

Between Life and Afterlife Rituals of Death and Memorial Traditions among the Muria of Bastar

Vijay Kumar¹

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Abstract

This paper uses an ethnographic method to investigate the Muria of Bastars' customs for funerals and ways of remembering people, as well as to show how the different parts of this process, such as funeral rites, beliefs about the soul, and megaliths, all contribute to creating identity, historical memory, and the connections between those who die and those still living. This paper argues that Muria mortuary practices are rich in meaning as a megastructure, connecting and binding memory with landscape and death. Ceremonially transforming the deceased into ancestors through sacred rituals, these practices not only build and reconnect communities but also preserve memories in both people and the environment. Using fieldwork, oral histories and archival sources, this research provides evidence that Muria cosmology views (death) as a transitional process rather than an endpoint. Menhirs, dolmens and the departed pot all serve as the eternally enduring sites of memory for the Muria. The rituals associated with death not only help to create a normative and moral framework but also help to manage and mitigate the anxieties of living with death. The primary objective of this paper is to situate Muria mortuary practices within broader anthropological debates on death, regeneration, and memory, while analytically examining their role in structuring social and cosmological relations in Bastar. It further argues that these practices constitute a form of living heritage, characterized by the dynamic interplay of continuity and change, through which the Muria sustain and reinterpret their cultural traditions over time.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Memorial Traditions, Intangible Heritage, Preservation & Documentation, Indigenous Practices, Ethnographic Study, Ritual Art, Community Engagement, Digital Archiving, Conservation Strategies

¹ Assistant Anthropologist (Cultural), Anthropological Survey of India, North-West Regional Centre, Dehradun-Uttarakhand, **ORCID: 0009-0006-7831-4650**

4.0 Introduction

An essential way to learn how people think of themselves, their memories, and how they relate to others, as society continues to exist long after they are gone, is through the way that mortuary practices provide insight into how societies construct personhood, memory, and continuity as a society. The Muria people who live in the Bastar area of Central India (which is in the state of Chhattisgarh) are one example of an Adivasi group that has unique and culturally specific practices regarding how to deal with death and memorialization (Verma 1990). Their specific burial and memorialization activities include erecting megaliths, dolmen, and other monuments that help to transition an individual from being mortal to being an ancestor who now exists within the community and occupies space within that community, thus becoming part of the community (Elwin 1947, Sahoo 2010 and Sinha Roy et al. 2023).

Although there has been considerable scholarship regarding Indian megaliths, most have examined them archaeologically and as 'things' from the past (Ghosh 1989, Leshnik 1974 and Pradhan 2010). The ethnographic engagement with contemporary megalithic traditions is still limited, particularly with respect to the Muria. The inter-relationship of mortuary ceremony, physical memorials, and the creation of personhood and the landscape has also not been sufficiently theorised in the context of Bastar. Such a gap requires an integrated anthropological methodology that links ritual with things, memory, and cultural continuity.

The present paper analyses the continuing and existing Muria mortuary rituals related to their megalithic heritage, addressing the question of how such rituals facilitate connections between death, memory and the physical world. The paper argues that these rituals facilitate the transformation of a deceased person into an ancestor and the creation of an enduring material and social entity through these rituals. In this way, the paper attempts to demonstrate how megalithic traditions of dead ancestors continue to exist today in Bastar, thereby contributing to the larger discourse on the continued relevance of megalithic traditions as living cultural heritage and providing further insight for UNESCO's World Heritage Programme (2003) regarding the preservation of global cultural heritage.

The paper explores the living traditions of the Muria in the belief and practices related to death. Data were collected from secondary and primary sources; primary source consists of field study.

