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Thlen in Khasi Society: Then and Now

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Abstract:

In the recent years, the reconstruction of the history of North East India has assumed new dimensions since not only literary sources are being used for the same but also the myths and other forms of oral traditions are taken into considerations. Since human beings, animals and other animate objects have a long association; they have often assumed the form of myth and can also be a reality. However, with changing times, the myths of the pre-literate societies have not only been continuing but also influencing the socio-psychology of the people at large (literate or illiterate). Thlen in the Khasi society is a kind of a devil that has various forms. The mysteriousness woven around U Thlen and its supernatural power which are devilish in nature cannot be explained though its consequences have been far reaching affecting the Khasi society at large. This paper comprises of three parts. The first part is a discussion on contextualising myth and oral traditions. The second part presents a thorough study of U Thlen in Khasi society in the earlier period and the third part is the condition in the contemporary time. In this background, this paper aims to study the myth of u Thlen and how it has affected the Khasi society and shaped their thoughts. Therefore, through this paper we are trying to study the legend of U Thlen in Khasi society through the ages.

Keywords: *Contextualising myth and oral traditions in the Khasi society, Thlen in the twenty-first century, myth of U Thlen, importance of snake in Khasi society, story of U Thlen.*

1. U Thlen in Khasi Society: Then and Now

Memory of a group of people, whether it may be accurate or faulty, has come to play a vital role in the recording of oral history. Many of the pre-literate societies have relied upon memory to pass on their wisdom, knowledge, stories, myths, legends, songs and teachings of their religious rites and ceremonies. In modern times, those who are not academicians have also been able to contribute into the making of oral history. Many of the historical sources are actually based on the 'oral testimony' of various people.ⁱ Much of what is not recorded in the past has been passed on through narration around the hearth, through stories woven in an intricate manner, through the cultural memory of a group of people. Most narrations are narrated by an elder of the family to the younger generation so as to pass on the tradition of oral narration. Oral tradition has withstood the ravages of time and it is still prevalent in most societies of today. So this cultural material is transmitted through vocal utterance so as to preserve the tradition and custom of the people. Folk literature which is mostly in the oral form has withstood the ravages of time. Folk literature has not remained static, but, it has undergone a constant change since it is dynamic in nature and it adjusts itself to new situations and time. Our post modern society may have changed and become more advanced in technology and scientific discoveries, yet folk literature can still be applied to such developed societies.

Cultural memory has helped social groups in constructing a "shared past."ⁱⁱ This shared past is narrated in the present time through memory and it is the act of remembering that enables the narrator to narrate his story. There may not be a "historical accuracy" in the narration, but this does not mean that the folk have not remembered the incident or story.ⁱⁱⁱ Through the written form only one version of the story gets recorded and that particular version of the past is being maintained. In this connection Astrid Erill has stated:

"Literary forms that help to maintain one version of the past and reject another constitute an antagonistic mode... only the memories of a certain group are presented as true, while the versions articulated by members of conflicting memory cultures are deconstructed as false."^{iv}

We find that in folk literature, only one version of the story does not exist. The form and mode of narration will differ depending on the narrator. The story is narrated in a manner as to arouse a sense of excitement, suspense or even interest in the story. It is in this manner that people construct memories of the past so as to impart knowledge to the younger generations of their religious and cultural practices. Culture is transmitted through narration whether it is recorded historically in the written form or it is memorised and narrated in the process of expressing it. Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin and Linda Walton have expressed their view on this:

“History is but one of the memory systems by which community is defined and cultural knowledge transmitted. These memory systems share with history the process of shaping, defining, and perpetuating community cultural memory.”^v

It is through oral history that the windows to the past events and peculiar incidents have been recorded in memory and it is this that has helped people to retrace their origin, culture, traditional practices and teachings. A. K. Thakur’s “Role of Myth in the Reconstruction of Technological Past of Northeast India” discusses at length of the role of myth and “the use of myth in the historical construction.”^{vi} It has also been pointed out that myth is a “vital source of history.”^{vii} In keeping with this view, there are various versions about the lineage of u Thlen that have been narrated through the oral tradition and have survived till date.

