



**TRIBAL
LITERATURE
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

EDITED BY
BADAPLIN WAR
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
2009

Rs 150/-

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INDIA - Published by Prof. Badaplin War.**

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Printed at SMS Hi-Tech Impression, G.S. Road, Shillong. (M) 9863117684

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Writers' Perception of 'U Thlen' in Khasi Literature

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The prevalent belief in the pervading presence and evil power of the demon 'u thlen' is deeply rooted among the Khasi regardless of their religious affiliations. It is, therefore, natural that this belief finds expression in many literary works in Khasi Literature. Many authors have written on the subject of this demon in their poems, essays and works of fiction. Some of them have given a detailed account of the evil intent of this demon against God's creation and his sole aim to grievously harm human beings with his gruesome appetite for human sacrifice. These accounts tell us that the existence of u thlen appears as early as the period of human habitation on earth.

Prominent Khasi writers have recounted the traditional narrative of how the earth was created and what the role of man was in the first act of creation. These accounts tell how God the Creator through Ka Hukum (the Law or Law-giver) in heaven first created Ka Ramew (the Earth's surface). Ka Hukum is usually taken as one of the names/attributes of God, the others being U Blei (God), Trai (Lord), Nongbuh Nongthaw (Creator) beside others. Ka Ramew and her husband U Ryngkew (Dry Land) gave birth to the Sun, the Moon, Wind, Water and Fire. Traditional account further tells that these siblings work together in harmony to create the right conditions for living things. Ka Ramew became pregnant once again and gave birth to plants and animals, causing the earth to teem with diverse creatures, beautiful plants and magnificent trees of all varieties. At that time Ki Khathynriew Trep (the Sixteen Huts or Groups) were already created and were

residing in heaven. When creatures that roamed the earth multiplied greatly, there was a lot of chaos, confusion and disharmony among them. Thus, Ka Ramew entreated God the Creator to send a wise and capable ruler to rule over the creatures of the earth. That was when Ka Dorbar Blei Ba Nyngkong (the First Divine Assembly) was convened and the decision was taken to send U Hynñiew Trep (the Seven Huts or Groups) to come down to earth and to rule over it. Every day, U Hynñiew Trep came down and tilled the earth during the day and then ascended back to heaven before nightfall through Ka Jingkieng Ksiar (the Golden Ladder) at Sohpetbneng Peak. For a while there was peace and prosperity over the whole earth. Ka Hukum continued to guide and to instruct U Hynñiew Trep on ways and means to maintain peace and harmony among earth's creatures. When the species multiplied to an even greater number, Ka Hukum saw the necessity to allocate gifts and talents, strength and power to all creatures and so another Divine Assembly was convened. U Hynñiew Trep were toiling steadfastly, living righteously on earth and ascending to heaven every night when suddenly an evil and perverse demon who roamed the earth emerged, full of hatred and envy against all of God's creatures and particularly against man. Because of this, man and all other creatures entreated Ka Hukum to convene another Divine Assembly to distribute talents, power and strength to them so that they could protect themselves against the wiles and destructive acts of the demon. In the meeting, Ka Hukum asked a question to each one of them: "How will you live and what will be your means of livelihood?" Man, ruler over the earth, answered: "I will live to earn righteousness, according to the pledge given by you". To the consternation and horror of all present, u thlen's answer to Ka Hukum was: "My food will be human life and my goal will be to earn wealth". Ka Hukum set the deadline of seven days and seven nights to distribute gifts, talents and strength to all living beings. The first to receive these gifts were the animals because man waited for the seven days and seven nights to be over before approaching Ka Hukum for his share. This is considered the reason why animals have more physical strength than man since strength had already been allocated to animals and what remained was a little of physical strength and Ka Buit (intelligence/

reasoning power/ability to think rationally) for man. Before this meeting of the Divine Assembly, man and beast could communicate through a common language but because man kept his word to earn righteousness, Ka Hukum took away language from animals and it thus became the sole property of human beings.

The blood-thirsty objective of u thlen 'to live off human life and to earn wealth' influenced all the other creatures on earth. U thlen then set to work and became the force behind the strife, enmity and hatred between the inhabitants of the earth and he also caused widespread poverty and hardship for man. More importantly, the demon was able to entice human beings to stray away from their Creator.