4.1 Megaliths and Human Existence

For all living beings, space is fundamental. Creatures orient themselves within their ecological niches to meet biological needs and ensure survival. However, human beings uniquely engage not only with spatial environments but also with temporal awareness. While animals exist within the immediacy of the present, humans possess a cognitive framework that extends across past, present, and future. This consciousness of time becomes particularly significant in the context of death, which humans perceive as an absolute and irreversible threshold (Settar 1982). The experience of mortality gave rise to the early development of commemorative practices, wherein memory and materiality converged to negotiate loss, identity, and continuity (Bloch & Parry 1982).

This interplay between spatial and temporal dimensions contributed to the emergence of megalithic traditions across the globe. From the dolmens of Western Europe to the stone circles of Africa and India, megaliths served as enduring markers of the dead, transforming the landscape into a mnemonic field where memory was spatially inscribed (Nora 1989). These monumental structures functioned not only as sepulchral sites but also as socio-ritual spaces that encoded ancestral presence and community values (Renfrew 1976). In many contexts, including that of ancient India, megaliths were also believed to function as rudimentary astronomical observatories mapping celestial movements, seasonal cycles, and agricultural rhythms, thus bridging cosmic time with terrestrial space (Rao 1994).

In Bastar, the tribal communities of the Bison-Horn Maria, Muria, and Abujh-Maria have preserved and adapted megalithic traditions as part of their living heritage (Sinha Roy et al. 2023). Here, the erection of commemorative stones is integrated with animistic beliefs, ancestral worship, and ritual performances, forming a complex cultural system that encodes tribal cosmology and social order (Bird-David 1999). As a living tradition, Bastar's megalithic culture offers a rare continuity between prehistoric mortuary practices and contemporary indigenous expressions (Pradhan 2010). These memorials act as portals through which past and present intersect, embodying both the permanence of death and the persistence of cultural memory. For archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians, they represent not only material culture but also dynamic repositories of knowledge, linking human experiences of space, time, and mortality in profoundly meaningful ways.

4.1.1 The Study Area and People

The present paper analyses the continuing and existing Muria mortuary rituals related to their megalithic heritage, addressing the question of how such rituals facilitate connections between death, memory and the physical world. Muria, an Adivasi community of Bastar, identify themselves within a distinct socio-cultural and ritual framework. Muria are known for their elaborate mortuary practices, beliefs about the soul, and the construction of megalithic memorials such as menhirs (uraskal) and dolmens. These practices are closely tied to their cosmology, kinship organisation, and territorial affiliations, reflecting a deeply embedded relationship between the living, the dead, and the landscape.

4.1.2 Megaliths and the Bastar Region

The megalithic traditions of Bastar are not only to be understood as archaeological remains but as part of an ongoing cultural system where ritual practice, memory and materiality are close-knit. Megaliths have been studied in archaeology for the most part as remains of prehistoric societies, especially in relation to burial practices and cultural formations of the Iron Age (Ghosh, 1989; Leshnik, 1974). This view is limited in regions such as Bastar, where these traditions are ongoing as living practices among communities such as the Muria.

Megaliths are not static monuments for the Muria but active ritual objects mediating relationships between the living and the dead (Sinha Roy et al. 2023 and Mahawar 2003). A fundamental part of the mortuary cycle is the construction of memorial stones, such as menhirs (uraskal) and dolmens. These structures are installed after the completion of funerary rites, and

they serve as permanent sites through which the deceased is remembered, localised, and incorporated into the ancestral domain. In contrast to archaeological interpretations focused on their sepulchral function, Muria megaliths are embedded in a wider symbolic and social frame where they represent continuity, presence and the moral authority of ancestors.

So, there is a difference between archaeological megaliths and living megalithic practices (Pradhan 2010). Archaeological megaliths are frequently removed from their original cultural context and treated solely as material remains. In contrast, living megalithic traditions in Bastar are embedded in ongoing ritual processes, oral narratives and social relations. The meaning of these structures is constantly being re-created through ritual performance, communal participation and spatial placement within village landscapes.