2. The Legend of U Thlen

According to one version, the narration of the living legend of u Thlen ran thus. That long ago, in one of the villages near Sohra, lived a very beautiful maiden named Ka Ngaid. As time passed on, she conceived and gave birth to a male child. However, she refused to disclose the name of the father. Because of this reason, she was ostracised from the society. The people in that village nicknamed the child as u Thlen since she lied (Thok) and concealed (Len), the truth. Thus as per social customs, the child was not named ceremonially. As a young boy, U Thlen was psychologically affected. He grew up to become rough, stubborn and unreasonable. He lived like a vagabond. He accumulated a lot of wealth through gambling. Since he earned by means of cheating, he broke the sacred law of the Khasis that is ‘Kamai ia ka hok’ or to earn righteousness. Society did not accept him. So u Thlen had no sense of belonging. But, he met ka Hynroh (Toad) who was an orphan and married her. Having no sense of responsibility, he neglected his wife and son which caused a sense of insecurity in the mind of Ka Hynroh.

Hynroh’s neighbour instigated her to leave u Thlen and kill her son for the son would probably become wicked like the father. Finding it difficult to commit such an act, she ran away, leaving her son to be butchered by her neighbour. When u Thlen returned home, he thought that his wife and son were probably at the neighbour’s place. Since he was struck with hunger, he ate his supper. While munching his supper perchance he saw a tiny finger by the side of the hearth. With great shock, he realised that he had eaten the corpse of his own son. U Thlen searched for his wife, for enquiry and vengeance, but it was all in vain. Because of having relished human flesh once, u Thlen hid in a cave near Rangjyrteh. After a while, u Thlen manifested himself as a huge snake. Just a little distance from the cave lived u Lawshidnoh. U Thlen fell in love with u Lawshidnoh’s sister and he coaxes the latter by referring to him as ‘um’ or brother-in-law.

As it was known, Rangjyrteh was popular in those days for marketing lump iron to Sylhet. But, strange things happened while people travelled to the market place especially when they moved in odd numbers- one, three, and five and so on, an individual was found missing. Later, the Khasis found that it was the huge snake living in the cave that caused all this mysterious missing of individuals. After a durbar, whereby none could give a concrete suggestion in the matter, U Lawshidnoh requested that he and his bosom friend, who is a blacksmith, would solve this problem. U Lawshidnoh threw a feast for U Thlen stating that it was a kind of honour to have such a good friend. U Lawshidnoh fed U Thlen with a nice piece of pork. Next, he asked U Thlen to close his eyes so as to feed him with a rare piece of meat. However, U Lawshidnoh’s friend who is the blacksmith was roasting a big lump of iron in the furnace instead of the so-called rare meat. When the lump of iron was dropped into the mouth of U Thlen, the latter struggled for life and passed away. Due to its gluttony, for a priced and rare meat, U Thlen lost its own life. News of U Thlen’s death spread from place to place.

A great feast was held with a warning that no man, woman or child should leave a single piece of meat or bone of U Thlen and it should not be taken home. All the Khasis including people of other races too were called forth to partake in the feast. It was declared that leftovers or even bones should be burned to ashes. The feast was meant only for a day. Unfortunately, an old woman secretly kept a small piece of meat for her son since he could not partake in the feast and she forgot about it. This little piece of flesh came to form again and it requested the old woman to take care of it and it would give her riches unknown to man. Out of fright that the people would be angry with her for disobeying the warning, she took care of U Thlen. In this fashion, U Thlen came into power as an evil spirit that lives on human blood only.

