

On Wealth and Jealousy among the Khasis Thlen, Demonization and the Other

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Abstract

The Khasis are an ethnic community in Northeast India numbering about 1.2 million. The majority of them are Christian converts who belong to two main denominations, the Presbyterians and the Catholics. The Thlen tradition of the Khasis represents belief in a demonic spirit who is satiated with human blood and in return gives wealth and good fortune to his keepers. Narrated as a folktale, this traditional practice assumes significance when beliefs embedded in the narrative are enacted in the social discourse of the Khasis. This article examines belief performance; it explores how the Thlen belief and narrative is used to create social division and justify ostracism, murder, othering and demonization.

Keywords

Khasi, Thlen, belief, narrative, other, demonization, Christianity, India

Introduction

“...the single, emotive slogan *Nongshohnoh*, is enough to stir a witch-hunt.”

Patricia Mukhim (*The Shillong Times*, 5 March 1999)

Embedded within the consciousness of the Khasi ethnic community of Northeast India is the belief in Thlen, who is a supernatural entity so terrible that an entire construct of protective defenses against him has evolved – as for example the practice of carrying a handful of rice grains from home or eating a bit of earth as a remedy against the hypnotic spell cast by the agents of the Thlen, the *Nongshohnoh*. In Khasi belief Thlen is a super-natural creature nurtured by persons who sacrifice human beings to him in exchange for wealth and good fortune. According to Khasi folklorist D.T. Laloo, Thlen is an evil spirit who does not keep his word (Laloo 1987: 24). H. Elias, a

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Catholic priest of the order of the Salesians of Don Bosco and author of the *Ki Khanatang U Barim* ("Sacred Stories of the Past"), an important collection of Khasi sacred stories, depicted Thlen as a minister of God who had fallen, thereby equating Thlen with a fallen angel (Elias 1937: 114). Sylvanus Lamare points out that Thlen is thought to be the "source of evil" in the Khasi society (Lamare 2009: 139). Thlen is a demonic creature as well as a house-hold deity,¹ and people who nurture him never admit or acknowledge that they keep him. Further, Thlen is the popular usurper, the creature who subverts the fundamental precepts laid down by Khasi traditional religion, in which earning righteousness is the foremost duty of human beings.

Nowadays, the Thlen belief is expressed in society through mob violence and lynching, ostracism and other injustices carried out against those members of the community who are suspected of keeping the Thlen. Paolo Israel argues in the context of Mozambique that supernatural crises occur as a result of the post-colonial transition to a neo-liberal global network (2009: 3). Perhaps it is possible then to attribute the spate of occult-related violence among the Khasis to change and transition from colonialism to widespread social western influence. Following this line of thought, this article tries to make sense of the manifold instances of violence and mob lynching within the contemporary context of the Khasi society.

The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group living mainly in the state of Meghalaya in Northeast India. According to the Census of India (Census of India 2001a), they number around 1.1 million. The main language spoken is Khasi-Khmer, a branch of the Austroasiatic language family. One of the earliest ethnographies of the Khasi people describes the matrilineal organization of the Khasi society. Major Philip Richard Thorndagh Gurdon (1863–1942), a colonial officer, observes that "many of the clans trace their descent from ancestresses or *kiaw* (grandmothers) who are styled *ki Iawbei Tynrai*, lit. grandmothers of the root (i.e. the root of the tree of the clan)" (Gurdon 1907: 38).

Khasi society and religion is clan and community oriented. In terms of religion, nowadays the majority of the Khasi population is Christian, with the population divided among Presbyterians and Catholics and several small groups like the Church of God, the Baptists, and the Seventh Day Adventists (Census of India 2001b). A minority of Khasis follow the indigenous religion known as Niam Tynrai ("original religion"). The common language spoken is the Sohra dialect of Khasi, which is prevalent in the East Khasi Hills

¹ Among the Khasis clan deities are venerated as protectors and guardians of a given household. Keeping of such deities is also common among the neighbouring Karbi community and is not unique to the Khasis alone.

District, where Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, is located. Christianity, westernization, and urbanization have had a huge impact on the social organization of the Khasis. The current capital city of Shillong used to be the administrative headquarters of Assam, which in the colonial period comprised the geographical area of present day Northeast India in its entirety. In the course of the colonization of the Indian subcontinent, the westernization of the Khasis began with the arrival of the British and the widespread activities of Christian missionaries. Nowadays, the capital city Shillong is well known in Northeast India as an important education hub, attracting numerous people from surrounding states for higher education.