U thlen first took residence in a deep hole beside the waterfall near Rangjyrteh village. This place has become a very famous tourist spot in Khasi Hills because it is believed to be the exact spot where the final physical battle between u thlen and U Hynñiew Trep was fought. This big village used to be a trading centre for many adjoining villages of the region. It was said that the demon inflicted untold suffering and even death to people walking by that place. It was also said that travellers walking in odd numbers risked losing one of them to u thlen. If people chanced to walk in odd number such as three, five, seven etc. the demon by his magic power would simply make one of them disappear. But when they walked in even numbers, the demon's magical power could not work and they would be safe. The people were in anguish for they could not understand how a person could vanish into thin air every time passers-by walked on the path in odd numbers. U Hynñiew Trep cried out to God the Creator to enlighten them on this matter and to help them find ways and means to overcome this danger. God in his righteousness saw the evil intention of u thlen to erase mankind from the face of the earth and knew that if the demon was not eliminated, man could face the danger of becoming extinct. God then directed a righteous man U Syiem Syrmoh (King Syrmoh) to remove the plight of the people. After making a thorough investigation into the matter, Syiem Syrmoh found that u thlen was the cause behind the suffering and death of many people. He went to the place where the demon resided and befriended him until he completely won his

trust. Every market day, Syiem Syrmoh would buy “luscious chunk of fattened pork, a delectable variant of human flesh”¹ and fed it into the gaping mouth of the serpent-shaped demon. One day, King Syrmoh heated a huge narliang (an iron rod) in a nearby furnace until it became red-hot. Holding the hot iron rod with tongs, Syrmoh greeted u thlen as usual and then said, “Ang Um, ang! Kane ka kshong nga wan thied ia phi na iew”² (Open your mouth, Um! I’ve brought you this piece of fatty pork from the market)³. The demon opened his mouth and Syrmoh thrust the red-hot iron rod down his throat. U thlen thrashed himself on the ground in agony as the hot iron seared and burnt his insides and after a burst of horrible death throes, he finally died. It was said that the head of this demon was in village Rangjyrteh while his tail was stuck inside the Mawiew cliff near Sohra. Syiem Syrmoh sent word of the demon’s death to all people and there was widespread rejoicing at the news. Immediately a get-together was held where everyone, Khasis and non-Khasis alike, were asked to feast on the flesh of u thlen. Syrmoh had specifically instructed the people that every bit of the demon’s flesh was to be consumed and that there should be no left-over, otherwise the demon would come back to life. The carcass was taken out of the river and cut into pieces. The people then cooked its meat and ate it. The non-Khasis finished their portions completely and the Khasis also cleaned up their plates of thlen meat. After the others had left, the Khasis as the rightful owners of the land remained behind and sculpted cleavers, chopping boards and sieves out of stone to mark the memorable event. These stone objects are still seen in Daiñthlen. Once more peace and prosperity covered the land.

Unfortunately, an old lady kept a small morsel of thlen meat on the wooden platform above the open hearth for her small grandson and then strangely forgot all about it until the day u thlen came back to life and demanded human sacrifice from her. If she would acquiesce to his demand, he said, he would spare her life and prosper her greatly in wealth but if not, he would curse her and she would be reduced to

¹ Esther Syiem p. 49

² P. G. Gatphoh p. 3

³ ‘Um’ is a short form of ‘Kynum’ which means brother in law. According to Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (p. 72) it is used here as an endearing term.

abject poverty throughout her life. The woman bowed to his demand and became the first thlen keeper. It is said that u thlen could change his physical form to a serpent, a fish or a cat and that he would publicly exhibit himself on the rooftop to disgrace his keepers if they fail to appease him with human sacrifice. If they continue to fail to feed him, he would turn on the keeper’s family and feed on them. The old woman realised that she would not be able to meet the demon’s demands on her own, therefore she sought the help of an accomplice to find victims for u thlen. This hired killer is known as u nongshohnoh, literally the beater⁴ or the hitter⁵. It is the job of u nongshohnoh to extract blood from the victim’s nostrils and keep it in a bamboo tube. Before setting out on his gruesome task, the killer is given ‘ka ‘iad tang snem’, a special liquor which has been kept for a year and on which was poured drops of the demon’s sweat. After drinking this liquor, the killer would feel no compunction to kill mercilessly young or old, male or female because people would appear to him like butterflies. Beside u nongshohnoh, there is also ka nongkaphthlen or cutter for u thlen⁶ who snips off pieces of hair or clothes from victims. Both u nongshohnoh and ka nongkaphthlen cannot use iron tools in their tasks as this would not be acceptable to the demon for he was once defeated by Syrmoh’s use of this metal. Thus, silver scissors or lancets would be used by the hired killers on victims. Long after the blood or the pieces of hair/clothes were collected, they would be offered as a sacrifice to the demon in his lair. The rituals of feeding u thlen would be conducted in a special room kept exclusively for his use and where only his keepers are allowed to enter at a certain time, usually midnight, when the whole world would be asleep. Costly clothes and gold ornaments would be spread before him and the victim’s blood, hair or cloth would be placed on a brass plate and the ritual would begin with the beating of a small drum. If the demon found the sacrifice acceptable, he would crawl out of his hiding place. To the accompaniment of the eerie drum beat, the miniature shape of the victim would appear and would start dancing and laughing on the plate and the demon would start swallowing him