Symbolically, megaliths are nodes of memory that transform the landscape into a culturally inscribed space. They not only signify the presence of the deceased but also convey information about clan identity, gender, status and circumstances of death. The difference between menhirs and dolmens, often related to gendered representation, indicates a structured symbolic system through which social identities are materialised. In addition, the placement of these ancestral remains along pathways, on the borders of villages or within burial grounds the ancestral presence in the everyday spatiality of life, reaffirming the incorporation of memory into the lived space

Muria megalithic traditions are thus a form of living heritage in which material monuments, ritual practices and cosmological beliefs intersect. They undermine the traditional distinction between past and present by showing continuity between prehistoric forms and modern cultural expressions. Such traditions, therefore, require an interpretive framework that understands megaliths not only as archaeological artefacts but also as dynamic elements within a continuing socio-ritual system.

4.2 Muria's Beliefs about Death

The Muria view death in cosmological terms, involving natural causality, spiritual agency and ancestral continuity (Von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1979). Death is not treated as an event, but as a process in which the passage from life to ancestorhood is mediated by a number of forces, including gods, spirits and social relations. This cosmology shapes the interpretation of death and the ritual practices that follow.

4.2.1 The Causes of Death

According to the beliefs of the Muria people, the causes of death can be either natural or supernatural. While illness, old age, or environmental factors are accepted as natural causes, many deaths are attributed to the displeasure of deities, the influence of malevolent spirits, or sorcery. Ritual specialists such as the 'Sirha' play a pivotal role in identifying these causes through various methods of divination. Thus, the Muria situate death within a broader moral and cosmic order. Identifying the cause of death is not merely an act of interpretation; rather, it also determines the nature and intensity of the rituals to be performed in the aftermath of death.

The Muria cosmological framework posits that human beings possess three souls (*Jeev*). After death, each of these souls embarks upon a distinct journey: one soul departs through the mouth and proceeds directly to *Mahaprabhu*, the Supreme Deity. The second soul remains with the corpse and accompanies the mourners to the burial site; it is believed that this soul observes the funeral rites from a nearby tree. The third soul enters a nearby stream and symbolically assumes the form of a fish. Subsequently, members of the community retrieve this soul through a special ritual; it is then brought into the home and worshipped as a household deity (*Dev*). This tripartite model of the soul reflects a profoundly spiritual perspective within Muria society regarding the nature of 'personhood' and the 'afterlife.'

4.2.2 Ritual Mechanisms for Determining Cause of Death

Among the Muria, understanding the cause of death is not treated as a purely physical or medical matter; rather, it is a deeply social and spiritual concern. The community seeks to interpret death within a broader moral and cosmological framework, where natural, supernatural, and social forces are interconnected. In this process, the *Sirha* (ritual specialist) plays a central role, guiding the community through various forms of divination that combine belief, observation, and collective participation.

4.2.2.1 Divinatory Naming Ritual

When death is suspected to be caused by sorcery or malevolent intent, the *Sirha* intervenes during the funeral procession before the body reaches the burial or cremation site. Through the recitation of names of suspected individuals, the ritual seeks to establish culpability. The sudden forward movement of the bier at the utterance of a particular name is interpreted as a supernatural indication of responsibility. This practice not only attributes causality but also functions as a mechanism for addressing social tensions and reinforcing moral order within the community.

4.2.2.2 Crow Divination with Rice Heaps

Another method involves placing five ritual heaps of rice at the boundary of the village, each dedicated to distinct spiritual agencies: *Mahaprabhu* (the supreme deity), sorcery, Dharti Mata (Earth Mother), ancestors, and local village deities. The community then observes from a distance as a crow approaches the offerings. The specific heap that the crow pecks is interpreted as revealing the underlying cause of death. This practice reflects an animistic cosmology in which natural elements and animal behaviour serve as mediating signs between the human and spiritual realms.