Thlen in Khasi literature

In 1841–2 in the village of Sohra the Welsh Calvinist missionaries Thomas Jones (1810–1849) and John Roberts (1842–1908) devised a script for the Khasi language, which until then was transmitted only orally. The earliest works to be translated into Khasi were Christian texts, as the Christian Catechism (*Kot Tikir*, 1841), the Lord's Prayer (*Ka Jingduwai*, 1842) and portions of the New Testament (*Ka Testament Bathymmai*, 1843). At the time, the British colonial rulers needed a trade corridor to connect Assam with Sylhet, a city in modern Bangladesh. Thus, they first established their headquarters at the village Sohra, which was called the Cherra Station or Cherrapunjee (Singh 1979: 43). This was also the location of the first schools, health facilities and missionary activities.

This is the reason why the standard language spoken today in Shillong is the Sohra dialect of Khasi. The Thlen narrative enacts its events in the locale of Sohra and its neighbouring villages. P. R. T. Gurdon's Khasi ethnography records one of its earliest written variants (Gurdon 1907: 54, 82). In this early printed version, Gurdon describes in some detail the Khasi belief in propitiating Thlen. He quotes the description given in a 1904 article by him in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*:

The following account, the substance of which appeared in the *Assam Gazette*, in August, 1882, but to which considerable additions have been made, will illustrate this interesting superstition: "The tradition is that there was once in a cave near Cherrapunji, [25] a gigantic snake, or thlen, who committed great havoc among men and animals."

For Gurdon, the "Thlen superstition" was "by no means dying out" at the time that this ethnography was written (Gurdon 1907: 54). The most common manifestation of Thlen is a serpent, but it is misleading to equate this entity with a snake. According to the Khasi folklorist D.T. Laloo, there is only a

single Thlen, but because he is a magical creature, he can be present in many households at the same time (Laloo 1987: 45).

Another notable early version of the Thlen narrative appeared in K.U. Rafy's *Folk-tales of the Khasis* (1920); she titles it "U Thlen, The Snake Vampire". Rafy refers to Thlen as "one of the most remorseless and cruel of all Khasi deities" (Rafy 1920: 58). This recounting of the narrative is significant in that an analogy is drawn between Thlen and the Western concept of the vampire that drinks human blood. Thlen is also referred to as a "deity" or a "god", a reference to which any Khasi would object. This version, however, chronicles the origin of Thlen and his mother and grandfather. According to it, Thlen is the grandson of the powerful deity U Mawlong Syiem, who is foremost of the gods at this locale.

Father Giulio Costa, a Spaniard who came to the Khasi Hills as a missionary, makes mention of this legend in his 1936 publication, entitled *Ka Riti Jong ka Ri Laiphew Syiem* ("Customs of the Thirty Kings"). He seems to interweave Christian theology into this narrative, which added a didactic element to the Thlen legend. After Rafy's account, the next influential printed version of this narrative appears in the collection of Khasi sacred stories, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*, first published in 1937. This work was penned by H. Elias, a Don Bosco priest affiliated to the educational institution run by his order. It was the first time that Thlen was presented as a "minister in the council of God" and as such likened to a "fallen angel" (Elias 1937: 113–138; Lamare 2009: 139). This analogy became important as it assigns a status to Thlen that is equivalent to Satan in the Bible. In Genesis 3.1–6 it is the serpent that tempts Eve, the first woman, thus leading to the fall of man. Later on in the Biblical tradition, the serpent was identified with Satan (Kelly 2006: 176).

In Khasi tradition, Thlen manifests himself as a snake. This close likeness with Satan helped to support the associations made between Satan and Thlen. In a casual conversation at the home of a healer, a woman belonging to the Christian faith told me that her three-year-old child was afflicted by Thlen.² The words that she used describing the state of her child were interchangeably "Satan" and "Thlen". The Church itself encourages this connection by attributing negative events to the influence of Thlen and Satan.³ In an interview, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Shillong

² Conversation with a Christian woman, 5 January 2014, ML.