⁴ P. R. T. Gurdon p. 99

⁵ Lyndan Syiem p. 3

⁶ Ibid p.3

or her, feet first. As he continued to swallow, the victim in his or her own residence would slowly grow weaker and weaker and when the demon had swallowed it completely, that person would die. According to tradition, the victim could be set free from the demon's clutches only when he or she went to traditional healers, ki syiem (members of the Syiem clan). These have the authority to do so because U Syiem Syrmoh had defeated the demon in the past. That is why the hired killers of the thlen keepers can not harm members of the Syiem clan. The healer would then singe the victim's hair or clothes with a red-hot iron, the same material used by U Syiem Syrmoh to kill the demon and thus effectively stop the keepers from conjuring up the victim for the demon. Should that happen, u thlen would turn on the keeper or his/her family member.

The oral narrative on u thlen has been documented by eminent authors such as D. T. Laloo, R. S. Lyngdoh, P. R. T. Gurdon, P. G. Gathphoh, K. S. Nongkynrih, among others. Though minor variations do exist here and there, their account regarding the demon more or less runs along the same line. Creative writers such as Esther Syiem (poetry), D. T. Laloo (novel), Paul Lyngdoh (short story), D. S. Khongdup (fiction) have made this the main focus of their work. Below is a brief analysis of the work on fiction of three of the above authors, namely that of D. T. Laloo, D. S. Khongdup and Paul Lyngdoh.

D. T. Laloo gives u thlen a prominent place in his novel *Lasubon*. The events in the story and the suffering of the main characters are woven around the demon. The story begins with a detailed narration of the change that took place in a house with the red roof where the family that resided in it suddenly fell sick with a swelling disease and then one after another in the family died within a year until finally only an old woman was left. This combined with the strange and eerie sounds that echoed from the house in the middle of the night points to the presence of u thlen in it. People in the locality suspected the old woman to be a thlen-keeper and shunned her house and company completely. She, however, was in no way perturbed by her social isolation. The writer then gives an account of the rituals the old woman performed in a secluded room as part of her offer of human sacrifice to the demon.

It was a frightening scene and the old woman herself knew that she was in mortal danger of being killed if the demon found her offering unacceptable to him. Bowing low before him, she first offered prayers in total submission and entreated him not to harm her but to accept her offering. After offering hair and threads from a cloth that were snipped off of her victim and after he had accepted her offering and retired to his lair, she then gathered all the tools used in the ritual until such time when they would be needed again. Later on, the old woman died and her entire property including u thlen was inherited by a distant relative, Lasubon's mother.

The scene then shifts to a classroom where a school teacher was teaching a lesson on u thlen. Some students were convinced that the demon really existed while others took the whole thing as mere superstition. Two of them would later be involved in a deadly encounter with the demon. One of them lost his sister to her nongshohnoh husband hired by Lasubon's mother and the other fell in love and married Lasubon. Lasubon, the central character of the novel, was ignorant of the fact that her mother was a thlen-keeper although she always experienced a sense of unease and fear in the house. The young woman did not know that u thlen was the reason why all their relatives kept away from them. Lasubon and Rymphang met while they were in school but lost touch with each other for almost ten years because he studied and worked outside Shillong during that time. After his return, the two met again and fell in love with each other. The relationship between the couple blossomed and deepened and they swore they would never part from each other. The plot became complicated at this point as Prem, the hired killer, wanted Lasubon for himself. He threatened her mother that unless Lasubon was given to him in marriage, he would let everyone including Rymphang, know the true state of affairs in her house. Around this time, Lasubon told Rymphang that she had a strange and horrible dream about a snake licking the soles of her feet, making them fiery hot and painful. She woke up and screamed at the excruciating pain she actually felt in her feet. Her mother then came in and offered some prayers, after which the pain disappeared. This was in keeping with the traditional belief that when the keeper fails to satisfy the demon with human sacrifice, he would

turn on the keeper's own family members. Rymphang who had already suspected that Lasubon's mother was a thlen keeper became extremely worried because he knew that the demon had started attacking his beloved. He immediately went to search for his old school teacher in Laitlyngkot to seek his advice on what he should do. Making every effort to free his beloved Lasubon from the deadly clutches of the demon, he bought her new clothes so that she could leave her mother's house without taking anything from there. After completing all necessary rituals to free her from the power of the demon, Rymphang hurried back to Shillong. Meanwhile Lasubon's mother tried to get rid of Prem by giving him poison. He survived her murderous attempt and in vengeance came and poured petrol around her house before he went inside. He pushed Lasubon inside her room and locked it from outside. He then entered the kitchen and found her mother and charged at her. She threw a smouldering firewood at him but missed and the piece of wood fell on the petrol already sprinkled by Prem. That set off a roaring fire which started to engulf the whole house. Prem forced poison down the woman's throat while she stabbed him with a knife. Lasubon's heart-rending wails from inside her locked room were heard by people coming to help her but the fire forced them back. Ultimately, all three perished in the fire. Rymphang arrived too late to do anything but watch the whole scene in horror.