4.2.2.3 Smoke Interpretation

The movement of smoke from the funeral pyre provides an additional diagnostic medium. A steady, vertical ascent of smoke is regarded as indicative of a natural death, while irregular or turbulent movement suggests the involvement of supernatural forces. This interpretive practice demonstrates how sensory observation is embedded within a symbolic framework, allowing the community to read environmental signs as expressions of cosmological truths.

4.2.3 Classification of Death

In Muria society, death is classified based on its nature and circumstances, and each category carries distinct religious and ritualistic significance. These categories include death resulting from chronic illness, animal attacks (such as an encounter with a tiger), snakebites, lightning strikes, complications during pregnancy, and deaths attributed to supernatural forces. These classifications are significant because they determine the treatment of the deceased's body, the location of the funeral rites, and the specific procedures required to bring peace to the soul or to safeguard against it. For instance, in cases of violent or "unnatural" deaths, special rituals are often required to prevent the emergence of restless or malevolent spirits.

4.2.4 Cosmology of the Soul

The cosmology of the Muria people features a flexible concept of the soul since different cultures recognise two elements of personality. Contradiction in this aspect is not a problem because there is a specific context of interpretation within rituals. The first theory considers the notion that the individual possesses several soul elements, namely those who leave for the divine power, those who stay linked to the body to take part in funeral procedures, and those that transform within natural elements and return through ritual to be integrated back to the family environment.

In the other theory, the soul can be interpreted through two concepts, which are a "life" spirit that moves to the divine world and the shadow spirit staying at the village and getting its place within ancestral rituals in the future. Regardless of the type of interpretation, the idea is clear about the soul as a combination of elements moving along different paths after death.

The diversity of theories shows a peculiar understanding of the concept of personality within Muria culture, considering it as an integral part consisting of separate elements. By means of ritual transformations, it becomes possible to integrate elements together and give them new meanings to ensure the possibility for a person to become an ancestor within the community and its environment.

4.3 Death Rituals among the Muria

The mortuary practices of Muria can be considered as a certain ritual complex aimed at understanding death, managing it, and integrating it into society. However, they differ depending on the kind of death, its cause, and social consequences. In order to make it easier to understand the practices and their essence, it is possible to distinguish three different spheres of activity connected to death, including funeral rites, rites for special or abnormal deaths, and divination.

4.3.1 Funeral Rites

First of all, funeral rites are conducted right after a person's death, and involve the family members and people from the community who take part in the ritual process. First of all, the body is located on a bamboo mat in the courtyard and then purified by means of water and turmeric. Then the dead body is taken to the cremation place called Marghat in a procession accompanied by mourning songs. Marghats are located on the outskirts of the villages or in forests.

Cremation is the most common form of dealing with death, but burial is typical only in certain cases, such as children or in some situations. In the course of cremation, the body of the deceased is put in an east-west position to symbolise the sunrise. Certain rituals take place at the pyre, such as breaking the widow's bangles and putting some of her property there, implying that the connection of the dead with life ends now.

4.3.2 Special Deaths: Pregnancy and Animal Attacks

Deaths which occur due to exceptional or violent causes are considered separately in this cultural context since it is believed that such happenings interrupt the natural process of the soul.

When there is a death in pregnancy, it is viewed as spiritually unstable and dangerous. The corpse is cremated in a private spot away from the community, usually at a crossroad or under a tree. A farewell dialogue takes place with the spirit not to haunt the living or come back. This ceremony is carried out cautiously, and when the process of cremation does not go completely well, sacrifices are made to appease the restless spirit. These rites are grounded on the understanding that incomplete lives, especially those ending in abortion, could result in unsatisfied spirits that might bring harm.

Death caused by attacks from wild animals, specifically tigers, is also perceived differently. In this case, wooden dolls representing the deceased and the attacking animal are prepared and burnt where the accident happened, instead of the usual cremation place at the village. The offering is made to the spirit of the animal to balance man and nature.