Another version of U Thlen’s lineage is that he may have belonged to a godly parentage. It was believed that his mother, Ka Kma Kharai was the evil and immoral daughter of U Mawlong Syiem.^{viii} U Mawlong Syiem was a god who presided over Mawsmi, a village to the south of Sohra. It was known that Ka Kma Kharai was a deity that presided over trenches and caves and she was known to be associated with dirty living. Most of the people shunned her company. Ka Kma Kharai had degenerated herself through wanton living and was well known as an evil fairy. She was cursed with an unwanted son and this angered her father to the point that she had to flee for her life. It is in this manner, Ka Kma Kharai came to live in the northern territory of Sohra in the gorges of this area. Since then she decided to tuck away her child in the cave near Pomdolo Falls.

To take revenge against the unfair treatment meted out to her, she decides to hide her son from human contact and feed him only with human flesh. This cave was en route to Rangjyrteh, a very popular place of marketing for the people of that time. When people travelled in uneven numbers of three, five and seven, the person who straddled behind was sucked whole by U Thlen. It was in this manner that U Thlen grew in strength. Since he left no trace of the person he had sucked whole, he earned his name by this manner of consuming humans.

The first man to have disappeared as the narration goes is Shilotia. A huge search party was formed so as to find this missing man around Pomdolo Falls in order to perform the last rites of his remains. But, unfortunately many more men went missing. This alarmed many of the marketers that they finally decided to go to the priests to ask God for this unnatural occurrence.

Therefore, God instructed the priests that they should seek the help of Suitnoh who is U Syiem Syrmoh. Suitnoh can manifest himself as ‘U Syiem Kyrzan,’ who was the chief of all the guardian spirits whose main duty was to restore good health and virtue in the world.^{ix} Sometimes he was seen by the Ri Hynniew Trep or the land of the seven huts as the patron god of villages or U Ryngkew- U- Basa.^x U Suitnoh was known to rest and haunt the ‘lawkyntang’ or the sacred grove of Laitryngew, which was

known as Ka Law Suitnoh. It was known that at that time, even the Dkhars or the Plains people from Surma had come and performed many religious rites since Suitnoh was famous as a patron. People offered prayers, pleading the god to help and protect them from the malignant spirit that was on its mission to destroy the human race. Suitnoh could not ignore the pleas of the people especially because he was a god that protected and restored health. So Suitnoh gave word that he would help the human race to end this fiend that was causing a lot of chaos in the lives of the people.

In order to put an end to U Thlen's evil ways, Suitnoh appeared in human form at the house of a priest or Lyngdoh, who was the priest of U Law Suitnoh. Suitnoh instructed the Lyngdoh to build a smithy. The Lyngdoh was also instructed to heat a huge iron ball and also make huge tongs to carry the iron ball. After all the things were set in place, U Suitnoh waited for the market day of Sohra (Iew Bah Sohra) and approached the cave of U Thlen. U Suitnoh greeted U Thlen in a manner as if U Thlen was a close bosom friend and referred to him as 'um' or brother-in-law. The Hynniew Trep (The Seven Huts) usually calls a person 'um' to denote closeness in the relation with a particular person. U Thlen also responded in a positive manner. Suitnoh called out to U Thlen if he would like to have anything to be bought from the market. U Thlen who was then sick of human flesh, responded that he would not mind a fresh piece of the famous Sohra pork. Suitnoh then took his leave and was glad that his plans had worked. Then he instructed that the iron ball should be heated to a very high degree. Then with the huge tongs, U Suitnoh carried it to the edge of U Thlen's cave. Calling out to U Thlen once again, Suitnoh announced that he had brought that rare and famous Sohra pork. U Thlen was overjoyed that someone would treat him with the rare pork. Since U Thlen had become lethargic due to the consumption of human flesh, he did not bother to stir from the cave. Trusting Suitnoh's word and feeling greedy, U Thlen opened his jaws. On Suitnoh's instruction, U Thlen opened his jaws a little more and at that moment, U Suitnoh shoved the hot iron ball into the jaws of U Thlen.