³ Conversation with a Presbyterian Church Elder, Shillong, 13 January 2013, ML.

told me that this faith of the Khasis in dark forces (i.e., Thlen), when looked at in the global context, can be called Satan-worship.⁴

Examining the Thlen belief in Khasi literature, the most detailed and well-known description of the Thlen practice, its tradition and narrative are found in the novel *Ka Lasubon* (a rare yellow flower, and the name of a girl) written by Donbok T. Laloo, the first Khasi folklorist, in 1987. This novel in four parts centres of the life of three main characters – Rymphang, Lasubon and Prem. It is a love story with a tragic ending. What makes the reader take notice is the elaborate description of Thlen belief and rituals associated with its nurturing, which until then had existed only in the oral belief narratives and practices of the Khasis. In the section entitled “Shikyntein”, which is the equivalent of “Foreword” in the Khasi vernacular, Laloo states:

To end this foreword, I want to tell you the truth: that all of the creations, episodes and the plot are a product of the imagination. They do not have any similarities with reality or any resemblance with actual happenings, except the truth that has been revealed about Thlen, which I have included after extensive research. (Laloo 1987: ii, translated by ML)

This quote articulates an attempt at authenticating the Thlen belief among the Khasis. Khasi belief and fiction are interwoven into this novel, which goes on to elaborate, elucidate and clarify practices and customs about Thlen.⁵

Thlen⁶ was the son of Ngaid and he was dishonest in everything he did. He married a woman named Hynroh and had a child. Thlen was tricked into eating the cooked flesh of his own child, and this embittered him so much that in the Council of God he said that his sole purpose in life would be “to eat human beings and to earn wealth”. It was then that Thlen began to eat livestock at first and then to eat human beings. Thlen had angered a man named Sormoh who lived in the same forest as he [Thlen] did. Sormoh also knew that it was Thlen who was the oppressor of mankind. Therefore, Sormoh went to the ‘Lei Synshar, the highest God(dess) in the Khasi pantheon, to seek permission to destroy Thlen, because he had gone against God’s supreme command that man has come into this world to earn righteousness. Thus ‘Lei Synshar gave permission and told him the means by which to kill Thlen.

⁴ Interview with Wanbok Shylla, Pastor of Presbyterian Church, Nongthymmai, 3 September 2014, ML.

⁵ As I was denied permission to quote the narrative from Laloo’s book by his family, I have translated and adapted this variant from the Khasi language as clearly as I could. As an example for Khasi literature, this novel is part of the syllabus for the Master’s Degree at the Department of Khasi at the North-Eastern Hill University.

⁶ Thlen is the name of this supernatural entity and references to him in English language books and in Khasi books the term “U Thlen” used, “U” denoting the male gender in Khasi.

Sormoh thus earned the trust of Thlen, and one day at a community feast, he inveigled Thlen to swallow a red hot iron ball which led to Thlen's death. The people were to feast on the body of Thlen, and no piece of meat was to be left uneaten, but one old lady took some of the flesh for her son. It was a mysterious enchantment that made this woman forget to give her son this piece of flesh to eat. This is how Thlen came back to life, and in his second birth he became master of anybody who agreed to house him and feed him with blood belonging to the family of the keeper in exchange for wealth.

In distress, humankind sought again the help of 'Lei Synshar on how to kill Thlen a second time. At this point, out of nowhere, Thlen's mother, Ngaid, suddenly appeared and intervened on behalf on her son. The Council then dispersed and this is how Thlen propitiation and worship was spread among the Khasis (translated by ML, following Laloo 1987).

It is difficult to say how influential this book *Ka Lasubon* has been in propagating Thlen belief. I make a reference to the Thlen practices and beliefs and the narrative of their origin that are recorded in *Ka Lasubon* because in my interviews with various healers and ritual performers, the secret practices described in this book are whispered in hushed and fearful tones. There are not many copies of the novel, because the author was unable to pay for mass publication. These facts are mentioned in the Foreword, and Laloo urges the reader to pass the novel on to the next reader once he/she (the first reader) has finished reading it (Laloo 1987: i–ii).

This brief survey of the most significant literature on Thlen is necessary in order to trace the gradual shift in attitudes towards Thlen. Discourses surrounding the Thlen tradition, in both belief and Khasi fiction, express themselves in the social mechanisms of marginalisation, othering and ostracism.

