 11 sites included in the Lao government's dossier seeking to list the Plain of Jars as a World Heritage monument, are reasonably well monitored. The application was submitted in 2017 and a decision is expected in July 2019. Despite Harrisson and Harrisson (1971: 130) stating that megalithic areas like the Plain of Jars have "no living links in contemporary society", communities continue to engage with the jars, often in ways which result in permanent damage. Although a small votive candle inserted into a jar's cavity during petitionary prayer, or a jar used as prop for photo opportunities at weddings or national festivities, are unlikely to cause extensive damage, other uses cause irreversible damage, as when jar rims are used as whetstones (Figure 11) to sharpen knives and farming implements. Inadequate levels of control at remote sites cannot prevent misuse or damage, with jar fragments stacked up into a cairn to mark ethnic minorities' contemporary burials in parts of Xieng Khouang, as at the granite site of Muang Phan (Figure 12).



Figure 11. Site 22-Ban Hin, Xieng Khouang. Rim of a sandstone jar used as whetstone. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 12. Stone cairn built with fragments of granite jars at Muang Phan, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

After the second half of the twentieth century, stones were rarely moved in Sabah, with two rare events documented in Penampang in the last 30 years. In the first case, machinery was employed to bring five large boulders from Kampung Divato and nearby Kampung Limbanak, in the south of the district, to mark the completion of the KDCA heritage complex in May 1989. The second event happened four years later, in May 1993, when a large boulder and eight small- to medium-size stones were transported to Sugud, also in the south of Penampang, to mark the opening of the local community hall.

More recently, in August 1996, the KDCA erected a menhir to mark the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, hosted by the province in 1995. A medium-size menhir was moved by hand from a corner of the village, following complaints that the yearly ritual conducted near the stone caused disturbance in the predominantly Muslim community (Note 2). However, this is a single incident in an otherwise harmonious environment where Muslims are receptive to the use of stone. Rocks feature in Muslim funerary and commemorative rituals, with stones placed around burials in Sabah and Sarawak, and small black pebbles often strewn over the graves of devotees (Harrison and O'Connor 1970: 320-321). Similar conclusions were reached about the absence of anthropomorphic stone statues in the south of Nias: "We must immediately rule out the idea of any Muslim influence forbidding figurative sculpture; the south, which was the last region of Nias to be Christianized, kept up most of its traditional religion until the first quarter of this [twentieth] century" (Ziegler and Viaro 1998: 67).

Adherence to a new religion is rarely detrimental to megaliths, whose use predates recent Kadazandusun conversions. Although conversion to Islam and change of identity have been cited

as contributing factors, the decline in the Kadazandusun population, from 42 percent reported by the British-conducted 1911 North Borneo Census, to 19.6 percent in 1990, is due to a falling birth rate among the Kadazandusun, “accelerating immigration” (Topin 2017: 26-28) and higher birth rate among the immigrant population. Ritual stones have coexisted with disparate belief systems to become part of communities’ rituals. This peaceful cohabitation is also present in Buddhist Cambodia, where the huts of the land spirits, known as *neak tū*, are found in the vicinity of Buddhist temples, “which is both the result and the mechanism by which these various elements came together to form a single complex belief system” (Ang 2000: 5).

Loss of relevance is also observed in the objects formerly used in rituals, and treated as heirlooms, which have since been concealed or destroyed. Their residual power is a source of apprehension for their owners and instances are cited of sickness or misfortune befalling families who showed or loaned these objects to researchers for scholarly study (Note 1).

Although new menhirs have not been installed in rice fields, most of those erected in former times remain *in situ* in Sabah, albeit often surrounded by overgrown vegetation. Bridges or walkways, which in former times allowed access to the menhir for the annual ceremony prior to the planting season, have since been dismantled or are in disrepair. This is the case with the largest menhir in Sabah, by volume, located in Sugud, Penampang. Installed in the middle of a wet-rice field, over the years the Sugud menhir has sunk deeper into the soil. Nicknamed *sansaabon* (‘big and wide’), the menhir is 2.5m high, with a girth of 3m at its widest. The bridge that once connected the stone with the road has been demolished but at the time of my visit in early April 2018, before the onset of the rainy season, its majestic size could be admired above the tall grass. In the mid-1990s, villagers informed Phelan (1997: 87) that this menhir was sourced from a river valley 2km away and that one month was required for 100 men to bring it to its present location, fastened to a frame of timber logs and rolled over dry ground.