It was said that the iron ball had burnt all the insides of U Thlen that made him struggle for life and he started twisting and writhing in pain which caused the whole of Sohra to experience an earthquake. As the narration goes, it was said that U Thlen's last movements formed the famous gorges of Ka Riat Mawiew, in Sohra. Many people were thrown into a lot of chaos as the earthquake caused a lot of cracks and it was believed that for a while the sun was blotted out from the rising dust caused from the tumbling of the hills.

Then U Suitnoh ordered that they should beat their drums and announce the death of U Thlen and that a grand feast should be made of U Thlen's remains. The order was also made that not a single flesh or bone of U Thlen should remain lest it resurrects. But again another version states that U Suitnoh never gave the reason as to why there should not be any leftovers of U Thlen. The order was supposed to be obeyed without question. Thus everything that was not eatable was burned to cinders.

After the grand feast which was attended by the Ri Hynniew Trep and the Plains people, they returned to their respective villages and homes. The elders however, stayed to pay their obeisance to God and thanking Him for all that came to pass. The Pomdloi Falls was renamed Kshaid Dainthlen or Dainthlen Falls since it was the place where U Thlen was cut into pieces.

Then the story continues that an old lady kept a small piece of meat wrapped in a leaf for her son who could not attend the feast. Another version states that she kept the piece of meat for her niece. But the part that she forgot about the piece of meat to the point that the piece of meat was resurrected into an evil little snake remains the same. The old lady was promised riches beyond her imagination if she took care of U Thlen. But if she tells that she had kept a piece of U Thlen by disobeying the order and that U Thlen had resurrected, it would bring the wrath of many people upon her. Therefore, she decided to keep U Thlen.

The old woman became rich in time. Then U Thlen reminded her that he had kept his promise and that it was her turn to feed him with a spotted head goat or 'lang-thoh-khlieh.' The old woman brought the goat as was ordered and to her shock U Thlen bellowed in anger that he wanted someone like her and not the goat. The old woman trembled in fear and questioned U Thlen that from where she would get humans since they would not come willingly. U Thlen in anger told her that if she could not provide him with humans then he would surely kill one by one of her family members.

Since the old woman was not able to provide U Thlen, the latter stood by his word and took the life of her grandson. To save her family, the old woman employed 'u nongshohnoh' or assassins who were paid to murder people. It was said that the assassins were cast into a kind of spell and to them, humans were nothing but butterflies. So killing a butterfly does not prick the conscience. It was said that the spell was cast by making the assassins drink the 'iad tang snem' which was specially collected from the sweat of U Thlen when he feeds on the victims.^{xi}

Since, it was a Khasi who had tried to put an end to U Thlen, so the latter refused any kind of human blood. U Thlen wanted to take vengeance on the Khasis. Therefore he would accept only Khasi blood. However, U Thlen remains powerless if he tried to kill or hurt the Syiem clan since U Suitnoh who belonged to the Syiem clan tried to put an end to the life of U Thlen. It is also said that U Thlen's greatest fear was an elephant. Therefore, the Khasis believed that wearing a small portion of the elephant's tusk would ward off all evil and protect the wearer from any kind of harm from U Thlen.

3. Rituals Related to U Thlen

U Thlen is a kind of devil or 'Ksuid kynsha'. It devours only healthy Khasi people and not anyone who is ailing or physically challenged. It is believed that the 'nongshohnohs' or assassins pierce the nostrils of the victim and cut their fingers and toes and then drain the blood of the latter into a golden plate or *ka pliang ksiar*. Then the keepers of U Thlen beat the '*singthlen kyndong shi kyndong*', so as to call forth the beast from hiding. They also sing and pray at the same time ('ka dwai ka kyrpad, ka rwai ka kynud'). U Thlen then reveals himself and passes through '*ka salu saw*,' a coarse red cloth which is a path for him to walk through to the golden plate. This ritual of singing, praying and beating the drum lasts till U Thlen has sucked up all the blood of the victim from the '*pliang ksiar*' or the golden plate.