Thlen – ontology, description and enactment

Is Thlen human, divine or a malevolent supernatural entity? Is he a concept ascribed by the Khasi community to a common set of beliefs practised by some people that seem unnatural and fearsome?⁷ In the literary version by D.T. Laloo, Thlen is portrayed as a human character with a penchant for cannibalism – which was in turn carried out by the entire human population when they were instructed to eat all of Thlen's flesh without leaving a morsel of it.

⁷ For example, a particular family may keep suspiciously late hours; different people come and go at odd hours at someone's home; claims of sightings of a huge fish or an enormous orange on the front porch of a particular house, etc.

The act of eating Thlen seems to symbolize an act of consuming and internalising Thlen's being so as to render him extinct. This resembles the death rituals among the Khasis, at which every bit of the corpse must be burned and only small pieces of calcified bone may survive, which are ceremonially taken to the clan ossuary. Among the Lyngngam sub-community of the Khasis if a piece of flesh remains unburnt⁸ it is eaten by a family member to completely eliminate any mortal remains of the deceased.⁹ This step is important in order to enable a complete cleansing/purge of the pollution of death.

The origin narrative of Thlen recorded in Laloo's book is one of many variants. Laloo's version may also be a composite of other versions. In one version Thlen is presented as a minister of God (Elias 1937: 113–124); in another Thlen is the son of Ka Kma Kharai, daughter of the most revered deity U Mawlong Siem (Rafy 1920: 58–67). In Primrose Gatphoh's version, Thlen's origin is unknown and the tale begins with his consuming human beings (Gatphoh 1936: 1–6). In an oral version collected from one of the council members of the Sohra Syiemship, Thlen was the daughter of Ngaid and his father was U Synriang Um, a water deity.¹⁰ It is rare that Thlen's father is mentioned in the narrative; however, there are multiple versions where it is agreed that his mother is Ngaid.

The term *mrad kynsha* ("strange/weird animal") is applied to Thlen. Another term that is used for Thlen is *ksuid*, which is a generic term to signify a malevolent supernatural being. From D.T. Laloo's version, it may be inferred that Thlen began as a human, or as an ambivalent entity whose sole purpose is to put an end to the human race (Laloo 1987: 18). Thlen beliefs and practices, however, elude a homogenous theorization.

The most common narrated manifestations of Thlen in belief and in narrative are the fish, a black dog, a strange cat and a snake. Thlen consumes the *rngiew* of a person. The term *rngiew*, as explained by Khasi writer H. Onderson Mawrie, "is that Power of Man which is inherently born in him and he has it by virtue of being a Man" (Mawrie 1981: 8). It is the *rngiew* of an individual which Thlen consumes. It is worthwhile then to clarify some terms that are associated with Thlen propitiation. People who propitiate Thlen with human blood are called *nong ri Thlen* or people who

⁸ In the event where part of the body does not burn after repeated attempts, it is believed that the spirit of the diseased is unhappy or unfulfilled. This is widely known among the Khasis as *sahnud*.

⁹ Interview with Bah Theo in the village of Nongmyndo, 21 January 2014, and Bah Shim Puweiñ in Langdongdai, 7 February 2014, ML.

¹⁰ Interview with anonymous tradition bearer and ritual performer, January 2009, ML.

keep/rear/nurture Thlen. People commissioned to procure victims for Thlen are termed *nongshohnoh/menshohnoh*, or “people who beat (other people) to death or into submission”.

The rendering of narrative: Thlen and belief performance

As mentioned earlier, today the Khasi population is predominantly Christian. Shillong has a predisposition towards styling itself as an urban, cultural and educational centre. To some extent, then, there is a tendency to confine Thlen to the realm of fictional fairy-tale and myth. Remarks like “Thlen is a metaphor for jealousy”¹¹ and “Thlen is a blind belief” mark attempts to relegate the Thlen belief to the realm of “superstition”. On the other hand, contrasting viewpoints in the newspaper *The Shillong Times* illustrate a defiant perspective that counters the proposed hegemonic discourse of neo-rationality.

Some intellectuals said that those who believe that U Thlen exists are superstitious because its existence cannot be scientifically proven. But can anybody prove scientifically that God exists? [...] To me it is just a form of demon and there are demon worshippers throughout this world. There are people who worship God and there are people who worship Satan or demons (Diengdoh 2013).