4.3.3 Muria Death Rituals of Divination

The practices of divination are among the most important in Muria death rituals, especially where the causation of death is concerned. Guided by the Sirha, the members of the group perform certain actions involving name recital while accompanying the corpse during its transport, bird watching for their behaviour in response to sacrificial offering, and interpreting the way that smoke rises from the cremating fire.

More importantly, through such practices, causation is not only established, but social harmony is restored. By assigning the responsibility of causation to natural, supernatural, or social forces, the society makes sense of death and achieves harmonisation of social relations.

4.3.4 Return Rituals and Ancestral Incarnation

The ritual processes followed by Muria during the death of one of their own are far from ending once the cremation/burial takes place; indeed, it is extended further to incorporate a series of rituals that see to it that the deceased is gradually reincorporated back into the socio-spiritual world of the community. In essence, this ritual process seeks to establish the state of being an ancestor, thus ensuring continuity of the living and the dead. Such ritual processes include practices like Jiv Uthani and the incorporation of the deceased through the ritual use of the dead vessel.

4.3.5 Jiv Uthani (Awakening of the Soul)

The Jiv Uthani takes place about twelve days after death and is considered an important milestone in the ritual process. It is a process through which the soul is made to return to its natural habitat, which consists of both the family environment and the socio-cultural context. The use of practices like rice divination and fish ritual helps the society welcome the soul back home. The identification of signs like footprints on rice and the catching of the fish acts as proof that the soul has returned and been accepted.

4.3.6 The Departed Pot and Domestic Ritual Continuity

The Departed Pot and Domestic Ritual Continuity. After the Jiv Uthani, the household keeps the memory of the deceased alive with the departed pot. This pot serves as a physical and ritual centre for connecting with ancestors. It is placed in a special sacred area and is used in daily and seasonal rituals, such as agricultural festivals like Nuakhani. People make offerings through the pot, which helps preserve the memory of the deceased. The ongoing practice of this ritual, along with passing its importance to new household members, shows how ancestral presence is part of daily life.

4.3.7 Transformation into Ancestor

These rituals of mourning, therefore, aid in the transition of a deceased person into a stable member of the community (deo). The process by which a deceased becomes an ancestor (deo) is gradual, rather than immediate, and occurs through a series of rituals designed to create a stable soul and to create physical connections to the body, such as the creation of a memorial stone. After becoming an ancestor (deo), the deceased is viewed as an influencing force on the living by providing protection, guidance, and, at times, moral sanction.

These rituals collectively demonstrate that in Muria society, to die is not the end of life. Rather, to die is to be 'incorporated' into the world. The return of the soul, the physical anchoring of the soul within the rumah, and the subsequent conversion of the soul into an ancestor (deo) will create continuity of kinship, memory, and moral values across the generations.

4.3.8 Material Memory

Murians use the physical environment to memorialise their deceased ancestors through non-verbal forms of memory, such as stone and wooden memorial markers and to memorialise their behaviour. Additionally, these markers create a physical environment that provides an ongoing reference to the deceased and allows the living to engage with and remember them, establishing a strong connection between those who have died and those currently living (Sinha Roy et al., 2023).

4.4 Menhirs, Dolmens and Wooden Posts

Archaeological artefacts among the Muria include a variety of different types of memorials, such as menhirs (uraskhal), dolmens, and carved wooden posts. Menhirs are typically created from

single large upright stones that became the most conspicuous forms of remembrance, especially with respect to males. Dolmens are typically created from horizontal natural stones that support smaller stones; they represent the most common form of memorialization with respect to females. In addition to being constructed from stone, wooden posts some of which may have been ornately carved provide alternative or supplementary types of memorialization in areas where adequate stones are more difficult to obtain. All three of these forms, stones and wood, are considered to be more than just memorials; they are considered to hold a tangible link to the deceased and act as places of locality for ancestor-based connections to the living.