U Thlen cannot tolerate any form of iron since it is the lump of iron that almost put an end to it. Therefore, whatever is being used in its feeding or killing its victims is either made of silver or gold. When a person is ailing from and grows sick and lean due to U

Thlen, it is said that he can be cured only if a Syiem or the ruler belonging to the Syiem clan takes a sword that is blunt and heats it in the fire and then burns a little bit of hair of the person who had been suffering.

Another belief is that the shadow of those who are murdered comes and reveals itself on the golden plate; they laugh and dance to the tune of the drum beat and as U Thlen licks their blood it seems to tickle them out of their wits. He swallows the shadow beginning from the toes to the forehead, slowly and gradually, but the head still seems to laugh out of pleasure till U Thlen devours it and sucks its life away. When a victim is killed and hit from behind the head and not from the face, it is believed that U Thlen would not lick the blood of such a victim. There is a specific way of killing. The killing is done in such a way as to imply sadistic pleasure. The toe nails are cut, a bit of hair is cut with silver scissors from the victim, then the ear is cut a bit and finally, the 'nongshohnoh' or assassin uses a long silver needle to prick and push through the nostrils of the victims in order to collect some blood in a *tyndong japung*, a kind of container. In this fashion most of the victims who are unlucky and do not have a strong aura (*ryngiew*) to ward off evil, are killed.

It is also said that the 'nongshohnohs' are provided with 'u khaw tyndep' or rice mixed with turmeric which has been cast with incantations and spells. When the assassins throw the 'khaw tyndep' on the intended victim, it is said that the victim loses all senses and is stupefied, and thus becomes an easy prey to the assassins. Sometimes, in order to appease U Thlen, and when the assassins fail to catch a victim, it is said that he would just knock at people's door and then return to inform the keepers that he had tried his hardest, but has failed.^{xii}

U Thlen has become a threat to pedestrians, to the point that whenever pedestrians moved in uneven numbers, one person would be found missing. Due to this reason, the Khasis believe that it is safer to travel in even numbers. It is also said that with the coming of the spring season, the assassins would lurk around to find their victim. It is also said that the time when the mushrooms and 'ja myrdoh' are ready to be harvested is also a time to be alert as the assassins are on the move to kill their next victim. This is the period when the assassins are very active and the young ones are warned not to move around alone in the dark.

4. Metamorphoses of U Thlen

It is again believed among the Khasis that U Thlen has various forms and that is the form of a snake (bseiñ), a fish (dohthli), and a cat (miaw) and sometimes even a (niang bahshah) lizard.^{xiii} These metamorphoses of U Thlen are a demonic feature. There is the absence of the divine in its transformations. Most societies believe in the tendency of transformation or metamorphoses. We cannot reason whether it exists or not since it is a shared belief. Though man is rational and scientific, yet he still has such beliefs that may be considered as an illusion or a superstition by another society. These metamorphoses of U Thlen usually takes place when he wants to 'pynkhemrain' or shame the keepers or in other words to inform the world of its existence. In order to 'pynkhemrain' or shame the keepers, U Thlen transforms itself either in the form of a snake, or a fish or a black cat. It usually appears on the roof tops of the keepers when the keepers have failed to feed it with human blood. Those who have witnessed such metamorphoses have narrated the incident and such stories were passed on to the other members in the society. The keepers of U Thlen are very careful in feeding U Thlen so that it does not reveal itself and shame the family that is keeping it. This idea of metamorphoses is associated with possessing supernatural powers. This mysteriousness woven around U Thlen and its supernatural powers which are devilish in nature cannot be explained. Therefore, the elders have warned the young ones not to ever keep a stray cat lest it is the manifestation of U Thlen.