The Catholic faction has adopted a much more neutral approach, in which it neither ignores nor fully accepts the Thlen belief. Rather, because of the presence of Church-sanctioned exorcism rites it has been much more effective in dealing with this phenomenon. Alongside these opposing lines of thought, there also exists a devout Christian vernacular perspective in which the only way to deal with violence connected with Thlen belief is to prove to people unquestionably the victory of God over the “power of evil” (Syiem 2013).

In the chapter entitled “Television as narrative” in her work on the inter-medial expression of Khasi folklore (like films, radio, new folksongs), G. Badaiasuklang Lyngdoh Nonglait argues that the Thlen narrative recalls a metaphor for human exploitation of nature: human beings destroying Thlen through the use of iron suggests the assertion of supremacy by human beings over nature (Lyngdoh 2012: 185–198). This perspective, however, undermines the pragmatics of the narrative and its consequences. The Thlen myth has spawned an entire discourse which is enacted in contemporary Khasi society; therefore, the violence that it invariably invokes is linked to the

¹¹ Casual conversational remark made by an anonymous interview partner in the winter 2009, ML.

effect that the narrative has. Its function may be connected with the suspicion associated with going out alone, dubious activities carried out late at night and the use of rice grains. We may look at the Thlen discourse, therefore, as, first, a myth about the killing of a primordial monster and, second, as the stories and beliefs that circulate about this event. Sometimes it is enough to invoke the name of Thlen in order to validate a belief or narrative about it. Also, the variant of the narrative used by the author for this study on Thlen is the one where Thlen is killed with the use of iron, thereby ignoring those versions where Thlen was killed by a white hot piece of quartz (*mawleiñ*).

In the religious backdrop of Christianity that has more or less adapted itself to Khasi society, the Thlen tradition has become an adaptable, communicative vernacular genre expressive of the traits that are deemed “evil” in society today. Corruption in political circles and jealousy for someone who does well in life are now spoken of as being a “Thlen”.

As has been shown, Thlen is likened to Satan (or, alternatively, to a demon), the foremost opposer of God in Christian epistemology (Kelly 2006: 8–9). The almost ambivalent attitude that Khasis today have towards Satan is central to the genre of disbelief that encompasses the prevalent perceptions about Thlen. He has become synonymous with jealousy, which is frowned upon by the Church as an undesirable human emotion. In this sense, the Thlen belief system is decontextualized from a mythical, demon-deity into an ordinary manifestation of human fallibility as exemplified by the human emotions of greed and jealousy. For example, if a particular family in a given neighbourhood is doing well economically and socially, neighbours become envious. Malicious whispers of the family owning Thlen begin to circulate. Remarks like “Their house was dark like a cave inside” or “What do they do? I see their lights are switched on at 2.00 a.m. in the morning” all provoke the volatile, anxious sentiments of people, which then translates into mob fury.

A well-known member of the Presbyterian Church, Pastor Syiem, told me that because the (Presbyterian) Church “generally followed the safe missionary line by rejecting Thlen etc. as superstition”, it was not as successful as the charismatic and Pentecostal Churches in dealing with church members’ experiences of Thlen.¹²

In the empirical experience of the Khasis, this complexity of beliefs seems resistant to the conscious effort to categorize and label them (beliefs). The Thlen belief manifests itself with violent consequences of loss of life, property and defamation. The darker side of this tradition seems to arise

¹² Interview via e-mail with Rev. Lyndan Syiem, 19 September 2014, ML.

from an inherent belief in the various narratives that are circulated in specific neighbourhoods as truth. And the result of this is communicated in the various inhuman events that have been collected from the news media over the last four years. In order to clarify the consequences and pragmatics of the narrative, some of these events are mentioned so as to illustrate the role of narrative in mob mentality during certain events.

Narrative consequence: Thlen and violence performance

The following information was collected from the news portal of the online local daily, *The Shillong Times*. I would like to clarify beforehand that “witchcraft” is the collective term used by newspapers in Meghalaya to write about anything supernatural. In the cases that I have mentioned, “witchcraft” refers to Thlen phenomenon. Significantly, it might not be a coincidence that the term “witchcraft” is used. In the wider Christian demonological context, a “familiar” is the assistant of the witch given to her by the devil, usually in the form of a toad, black cat, dog or insect (Remy 2008: 27–29). It might be inferred from this that Thlen is identified as a helper of the Devil.