## FUNCTION

The contrast between jars and menhirs could not be more pronounced, with a rich and varied spectrum of uses and meanings permeating the Malaysian menhirs, with individuals or communities determining the stone’s specific purpose and its installation location.

If the Laotian jars are inanimate participants in village life, occasionally involved in festivities or rituals, some of the menhirs in Sabah were promoted as models of fairness and impartiality, protecting people from sickness or dispensing justice to wrongdoers.

### Megaliths of Laos and Sabah: function

The documented or ascribed uses for the Laotian jars and the Malaysian menhirs are illustrated in Table 2.

| Table 2 - Laotian jars and Sabah menhirs: function |   |
|--|---|
| Laos: Jars   | Sabah: Menhirs                                      |
| Three main theories:                               | Varied and meaningful:                              |
| ● funerary (main purpose)                          | ● boundary stone ● tombstone ● crop fertility       |
| ● commemorative (hypothetical)                     | ● peace stone ● to end a village feud ● oath stone  |
| ● ritual (hypothetical)                            | ● for persons buried far from home ● memorial stone |
|  | ● to commemorate childless couples                  |
|  | ● auspicious functions (eg. luck in gambling)       |
| Source : Compiled by Lia Genovese                  |   |



The Laotian jars were connected with funerary rituals, a theory supported by the clay pots with human remains and grave goods buried in their vicinity. Colani (1935, vol. 1: 173) lamented that “no-one appears to be dreaming of a mystical purpose” for the jars and did not favour a domestic or practical use, as stone coffins in the primary burial phase. The use of jars as vessels for primary burials is not supported by the limited instances of secondary burials in their vicinity.

The jars are now being viewed as ritual or commemorative monuments (Genovese 2015: 133), in parallel with other megaliths in the region, including the menhirs of Sabah. Assumptions are being refined or discarded in light of recent findings by Lao and international archaeologists, particularly the discovery of a flexed skeleton at Site 1-Ban Hay Hin, located through a ground-penetrating radar survey (Shewan et al. 2016). This is the first instance of a primary burial from the Plain of Jars, following decades of secondary burials discovered by Colani in the mid-1930s, by Japanese and Lao archaeologists in the mid-1990s and test excavations by UNESCO-appointed archaeologists in recent years.

The menhirs of Sabah are installed for a variety of purposes, as boundary or peace stones, to end a village feud or to commemorate a person buried far from home, among others. It has been possible to document this multitude of functions because the stones were installed in living memory, with accounts corroborated by the individuals or communities responsible for their installation.

I will now detail a sample of ways in which the Sabah menhirs assume meanings in the eyes of their communities, with direct parallels, where possible, with studies on the stone jars of Laos.

### Crop fertility

The virtues of a man of exceptional wealth are said to inhabit the stones erected in his name, benefiting the community “by increasing the fertility of all the crops” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 218), similarly to beliefs surrounding megaliths in south India, where the soul or virtue of a dead man attaches itself to the stone to benefit “his survivors and the village-crops” (Wheeler 1968: 151).

Paul Mus (1902-1969) discusses the *kut*, a stone stela ritually placed in Indian rice fields to give material form not only to the ancestors “but also to the god of the soil” (Mus 2011: 32-33), analogous to the Cham *kut* or the Sino-Vietnamese tablets which duplicate the deceased. The ancestors thus embody their descendants’ rights over the earth, while the stone representation becomes “a tangible expression of the religious contract between the two” (Mus 2011: 55).