Those who are the keepers of U Thlen become prosperous by feeding the Man- eating creature with human blood. If it is a demonic spirit without any bodily form, then it would be very difficult to fight against it. But, spiritual leaders have been able to do so. U Thlen therefore represents evil.

In *Lasubon*, the novelist Donbok T. Laloo has been able to fictionalise the story of U Thlen and how it came into existence. He is able to weave the plot in such a manner as to educate people on how U Thlen came into being again. U Thlen attaches itself to various forms of wealth. For example, it lives on in the traditional *paila* or corals and in *Ka Khor ka Khriam*, in other words, it lives in the traditional 'muka' which is woven of pure silk. So the *Khasis* never buy such materials from unknown personals as U Thlen may reside in it.

In order to destroy U Thlen, the keepers have to leave all their wealth behind including the attire that they possess. It is the *Syiem* or the King who buys new clothing for the keepers when they wish to repent and give up their worship of U Thlen. In this manner, they live a new life by working and toiling for their daily needs. Thus they would uphold the *Khasi* law of earning in an honest way and not be corrupted by cheating, lying, and killing or stealing. It is also said that the property of the keepers of U Thlen can be 'appropriated' only by the Syiems since U Thlen can never touch or enter a Syiem's household.^{xiv}

According to Vanlalruata Rengsi in his essay, "Thlen in Khasi Society," he points out that as "the office of Syiemship was created, apart from being alien to the original clan structure, it did not provide any real power or privilege as society, in so far as its laws were concerned was intrinsically tribal and thus egalitarian in nature." It is also noted here in the essay that power still remained with the clan heads, but the system remained so as "to exploit the people."^{xv} It was also theorised that the thlen-keeper "had to relinquish all his belongings" to the Syiem Clan since they were the only ones "immune to the Thlen." This system that prevailed used the legend of U Thlen as a means to ensure that those who have gathered a lot of wealth and become powerful should be checked and put under control. They were considered as elements of threat to the existing system.^{xvi}

In contrast to this system of the Khasis, Rengsi writes that the Mizos had another system which would ensure the equal distribution of wealth through the "Feasts of Merit" which "served as useful channels or means by which surplus (produced or acquired) within the society may be dissipated in a very useful and functional way while at the same time keep up the competitive spirit between individuals."^{xvii} So to gain respect in the Mizo society one should not hoard the wealth but have a "judicious distribution"^{xviii} Since the Khasi society did not have such a system, so people lived in suspicion of each other. The Khasi society "became one of hidden and disguised antagonistic, suspicions, and hostile elements with the Syiem ruling in tyranny with a

decadent group of clanheads. There was total apathy in surplus production as condemnation, rather than reward, awaited the person who showed up sign of having wealth- a whole society waiting to point an accusing finger and stone him.”^{xix}

In L. Chhange’s “Situating the Snake in Traditional Mizo Beliefs,” we find that the story of the snake in the Mizo context is not the same as that of the Khasis’. The snake in the Mizo society is “both feared and revered, and the tales and legends acknowledges its negative and positive qualities” which ultimately took a “hold in the traditional belief system of the Mizo.”^{xx} But in the Khasi context, the snake was a kind of spirit that was evil in nature and it had the power to make a household that looks after it to become prosperous.

5. Relevance of U Thlen in the Modern Society

The legend of U Thlen is relevant to the modern society. In today’s world, U Thlen has manifested itself in various forms. Many cases in our society points to the fact that evil lives in the heart of man. Evil is inherent in man. Because of this reason, Donbok T. Laloo has stated in his novel that the more the world progresses, the number of believers in U Thlen have increased incredibly.^{xxi} Whoever earns in an unfair manner and believes that it does not affect the society is no less than a believer in U Thlen. Such kind of people would not feel guilty when they start corrupting and destroying the lives of the innocent. They are not afraid to ravish any woman or child. They do not have any sense of fear when they lie, or when they hate or feel jealous. These negatives instincts have taken control over their lives to the point that many of the innocent have been helpless and they laud such people with power instead, for fear of being targeted. Unless every individual understands the underlying meaning of U Thlen, the society at large would be affected and it may start regressing to being primitive in its perspective.