On 7 October 2011 three persons were lynched by a mob in Sohra because they were suspected of being agents of Thlen. On 28 April 2012, Johnson Marak, a resident of Joiram village, “was asked to leave the village following a saga of superstition that included a tale as incredulous as five women dreaming about him giving ‘something’ to people where they ‘died’”. In 2013 alone, four separate cases took place: on 23 February 2013, Jein Khongwet and her family were attacked by villagers of Wahlyngkhat village in Pynursla, as it was alleged that she practised witchcraft. Two months later, on 16 March 2013, three persons assaulted Spendri Kharmyndai at Lempluh village, alleging that he practised witchcraft. On 24 April 2013, around four thousand villagers hailing from various villages within Sawympyer area under Mawsynram, attacked and set fire to the two-storied residential building of a prominent businessman of the area, Tremlin Nongsiej of Mawryngkang village, after accusing him of practising witchcraft. And on 6 May 2013, a couple was murdered at Nongbir-Lum village in Ri-Bhoi because they were suspected of practising witchcraft. The couple, identified as Bisha Wahlang and his wife Klitsimai Mawphniang, were hacked to death while they were working in their field in the evening by two persons who were arrested four days after the incident.¹³ More recently, on 27 May 2014, a mob killed a brother and sister because they were accused of

¹³ Information gleaned from internet resources mentioned at the end of the article

witchcraft and nurturing Taro, a wealth-bringing demonic entity common in Jaintia Hills District that is similar to Thlen.

The most atrocious incident, which received wide media coverage and evoked a horrified response from the people of Shillong city, occurred on 16 August 2013, when three persons were killed by a mob on the allegation that they were Thlen keepers.¹⁴ A young man was found naked, injured and unconscious by the banks of the Ummiew stream. After he was taken to the hospital and regained consciousness, he named his uncles as the ones responsible for his condition and alleged that they practised witchcraft. His sister went back home that same day. In the evening, about seven persons, including this young man's uncle, went to her home to inquire about the young man's health. Meanwhile, rumours were already rife, and a mob gathered around this place. Three persons, including the uncle, were hacked to death by the mob on the accusation that they were Nongshohnoh or the agents of Thlen.

When I conducted my interviews, local memory was very fresh and individuals were reluctant to speak about this event. The above facts were elicited from the ongoing investigation and provided to me by Inspector L. Syngkon of Madanriting Police Station. I collected an oral version of the same events during an interview with the village headman on 29 August 2014. An excerpt is presented verbatim here:

It began like this – it could be facts or it could be just suspicion. On the 14th of August, it seems that boy [Lam N.] went somewhere – we cannot say specifically where. It was said that he [the young man, Lam N.] met that man [one of the victims killed by the mob] and he took Lam on an outing. In that outing was a lot of merrymaking, eating and drinking and it seems that there was a lot of good feeling and whether this is a fact cannot be known – because this man is now dead. They say that this boy Lam was attacked with an attempt to kill – the other man beat him and threw him into the water and it seems that, that was not the day created for this boy to die. So this boy was able to get out of the river and crawl to the neighbouring hillside.

On the morning of the 15th of August 2013 the locals found him sleeping/unconscious. There were signs on his body that he had been assaulted and beaten. After that, this boy was taken to the hospital, and at the hospital – it can be true or it cannot be true, it cannot be said, because that boy Lam N. was unconscious and unable to speak. Or the hospital authorities forced him to speak, or the boy really talked about his

¹⁴ See Shillong Times 2013g. Information was also kindly provided by the headman of the village where the incident took place. Knowing the village headman's wife personally helped me to get the only information on the incident from an insider. Informants have told me that among the people of this village are afraid to talk about or mention Thlen.

experience – it is not known. But they said it was this specific person[s] who has perpetrated the crime. It was after this that a mob was roused to action. Everywhere the cries of “It is the Nongshohnoh!”, “They have killed people!” circulated. [...] On the 18th of August, 2013, it was the market day and the entire village of Smit was roused to mob fury – everyone was convinced that it was these men who had done it. Some persons who knew and were Lam N.’s relatives went to visit his home. These persons belonged to the family that was accused of owning Thlen and accused of trying to kill Lam. These person’s intentions were to enquire about the allegations that had sprung up against their family and to try to make peace and ease the situation. By this time the crowd had become too angry and they went to Lam’s house to attack these persons.”