For Harrisson and Harrisson (1971: 131), associating megaliths with the development of irrigation in agriculture “certainly happens to hold rather good in the Borneo context”, with the Penampang-Kota Kinabalu plain and the Kelabit plateau in Sabah being the two most “advanced” *sawah*, or rice irrigation locations, on the island. These comments are echoed by Ian Glover (1934-2018), who credits megalith builders for introducing terraced irrigation, metal-working and rice-growing into Island Southeast Asia and Oceania, despite rice “first domesticated in eastern Asia” (Glover 1998: 25-26).

Societies in Sabah now work in industrial sectors, largely away from agriculture, and the changes in economic factors have contributed to a waning belief in the power of stone. Rice cultivation has given way to forms of income generation like cultural- and eco-tourism, with direct implications for menhirs originally installed to promote crop fertility. Stones are being moved out of the *sawah* or out of areas only recently opened up for irrigation: “Where there is no continuing, contemporary respect, stones would be deliberately moved, ditched, buried or broken up” (Harrisson and O’Connor 1970: 88).

Similar developments have impacted the stones around Kota Kinabalu, now a mere fraction of their original quantities, “knocked down by road builders, buffaloes, and the new sort of neglect of traditional objects which is an almost inevitable part of the modernization process” (Harrisson

and Harrisson 1971: 133). In rare instances, menhirs that have fallen into disuse are given a new lease of life. This was the case with the menhir displaced by erosion from a hill in the village of Kandazon, Penampang. In 2015, the stone was installed outside the gate of a villager's house, with salt sprinkled during the ceremony to harmonise the surroundings. I asked the villager if she attributed supernatural qualities to the stone but she replied that the main factor for not discarding the menhir was its antiquity (Note 3).

Shaped like a slightly curved slab, the menhir that now stands in the grounds of the Sabah Museum, in Kota Kinabalu city, commemorates the *bolitus* tree. The stone rises 2.8m above ground and measures 1.8m at its mid-level circumference, with an average thickness of 20cm. A plaque informs visitors that some 300 years ago the stone stood on the side of a small hill in Kampong Sindina'an, Penampang. Believed to be the only one of its kind in existence in the area, an unknown *bobohizan* commemorated the death of the *bolitus* tree when it became extinct, with the menhir now known as the *batu bolitus* (bolitus stone). The tree derived its prodigious fertility from the spirit in the stone, which became a host for the "spirit of crop fertility" (Mohd. Rapi et al. 2013: 14).

In Laos, the association of stone jars with crop fertility has not been tested and there is no documented evidence of jars intentionally moved near rice fields, even though a few units are now found in their vicinity. What is well documented, however, is some ethnic minorities' custom to perforate the jars. Surveying the Plain of Jars in the mid-1930s, Colani (1935, vol. 1: 150, 216) suggested that the lateral perforations were post-death practices for the decay process, to allow the dispersal of gases and liquids from bodies which had not been suitably prepared after death. The reality, however, may be less poetic, since it appears that perforations are intended to turn the jars into chicken coops, in the belief that fowl confined to a stone enclosure produce eggs of better quality and in higher quantities. Most of the granite jars (Figure 13) documented by Colani at Site 13-Ban Thoum, Xieng Khouang, have since been destroyed but perforations can be observed on the conglomerate jars at Site 43-Ban Pakhom (Figure 14), also in Xieng Khouang.



Figure 13. Historical perforations on granite jars at Site 13-Ban Thoum, Xieng Khouang. (M. Colani. 1935. *Mégalithes du Haut-Laos*, pl. XXVI).



Figure 14. Perforations on conglomerate jars at Site 43-Ban Pakhom, Xieng Khouang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

### Oath stones

In Sabah, a *tamu* is a traditional farmers' market where a stone is installed in the trading square to guarantee honesty, fairness and trust, and to punish those who cheat, quarrel or swear within it. Oath stones were installed as recently as the late 1980s, like the one erected in August 1989 to inaugurate the new *tamu* in Tambunan (Phelan 1997: 24, fig. 14). The oath stone usually follows the market, as was the case with the stone at Inanam, south of Kota Kinabalu city, which travelled to four different trading locations, each installation requiring a buffalo sacrifice. In 1990, during one of these sacrifices, an elderly man warned those present that the killing of the buffalo was a sign "of what would happen to anyone who did wrong at the *tamu*" (Phelan 1997: 24).