U Thlen can also be interpreted as a way in which people in the olden days would want a society whereby everyone is economically equal in their earnings and there would not be a disparity regarding wealth in the society. However, this point of view can become controversial since it was recorded by P. R.T. Gurdon about a witness of U Thlen:

“A Mohammedan servant, not long ago in Shillong, fell a victim to the charms of a Khasi girl, and went to live with her. He told the following story to one of his fellow-servants, which may be set down here to show that the Thlen superstition is by no means dying out. In the course of his married life he came to know that the mother of his Khasi wife kept in the house what he called a *bhut* (devil). He asked his wife many, many times to allow him to see the *bhut*, but she was obdurate; however, after a long time, and after extracting many promises from him not to tell, she confided to him the secret, and took him to the corner of the house, and showed him a little box in which was coiled a tiny snake, like the hair spring of a watch. She passed her hands over it, and it grew in size, till at last it became a huge cobra, with hood erected. The husband, terrified, begged his wife to lay the spirit. She passed her hands down its body, and it gradually shrank within its box.”^{xxii}

Through this recorded narration, it is not easy to dismiss U Thlen as a superstitious belief of the Khasis. In fact, what is a belief to one race is a superstition to another. U Thlen has manifested itself in Khasi society at the present time. We see that some of the people are no longer men of character. They have become selfish and greedy and they would go to any lengths so as to satisfy their greed. The Khasis still believe that U Thlen exists. However, it may be mentioned here that most of the Khasi Christians dismiss this belief as a superstition.

6. Recent Events in the Twenty First Century

Reflecting on the recent past, it is found that many people still believe in the existence of U Thlen and the Nongshohnoh. In an article, “The Cult of Nongshohnoh” written in *The Shillong Times*, dated 28 August, 2013 by Barnes Mawrie, where he gave an account of the “horrific event at Smit where three persons were hacked to death by the villagers” which has:

“... drawn a lot of media attention. These are unfortunate occurrences which also tarnish the society’s image. However, one cannot deny that such evils are part of the human reality... The presence of evil is undeniable. Where there is God the devil also exists and where there is goodness, evil co-exists.”^{xxiii}

B. Mawrie narrates how this “cult of nongshohnoh” among the Khasis is not only a “myth but a reality” and the result of “intercultural influence.” He narrated in his article that the influence came from Hinduism especially because when the Jaintia Kings became Hindus, they offered human sacrifice to the Goddess Kali. However, the British occupation of the Jaintia Kingdom in 1835 brought an end to the practice of human sacrifice. B. Mawrie has also made a point that with the advent of the Christianity the nongshohnoh cult has also diminished considerably. However, the recent incidents have raised many questions as to whether Christianity has really been able to break through this belief and fear of U Thlen and u nongshohnoh.

Rev. Lyndem Syiem voices his concerns in his article, “Dealing with Obstinate Worldviews.” He feels that it is difficult to bring about awareness in villages and schools. It is also difficult to make a young adult “unlearn” what has been taught at the nuclear family about u Thlen and nongshohnohs. It is shocking that “urban Khasis are not very different from rural Khasis” since they still factor in Thlen rumours in their children’s marriage considerations.^{xxiv} This age old belief in U Thlen would be difficult to wipe out from the minds of the Khasi people as “...the Thlen is firmly embedded in our collective consciousness... religious intervention is often regarded as ineffective or at best mismatched.”^{xxv} This is a social issue for the Khasis will still continue believing in U Thlen even though they may be converted. This Khasi worldview cannot be wiped out, even if it is told that they need not fear U Thlen or it is just a superstition.