Of the seven persons who went to Lam’s house, four managed to escape with injuries and three were dragged to the marketplace, pelted with stones, kicked by the crowd and hacked with knives near the meat stalls. By the time the police arrived, the crowd was attempting to burn the bodies, but they were restrained by the police. The village headman who gave me these details was himself injured in the stampede and as a result spent two months in hospital. At the time of writing no charge had been filed with the police.

If we examine the oral version of the events which led to the death of the three persons, suspicion and jealousy as a result of wealth and status towards a given family or person contribute to the demonic ascription which later culminated in death and tragedy. It was told to me that for generations it was rumoured that this particular family were keepers of Thlen. When I approached them for an interview, asking if they would like to tell me about their experience of this trauma, they refused. There seems to be no clear indication why the people connected the victims to the attack on Lam N.

No data that I collected from the police explains the link made by the mob between the murdered persons and the injured boy. Also, no information that I could glean during my fieldwork connects these two different events – the attack on Lam N. and the murder of three persons at Smit market. This seems to point to the more productive possibility of examining the rumours about this family which played such an important role in these events. It was the distinctive cry of “Nongshohnoh” that aroused the frenzy in which collective groups of people act out of fear and aggression.

The Thlen narrative does not have a happy ending; the conclusion of the story allows for open interpretation. Taking a structural look at the Thlen story, it may be said that the first part of the narrative recalls the mythic anthropophagy – Thlen consumes human beings and in turn is killed and consumed by human beings. The second birth of Thlen through the agency of the old woman and the propagation of his worship is the legendary epilogue of the first part – Thlen consumes human beings with the aid of the

Nongshohnoh and his keepers. Here again we have the consequence of narrative: the violence and murder of alleged Thlen keepers. The first part of the narrative seems to be the “authoritative” version, because in its different accounts the first part of the narrative expresses a recurrent theme – Thlen kills and eats human beings and in turn is killed and eaten by them.

The dialogic response to this seems to be the second, legend-like continuation where it is possible for Thlen to come back to life a second time in order to seek his revenge by killing humans. There seems to be a continuity between narrative structure and its practice. The perpetuation of the legend is expressed in how, in present day Khasi society, responses to the narrative are manifested in its consequences. The visible instances of marginalization that characterizes Thlen violence among the Khasis marks this, then, as a dialogic narrative which serves to splinter society, create contested, dissident responses and fragment social rules.

Following the rumours that circulated around communal riots in Gujarat, Western India, Sudhir Kakar points out that rumours are a communicative activity more characteristic of large groups and organizations and that they use unconscious fantasies held in common by members of the larger group (Kakar 2005: 58). In this context, the larger group is represented by the community wherein such rumours about supernatural occurrences begin to circulate. Responses to these narratives are manifested in inhuman acts, which are then perpetrated against those members of the social group who are peripheral or marginalized. Rumour theorists posit the appearance of rumour in waves – in times of social upheaval and political and religious uncertainty (Fine 2009: 2–3). If we view contemporary Khasi society as an environment which is chaotic, dialogic and contested as a result of the psychological rapture which occurred with the gradual replacement of the indigenous religion (Niam Tynrai), the erosion of matrilineal values, and the untrustworthy political and infrastructural systems in the society (Lyngdoh 2012: 207–224), then the Thlen narrative becomes subversive in character.

Thlen, demonization and the other

Writing about the post-war rumour around the human sausage factory in Tartu, Estonia, folklorist Eda Kalmre points out that survival strategies of a particular group necessitate that it pit itself against another group. The other group then becomes “the other”, which has nothing in common with the own group, with “us”. An ethnocentric discourse is adopted when there is an obvious threat to the identity of the community as a result of social or political pressures (Kalmre 2013: 66–67). Most of Thlen-related violence is

directed toward people who for some reason are viewed as being an opposing “other”: such persons or families can include people who were actively involved and accepted in the community, but who have grown prosperous, thus arousing suspicion and jealousy. Strangers to a given village or locality, rich families and homes whose activity late at night is observed and questioned by the neighbours are also perceived as “others” who have little or nothing in common with the rest of the community.

Examples like this excerpt taken from an article in *The Shillong Times* from June 2014 illustrate this point: “The victim, a stranger, was in a field when the villagers branded him as one who practices witchcraft and assaulted him.” In other instances, it took as little as someone in the village dreaming that another individual from the same village was a Thlen keeper. The title of “Nongshohnoh” or “agent of the Thlen keeper” is given to any stranger in a village or community, or person, who does not conform to standard behaviour.