Instances have been recorded of oath stones not following the market, as with the menhir erected in a corner of the *tamu* in Inobong, Penampang. The original oath stone was set in concrete and could not be moved when the market was enlarged after World War II, requiring the installation of a second, slightly larger stone in the market square (Figure 15). In the late 1980s, Inobong was beset by outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and malaria (Arokiasamy 1990: 183) but when the weekly market was relocated to nearby Donggongan town, both oath stones remained cemented in Inobong, idle in their original purpose to punish dishonest traders. As listed in the Local Government Ordinance (no. 11 of 1961), Penampang District Council (*Tamu*) By-Laws 1978 (G.N.L 51 of 1978), p. 3, a weekly market was formerly held in Inobong on Sundays, 5-11am.

### Memorial stones

In ancient Sabah, a stone bore the name of the person responsible for its installation and local heroes hung the heads of captured enemies on trees in the forest, to decay. As testament to their bravery, the enemy skulls were suspended from the ceilings of local heroes' houses and were said to move even on a windless night to warn of imminent attacks. During the British occupation, a priest placed a rosary next to a *bobohizan*, who was trying to summon a spirit. When the spirit failed to reveal itself, this was interpreted as proof that Jesus was more powerful than animism and even more powerful than the *bobohizan*, leading the villagers to convert to Christianity (Note 1). The names of menhirs have disappeared from oral histories but a few notable exceptions are still relayed, like the large menhir at Monsopiad, Putatan, in commemoration of the 42 enemy heads (Figure 16) claimed by Monsopiad, the venerated local hero. Rituals around the menhir were conducted as recently as 2002, two years after the local Kadazan converted to Christianity.





Figure 15. Oath stone installed in the now disused *tamu* at Inobong, Penampang. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 16. Some of the 42 enemy heads claimed by the hero Monsopiad, Putatan. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

Prayers and rituals led by the *bobohizan* are said to have lessened the weight of the Monsopiad stone during the removal from the quarry. A booklet by the local Cultural Village illustrates the decay process, featuring the menhir surrounded by four bamboo poles. The upper section of each bamboo pole has been shaped into a basket for the enemy head during the decay process. Monsopiad's heroic gestures in protecting the village are still acknowledged by the community and his legacy remains enshrined in the menhir (Figure 17) that stands opposite his skull house.

The practice encountered in Sabah has regional parallels. In Nias, headhunting was widespread “and played an essential part in numerous practices of South and North Nias” (Ziegler and Viaro 1998: 44). Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1909-1995) noted the custom, among the Naga Hills’ Konyaks of northeast India, of centring a menhir inside a stone circle. Most villages erected a stone “for each head brought in” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 220), with the enemy’s tongue and ears cut off and ritually buried under the stone. After a successful raid, the head was placed in a basket and hung on the menhir. Von Fürer-Haimendorf, however, notes that the erection of such menhirs is not connected with feasts of merit.

### Childless couples

Édouard Chavannes (1865-1918) discusses the energies in the god of the soil (Chavannes 1910: 437) and the powerful roots growing under a stone, which over time appear to lift it up (Mus 2011: 27-28), exposing a portion of the menhir previously buried in the soil. This is the case with a 3.6m tall menhir (Figure 18) in Buit Hill, Putatan, Sabah, locally known as *batu hidup* ('living stone'), which villagers believe has grown over time. The menhir's origin and installation date are unknown but according to the recently-converted Christian villagers, it was erected to commemorate a childless *bobohizan*.



Figure 17. Menhir in Monsopiad, Putatan. Formerly, heads claimed during enemy raids were placed in the basket-shaped bamboo poles for the duration of the decay process. (Photo: Lia Genovese).



Figure 18. *Batu hidup*, or 'living stone', Buit Hill, Putatan. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

A less imposing contemporary cemetery is located on an adjoining hillock, populated with eight small- to medium-size menhirs not labelled as 'growing' stones. Funds and space permitting, locals prefer to bury their dead on Buit Hill, where the *batu hidup* is surrounded by contemporary burials and Chinese-style tombs. Although the megaliths on both hills are no longer the focus of traditional rituals, new practices have emerged, like the carving of four-digit sequences (Figure 19) on the *batu hidup*, for good luck on the lottery.