It is with this view that the Reverend states:

“Mission anthropologists concede that it is extremely difficult to wean people away from deeply rooted components of their traditional worldview, especially demonic spirits which they fear, like u Thlen... No matter how much mass awareness on the non-existence or non-potency of the Thlen, people will stubbornly cling to the familiar fear they have held for centuries.”^{xxvi}

Paul Heibert had spoken at length after his “extensive anthropological research” and “field experience” that “a blanket rejection of demonic activity and witchcraft on the ground that they are empirically non-verifiable will not work.”^{xxvii} The collective

consciousness cannot be changed just by telling them of the non-existence of their demon or U Thlen. If the world views of the Thlen accusers change, then probably this Thlen hunting which amounts to witch hunting would stop.

Many incidents in the recent past have brought about a lot of controversy on U Thlen. A shocking incident took place on 5th March 1999, in Mawlai Nongkwar where the mob incinerated Soben Kurbah and Phrosimai Ryntathiang. Such incidents were repeated on 17 June, 2007 in Mawbsein village, on 27th of April 2011 in Mawlai and on the 7th of October 2011 in Sohra.^{xxxviii} But the law seems not to have a say over the collective consciousness of the people. Again on 23rd April, 2013 “a four thousand strong mob” hailing from various villages within Sawrymper area near Mawsynram, East Khasi Hills attacked and set fire to a “two storied building of a prominent businessman.”^{xxxix} Another incident happened at Mawting Sohryngkham, East Khasi Hills District on 30th July. Halorsing Kharumnuid, a man of 46 years of age suffered a brutal attack from an angry mob but was “left off with warnings.”^{xxxx} An FIR was filed and the police arrested “7 out of 8 accused including a woman.”^{xxxxi} The incident that has shaken the city is when three men were hacked to death in Smit in the month of August. Can the law ever prevent this collective consciousness in the belief of U Thlen? To solve this problem of nongshohnoh and menshohnoh would be difficult since it is embedded in the collective consciousness of the people.

In another article, “Superstition in the 21st Century Meghalaya,” the reporter to *The Shillong Times* wrote:

“It has often been found that petty jealousies are at the root of most destructive human emotions. We wonder at such times whether education has succeeded even to a small extent to make us more rational human beings or whether all learning has failed to touch the cognitive domain of the human mind.”^{xxxii}

Many incidents in the year 2013 has made *The Shillong Times* reporter call it “a year of superstitions in Meghalaya.”^{xxxiii} These various cases of people alleging that some sections of the people practice something which is evil are still believed by most Khasis of today. This collective consciousness cannot be wiped out and such atrocious acts continue.

7. Conclusion

Since there are many narrations and versions that one gets about the existence of U Thlen, hence how does a society that has solely survived through the spoken word not believe in the stories of U Thlen? Does it really exist? Is it a myth or a reality? This question can only be answered by those who have really been affected by U Thlen. But there is no solid proof as we can only hear and not see.

Most of the oral societies relied on the oral as the spoken word which cannot be challenged. Every narrated story of the Khasis starts with the phrase, “Mynhyndai kulong kumah, mynba u maw u dieng, u briew u mrad...kawei ka ktien ki dang iakren.” In translation, it means in the golden ancient age, when stone and trees, and man and beast spoke the same language. This goes to show that stone, trees, man and beast were equal in the eyes of the Creator. There was no distinction among the creations.

Oral knowledge depends on the memory of the teller. Much of what is to be narrated lies solely on the human memory. But this collective memory that an oral society carries on for generations will speak of the main points of a story whether it is a myth or even a legend. In this respect though the myth of U Thlen may be regarded by some as a superstitious belief, yet it is very much a belief in the Khasi society and within its cultural context. When such beliefs resulted in mob fury and in loss of life and property, it is then that the mythical beliefs get transformed into a reality and its consequences far reaching, so much so that those who have gathered a lot of wealth would always be ostracised from the society and become victims of the ‘thlen stigma.’^{xxxiv}

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