4.4.1 Symbolic Gender Differentiation

Menhirs and dolmens represent a gendered symbolic differentiation in Muria mortuary practices. The menhir's upright shape epitomises masculine characteristics, including strength, patrilineal inheritance, and social visibility. As such, the horizontal dolmen represents female characteristics, e.g., nurturance and perpetuation of the family. The issue of gender is more than just a biological difference; it reflects the culture-derived concept of gender roles in both social and ancestral spheres. By means of these physical memorials, the meaning of gender has been inscribed into the landscape and preserved for future generations.

4.4.2 Spatial Placement and Landscape

The manner in which memorials are placed within a landscape can fundamentally affect their meaning. In most villages, menhirs and dolmens are placed along pathways leading to and from the village's borders as well as in relation to burial/cremation sites. Such placements ensure that people interact with their ancestors and their ancestors' spirits while moving daily within those spaces. In some cases, memorials for people who died under tragic or violent circumstances are placed in more secluded sites out of concern for managing potentially unwholesome spirits.

Through these arrangements, this landscape becomes a space for remembering, which carries the presence of ancestors and has social significance (Sinha Roy et al., 2023). Through their locations, the distribution of memorials establishes territorial boundaries, defines membership in some way among kin, and reinforces a connection between those from the past (ancestors) and those in the present (descendants). Thus, material memory in Muria society is fluid and constantly redefined through the interplay of regularly occurring rituals, their symbolic expressions, and the space they occupy.

4.5 Regional Variations and Beliefs

The size and placement of the menhirs and dolmens are influenced by local traditions and specific beliefs. In the Bailadila area, it is believed that the size of the menhir is determined by the reputation of the deceased. A larger menhir indicates a person of high status, while smaller ones are erected for those with lesser prestige. Conversely, in the regions of Narayanpur and Bhopalpatnam, the size of the menhir is believed to be dictated by the availability of suitable stones in the surrounding hills. This highlights the material constraints that shape cultural practices, as well as the flexibility of Muria traditions in adapting to environmental factors.

The placement of the memorial stones is also significant. Menhirs and dolmens are typically positioned in long rows by roadsides, near village boundaries, or in places of marghat (burial grounds). In many cases, the stones dedicated to men and women are placed separately, emphasising gender-specific practices. Suspicious deaths, such as those resulting from violence or other unexplained circumstances, result in the placement of the memorial stone in a secluded location, signifying the community's effort to separate uncertain spirits from the communal space.

4.5.1 Spiritual Significance and Beliefs Surrounding the Stones

According to Muria belief, the soul of the deceased is believed to inhabit the memorial stone, making it more than just a commemorative object. The growth of the stone is perceived as a sign that the soul of the deceased is satisfied with the funeral rites and the offerings made by the family. The Muria believe that the stone has the power to grow in size if the soul is content. The growth of the stone is seen as an ongoing connection between the deceased and the living family, where the spirit continues to influence the well-being of the family.

A specific belief held by some Muria is that the stone grows by approximately 1.2 inches each year if it is left undisturbed and remains in a remote location. This belief in the growth of the stone is symbolic of the continuity of life and memory, as well as the protection the deceased provides to the family. In Muria society, it is believed that the soul of the departed will accompany a new-born child in the family, and the stone will grow in size to reflect this ongoing connection. The memorial stone is not only a reminder of the deceased but also acts as a protective symbol against evil spirits and external threats to the family. Table 4.1 presents funerary monuments found in Bastar district.