Figure 19. Numbers scratched on the *batu bidup* for good luck on the lottery. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

### In sickness or in death

A feature shared by the Laotian jars and the Sabah menhirs is a belief in the supernatural abilities of the spirits inhabiting stone: unwavering with wrongdoers but compassionate towards sick children. Stone can avert or cure ailments but can also cause sickness or death, exacting retribution under some circumstances.

In the legend of the *batu batuah* ('magic stone'), a song popular among the Minang of South Sumatra, a young man was turned to stone for neglecting his filial duties: "For the Minang, who are pious Moslems, heaven is beneath the soles of one's mother's feet, so that neglect of one's mother is regarded as one of the gravest sins" (Barendregt 2002: 429). Petrification as punishment for infringing the *adat* (local customs) also appears in a tale from Tambunan, Sabah, with a woman turned to stone for going down to the stream pregnant "and near to delivery" (Phelan 1997: 66).

Western thought nowadays deems the supernatural incompatible with the tenets of a scientific mind. O'Connor (2017: 28-29) laments society's collective inability to tune into the magical and argues that our socially imagined world has become progressively disenchanted by a form of rationality "wholly corrosive to modes of thought which we now term magical". However, some communities in Laos still place their faith in stone's supernatural powers, as recounted by Bouapha Douangsouliya, a native of Ban Boua, in Xieng Khouang, close to sandstone quarries and jar sites. In 1968, at the height of the Second Indochina War, Bouapha was a novice monk in the local Buddhist temple. When his village suffered aerial bombings, the population was evacuated to safe houses in Vientiane. Before fleeing the village, Bouapha was asked to collect the Buddhas and bronze gongs from the temple and give them shelter inside a stone jar. In 1975, at the end of the hostilities, the evacuees returned home to resume their subsistence activities and although the village had been razed to the ground, the sacred objects had survived unscathed inside the jar, from where they were retrieved and ceremonially installed in the reconstructed temple (Note 4).

In Sabah, some stones become bad-tempered when ignored by people, as in Penampang's Kampong Kurai, where a passing woman stared at a stone, seemingly ignoring its request for information on her whereabouts. The woman fell ill and was advised to pacify the offended spirit by offering a chicken, which resulted in a full recovery. The menhir became known as *batu gunsolong* ('gunsolong' = to stare) (Phelan 1997: 12).



The spirit in the stone can banish sickness or disease from the village, particularly at times of epidemics like small-pox. Evans (1923: 53) observed that in a village on the slopes of Mount Kinabalu, spears placed next to a human figure in stone warned the sickness spirits that they will not be allowed to pass when the spirits of the spear called to them: “The men of this village set us here to dispute with you, the men here are our men, and you cannot pass”. However, Evans notes that the sickness spirits simply move on to another village. At Kiau Dusun, on the foothills of Mount Kinabalu, Evans came across a water-worn boulder, shaped to resemble a human head and bust and roughly smeared with lime to give it the appearance of eyes and nose. A slender and upright bamboo pole had been erected on one side, with the upper end split and shaped into a basket for offerings of eggs. Reticient about this human representation, the locals admitted its efficacy in keeping sickness away “from the village” (Evans 1923: 28-29).

The Xieng Khouang village of Ban Songhak, near Site 25, was bombed during the Second Indochina War. In 1969, the villagers were evacuated to safe houses and were able to return only ten years later. To appease the spirits, every three years the locals sacrifice pigs and chickens, while reciting chants and prayers and offering flowers, candles and incense, in the belief that failure to honour the spirits will bring sickness and strife to the village. The elders have banned children from playing near the jars, or the cutting of wood, for fear of awakening the spirits in the stone.