In an incident on 7 October 2011, three people were killed by a mob in the vicinity of Sohra village because they were strangers to those parts. In the events of 18 August 2013, three people were hacked to death and only on interviewing the police, was I able to find out that the three victims belonged to the minority indigenous religion.

Thlen seems to be built on an othering discourse, whereby the “other” is attributed monstrous and deviant qualities. Another motif present in the Thlen belief is that straying far from the house is dangerous, and mothers also caution their children against wandering far from the home lest the Nongshohnoh capture them. In contemporary Shillong this idea is commonly reiterated, probably because of the unsafe nature of the urban or even rural surroundings in which children might be stolen, kidnapped or trafficked. However, with the Thlen belief it is not only children who are targeted. Thlen is so deadly because he can affect anyone: Khasis, non-Khasis, men, women and children, although according to some beliefs, the Khasis are the only ethnic community who are affected by Thlen.¹⁵

A further dimension of the discourse of othering that is inherent in the Thlen narrative appears to be the targeting of people who belong to the minority indigenous religion, who are mentally challenged or who have physical abnormalities.¹⁶ In one of the events mentioned above, in which

¹⁵ This directs us back to the narrative, according to which, in some versions, the non-Khasis ate up all of Thlen’s meat which was portioned out to them, but it was the Khasis who left out a small piece, thereby leading to Thlen’s second birth.

¹⁶ Khasi society is strictly exogamous. It is strong societal taboo for couples from the same clan to intermarry. Such marriages are believed to be disapproved of by God and babies born

three men were lynched by a mob in 2011, one of the victims was a man of reduced mental capabilities. All of the victims who were hacked to death in the August 2013 incident belonged to the indigenous religion. Twelve persons who were arrested belong to the Christian religion. However, this does not mean that Christian families are not targeted as well.

An inextricable element of the Thlen belief seems to be the relationship between wealth and social marginalization. It is often said that traditionally Khasi society is equal and lacks the caste-based social divisions which commonly characterize the social organization of people belonging to the Hindu religion. As a result, the acquisition of wealth or its lack thereof is one way for a Khasi person to distinguish himself/herself in Khasi society: poor people are pitied and rich persons or families are envied. Traditional perceptions of wealth tend to associate it with the negative aspects of its acquisition. The quest for wealth is negated and undermined in the traditional Khasi precept of *Kamai ia ka hok* – that a man should earn righteousness (and not wealth). Associated with this is the Christian stress on poverty. The New Testament emphasizes a good Christian life acquired through poverty (e.g., Luke 6: 24; Matthew 6: 19–21; Matthew 19: 21–24). The contentious relationship that Christians have with wealth might also explain why Christian families have also been accused of nurturing this demon. In addition, Thlen folklore comes across as an inherent social mechanism which works in such a way that wealthy people or families, the social and religious “other” and the marginalized are eliminated or socially tabooed: Khasi society is inclined towards homogenizing any form of hierarchies or stratification.

Conclusion

To conclude, I may reflect on how Khasi society is marked with competing religious affiliations, an unstable administrative and social environment because of the uncertainty in the political and governmental infrastructure, westernization and urban culture and the reputation of Shillong as the most sought after education centre in Northeast India. This instability and the expressed need for a homogeneous society makes the folklore about Thlen very dangerous. The negative effects that this narrative has upon Khasi consciousness may be seen in the numerous incidents of violence and mob

with physical or mental defects are the result of an “unnatural” marital relationship. Even though the Khasis are mostly Christian converts, this rule from the traditional beliefs has survived.

fury attributable to Thlen. In addition, the Thlen narrative forces the Khasi populace of today to take a second look at Khasi myth and tradition and the role that they play in constructing the identity of the community. Thlen violence seems to be at odds with the aspiration of the Khasis to establish themselves as an intellectually enlightened, forward-thinking community.

Folklore that has such devastating results persists over time only if it is supported by the social mechanisms that create it and through the transitions that every society experiences. If expressing social conditions is one of the functions of folklore, then Thlen-related violence is illustrative of the need in Khasi society to carefully re-evaluate and re-examine its cultural values and norms that allow for and tolerate violence against fellow human beings.

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