Table 4.1 Types of Funerary Monuments in Bastar District

Group	Memorial	Sites mentioned in text
Bison –horn maria	Uraskal (upright stone)	Gammawada, Burkhpal, Dhurli, Chintalnar
Bison –horn maria	Danyakal (horizontal slab supported by boulders)	Planar, Kasanpal, Timmelwada
Bison –horn maria	Biti (heap of stones surmounted by an upright stone)	Gammawada
Bison –horn maria	Kama munda (carved wooden pillar)	Admamunda, Bastanar, Bade kilepal, Peneda, Mukram
Bison –horn maria	Painted stone memorial	Bade Kilepal, Samlur, gammawada
Abhuj Maria	Kalk (upright stone) in Kutru stones for women and children are left flat on the ground	Abhujmar (Irakbhatty, Kachapal, Kutul, Akabeda)
Abhuj Maria	Upright stones surmounted by wooden bison horns or birds	Chotta Karkeli, Kodepalli
Abhuj Maria	Hanal or wich gutta (carved posts marking graves)	Around Kutru (chotta Karkeli, Karkeli, Kaerpe)
Ghotul Maria	Kalk (upright stone)	Markabera, Palki, Bijlee, Surewahi

Group	Memorial	Sites mentioned in text
Ghotul Maria	Guta (wooden post)	Garanji
Bison-horn Maria, Muria and Raj Gonds	Math (Cenotaph)	Bade Kilepal, Dhurgaon, Kadai Khodra, Lamkaner
Raj Gonds & Bison horn Maria	Plain wooden pillar Plain stone pillar	Jagdapur –Chitrakot road
Rawat	Stone slab over grave	Dhurgaon, Raikot

Source: Field data

4.5.2 Memorial Tradition in Bastar: A Symbol of Life and Power

In the cultural landscape of Bastar, memorials are not just markers of death but are deeply connected to the community’s cosmology. The earth (Bhum) is considered the ultimate source of life and power, and these memorials represent the spiritual connection between the living, the dead, and the natural world. Each clan has its own territory (Bhum), which is presided over by a clan god, such as Anga Deo or Pat Deo. Memorials are typically erected within the territory of the respective clan, and their construction involves the active participation of community members. These memorials serve as both markers of ancestral remembrance and as spiritual protectors, reflecting the deep-rooted belief that the earth and the deceased’s spirit are inextricably linked (Sinha Roy et al., 2023).

As V. Elwin (1945) notes, the Muria and other tribal groups in Bastar differentiate between memorials for men and women, and those memorials for individuals who have died under suspicious circumstances are placed in more secluded locations. This reflects the cultural sensitivity and spiritual beliefs that guide the community’s practices around death and the afterlife.

4.6 Discussion

Muria mortuary practices constitute an integrated system in which ritual, cosmology, materiality, and memory are closely interconnected. These practices demonstrate that personhood in Muria society is not understood as a fixed or bounded entity existing in isolation, but rather as a relational and processual condition that extends beyond biological death. The belief in multiple or divisible aspects of the soul reflects the idea that the self continues to exist across different domains after death. Through ritual acts such as cremation, post-funerary ceremonies, and ancestral incorporation, the dispersed elements of the deceased are gradually reorganized and transformed into an ancestral presence. In this way, personhood is ritually reconstructed, allowing the deceased to remain embedded within kinship relations, collective memory, and the moral order of the community.

At the same time, these rituals play a crucial role in managing the social anxieties generated by death. Death introduces uncertainty, grief, and the possibility of social and spiritual imbalance within the community (Hertz 1960). Muria ritual practices address these tensions by providing culturally structured explanations and prescribed forms of action. Divinatory practices help determine whether death resulted from natural causes, supernatural forces, or social wrongdoing, thereby reducing suspicion and restoring moral equilibrium. Rituals associated with violent or “abnormal” deaths further function to control the threat posed by restless spirits. Collective

participation in funerary ceremonies also distributes emotional burdens across the community, transforming private grief into a shared social experience and reintegrating death into a broader cosmological framework.

Material objects and memorial structures further transform the physical landscape into a repository of memory. Megalithic monuments such as menhirs, dolmens, and wooden posts are strategically placed along pathways, village boundaries, and cremation grounds, embedding ancestral presence within everyday spatial life. These memorials are not passive commemorative objects; rather, they function as active sites of remembrance through which the past remains materially present in the lived environment. Through ritual engagement with these structures, the landscape itself becomes a mnemonic archive that mediates relationships between past and present, the living and the dead (Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1979).