D. S. Khongdup, a prominent fiction writer and Sahitya Akademi award winner also highlighted the evil power of the demon on the lives of ordinary people in his book *U Don Putit bad U Khlieh ka Khnap Masi*. However, Khongdup's perception of u thlen was quite different from that of Laloo's. Although both writers portray the demon as an evil spirit and one that wields demonic influence on its keepers, Khongdup projects man as the focal point of the relationship. Man always has a choice to worship and appease the demon or he may choose to worship God the Creator. In fact, it was Sngon's unsatiable appetite for wisdom and power that led him to abandon his Creator. The story started with a discussion on what constitutes an 'akhia' (a person revered for his wisdom) in the Khasi world. In trying to understand what the word really entails, the people taking part in the conversation remembered a person who was known throughout the

region as one who had gathered knowledge and wisdom on life and all that it stands for. That person was Sngon. The man was lately known to have founded a cult which professed to abide by principles generally abhorred by most Khasis. He acquired a large property in Laitdiengsong where he wielded enormous influence and power over his followers. Many young men and women were led by his disciples to worship him, not directly u thlen. When Don Putit the protagonist of the novel learned of the way young women, married and single, were enticed and at times abducted by the magic power of Sngon, a duel between the two took place. The thlen-keeping Sngon practised all kinds of perverse acts and was a terror to the people of the Laitdiengsong region. Within his commune, anyone who dared to question his decisions and actions, including his Meirilung (chief concubine) would be given dire punishment; the ultimate being 'Ka it jong ka myngkoi u Jom' (the mirror of Jom's nether region). That was the place where the demon was kept and where many perished for daring to displease Sngon. It was only at the end of the story that u thlen manifested his presence, when instead of devouring the brave young girl, Sharati, he turned on his keeper and killed him.

Both the above writers depict the traditional account that u thlen would turn on his keepers whenever thwarted or displeased during the feeding ritual. In Laloo's novel, the innocent Lasubon tragically perished because her mother could not offer human sacrifice to the demon and had to depend on her hired nongshohnoh to find victims. In Khongdup's fiction, Sharati escaped with her life because she took an iron knife with her when she was taken to the room where the demon was kept. This disturbed him very greatly for he was once killed by the red-hot iron of Syiem Syrmoh. Thus instead of slithering his way to the place where she stood, he attacked Sngon, crushed him to death and devoured him.

There is, however, another side to the thlen story and this is the irrational fear of u thlen which could and did sometime turn into a phobia. There were many actual cases where society witnessed an outbreak of rioting and mayhem because of this fear. Paul Lyngdoh's short story "U Thlen" did not portray in any way the actual presence of u thlen. In fact his

story depicts the danger of superstition that may bring in its wake tragedy and suffering to those wrongly accused of being thlen keepers. Lyngdoh bases this story on actual incidents where a village or locality caused a riot and attacked a family unfortunate enough to be suspected of keeping the demon. In this story, a well-to-do widow and her young daughter Wanda fell into such a plight when the little girl's friend slipped and fell down on the bathroom floor. She suffered a nose bleed and bruised forehead and her parents immediately suspected the widow of taking blood off the little girl Milsi to sacrifice to u thlen. Within a short time, the whole village gathered outside the widow's house, threatening her. The mob stoned her house, burnt her vehicle and destroyed the furniture inside her house. Some even snatched away boxes in the hope that they might contain money or gold. Had the village headman not arrived in time, both mother and daughter would have been killed. He did, however, directed them to leave the village for a while till the situation had calmed down. The woman had to agree but the shock and the trauma proved too much for her. She fell seriously ill and passed away, leaving her young daughter an orphan. Paul Lyngdoh, a young intellectual and social activist, is seen fearlessly criticizing such beliefs, seeing them as a cause for rioting which usually leads to tragic consequences.

In their fiction, both D. T. Laloo and D. S. Khongdup portray u thlen as an actual evil spirit which creates suffering and death to people because of his oath 'to live off human life and to earn wealth'. Paul Lyngdoh, on the other hand, projects this belief as one of superstition but one that leads to witch-hunt, mayhem and rioting. More importantly, whether u thlen is perceived by authors as a living existing entity or as mere superstition, the demon is always associated with danger, evil, violence, destruction and death. There is no doubt at all that u thlen has captured the imagination and the creative thinking of many writers in Khasi literature.

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