There are 24 jars at Site 25-Ban Songhak, but only water from a particular unit (Figure 20) has the power to cure sick children. When a child falls ill, the elders collect some water from this jar and boil it, before washing the child’s face in it while prayers and incantations are recited. All sick children treated with water from this jar are said to have made a full recovery.



Figure 20. Water from this sandstone jar at Site 25-Ban Songhak, Xieng Khouang, is said to be powerful enough to cure sick children. (Photo: Lia Genovese).

Two other accounts involving jars at Ban Songhak were relayed to me in 2011 by Mr Thitkhamphane, a village elder. In the first account, years earlier, people became sick when monks brought to the village temple a stone jar for water storage, but were cured when the jar was returned to its original location. This event echoes an historical account by Alfred Raquez, who was appointed to survey Upper Laos in January-July 1900 shortly after Laos became the fifth province in the Union of French Indochina. Raquez recounted the tragic death of a child in Xieng Khouang, when his father brought home a stone jar (Raquez 1902: 379).

The second experience left an indelible mark on Mr Thitkhamphane's impressionable young mind. In 1958, as a ten-year old, he was playing with other children near the jars, eventually managing to overturn a small unit. Suddenly, from the ground where the jar had stood for centuries, a snake emerged, while the sky grew dark and menacing and thunder was heard all around. The children managed to upright the jar before running back to their homes, certain that their playful antics had caused the terrifying reactions from the ground and the sky (Note 5).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has emphasised the limitations on our understanding of the purpose and function of the Laotian jars, created during the Iron Age, in contrast to the rich testimonies on the relatively recent megaliths of Sabah, where oral accounts are supplemented and corroborated by textual sources.

The installation of megaliths for funerary or commemorative purposes dates back thousands of years, with supernatural qualities attributed to stone during the Iron Age for the Laotian jars and the more recent menhirs of Sabah. The common denominator is a blend of fear and reverence for stone's perceived unearthly powers.

Often, human agency brings to life the spirit in the stone, to protect the inhabitants or avert sickness. This concept reduces the level of independent authority ascribed to stone and enhances the role played by humans in promoting its supernatural qualities, through their own beliefs in its powers as arbiter of honest trading or to ensure crop fertility. As a judge of morality, stone dispenses retribution for wrongdoing, but its forces of compassion can cure sick children.

A spiritual connection with people arises from efforts in harvesting and transporting stone from quarry to final destination. The flow of energy is the magnetic pull for human endeavour to transport megaliths over long distances, the reward being a lavish feast but also a spiritual connection with the stone. Believing in the supernatural qualities of stone requires that we trade some of our modern-day rationality for a mode of thought that embraces magic but also willingness to deviate from strict interpretation. For example, there is a practical basis in the assertion that the *batu hidup* is 'growing', due to the powerful roots growing under the stone which over the years expose parts of the menhir formerly buried in the soil.

Regionally, the custom of installing stones to mark significant events in the lives of communities continues unabated. In Nias, to the west of both the jars of Laos and the menhirs of Sabah, stone building was practiced as recently as the late 1990s. A study by Ziegler and Viaro (1998: 75) argues that stones are still carved and erected during feasts in the villages and are therefore "not beautiful remains of a bygone art but witnesses of a practice still quite alive, contrary to what has been asserted by others".

In Laos as in Sabah, megaliths have lost much of their original efficacy in their intended purpose, but a thread of continuity exists when people in Sabah scratch numbers on a menhir for good luck on the lottery, or when some ethnic minorities build cairns from fragmented jars. As a result, the menhirs and jars are defaced or permanently damaged. It is left to us to judge whether these practices transform ancient megaliths into 'living stones' or merely accelerate their demise.

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## Interviews

- Note 1. Conversation of 11 April 2018 with Mr James Dingon, director of the Pogunon Community Museum.
- Note 2. Conversation of 16 April 2018 with Dr Benedict Topin, director of the KDCA Cultural Village.
- Note 3. Conversation of 8 April 2018 with Mrs Winnie Jimis.
- Note 4. Conversation of 21 December 2011 with Mr Bouapha Douangsouliya.
- Note 5. Conversation of 5 June 2011 with Mr Thitkhamphane.

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