These interpretations strongly resonate with the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. The Muria mortuary system reflects Robert Hertz's (1960) understanding of death as a transitional process managed through ritual over time rather than as a singular event. Similarly, the work of Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) on regeneration and continuity is evident in the transformation of the deceased into ancestors, through which the disruption caused by death is converted into the regeneration of social and cosmological order. Thus, Muria mortuary practices reveal a coherent cultural system in which ritual action, material forms, and cosmological beliefs collectively sustain continuity across generations while preserving the memory and presence of the dead within the social and physical landscape.

4.6.1 Heritage, Change and Preservation

The mortuary practices of the Muria people are a current representation of living heritage with their traditions (such as ritualistic activities) along with their material items and cosmology being fully involved in daily life; however, these traditions are now being influenced by larger economic and social forces (market integration, migration, and government-led development) (Bhukya 2021). Even though some traditional practices have experienced a loss of practice, there is also the prevalence of selective adaptation, reinterpretation, and changes in the intensity and materiality of rituals.

For example, the building of megalithic memorials was sometimes delayed because of financial constraints, simplified, or changed materially. Also, certain ritual activities have had their activities shortened or symbolically reabsorbed. At the same time, exposure to the outside world through various cultural influences and bureaucratic practices has changed how the younger generations perceive the value of the rituals and the significance of participating in them (Shah 2006). Therefore, the Muria people's cultural traditions are not surviving in a state of stasis; they are instead culturally dynamic and work back and forth between preservation and change.

In order to more comprehensively analyse these datasets, one needs to understand that preservation is not a process that takes place only at one point in time by physically anchoring something within the landscape; rather, preservation is a continuing process of recognising the continuing evolution and development of tradition into something new. The significance of the mortuary traditions of the Muria lies in their ability to evolve and change in the context of modern

pressures, while still retaining their essential meaning for ancestral lineage, memory, and social order. Any effort to protect these traditions will need to reflect this nature of change and include the community's involvement in creating new expressions of their traditional cultural practices as the economy and society evolve.

4.7 Conclusion

This study explored how mortuary customs of the Muria people of Bastar ("Bastar Muria") created one system by which they mediated relationships between the living and dead through rituals, cosmology, and material forms. Furthermore, this research supports the assertion that the mortuary practices of the Muria were part of a continuing megalithic tradition, which connected death, memory, and the physical landscape through the practice of ritual transformation and ancestral inclusion.

Moreover, the results of this study show that in Muria society, death is not an endpoint; it is a staged transition of the person to re-create personhood personally and socially, using physical objects such as menhirs, dolmens, and ritual artefacts. In addition to addressing social and emotional issues that arise as a result of death, this act changes the physical landscape into a permanent record of memory and provides a link to the past and present.

The Muria mortuary traditions are constantly changing in response to external pressures impacting their society. Such change does not necessarily imply decline; rather, these changes reflect adaptive means utilised by the Muria to negotiate their own cultural continuity in an ever-evolving context.

From this perspective, the Muria are viewed as the keepers of a living megalithic tradition that spans all periods of prehistory through to current Indigenous forms of cultural practice. The Muria continue to utilise their tradition through ritual activity, and memorialise their deceased through monuments that serve as both symbols of continuity and change. The study of such monuments helps one to gain an understanding of how living heritage remains sustained, reinterpreted, and interwoven into everyday experience.

Declaration on AI Use

The author states that only language editing, grammar correction, paraphrasing, and enhancing the manuscript's general readability were accomplished with AI techniques. The author is solely responsible for the study's conceptual framework, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and results. The author is responsible for the article's authenticity, accuracy and integrity. The author also has thoroughly examined, adjusted, and validated all AI-assisted outputs.

Vijay Kumar

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