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## ***U Thlen* and the *Nongshohnoh*: Folklore, Experience, and Reality**

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**ABSTRACT:** The need to better understand the supernatural is an ever-engaging aspect of any enquiry into the matter due to the changing paradigms of time and space and the existence of numerous misconceptions and observations concerning the same. Such is a case of the legend of *U Thlen* and the *nongshohnoh* phenomenon of Meghalaya, a north-eastern state in the sovereign country of India. *U Thlen*, an evil mystical being, is described in Khasi legends and recounted in Khasi folklore as an entity thirsty for human blood and never satiated. He was, however, tricked and captured by the Khasi people but never ultimately destroyed. As an act of deception – of reward and mainly revenge, *U Thlen* promised people riches in exchange for human sacrifice. An existing belief is that *U Thlen* was adopted by a Khasi household which saw the beginning of the *nongshohnoh* or the “cut throat” phenomenon. The surrounding belief about the keeping of *U Thlen* functions on the basis of prevailing social notions that human sacrifice offered to *U Thlen* equates to riches. While the legend of *U Thlen* has witnessed transcendence from narratives to lived realities over an incredible part of the history of the Khasi people, the *nongshohnoh* phenomenon has seen its fair share of criticism with time as well. It is in this regard that this study aims to (re)look into this very phenomenon as a living reality of the Khasi society. This paper also aims to look at existing beliefs and disbeliefs in *U Thlen* and the *nongshohnoh* phenomenon in order to arrive at an understanding, proper to the contemporary setting of the Khasi society, in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS:** folk beliefs, Khasi folklore, Khasi legend, *nongshohnoh*, *U Thlen*

## Introduction

*U Thlen*<sup>1</sup>, a serpentine entity in Khasi<sup>2</sup> folk belief and legend, also exists as a living and oftentimes scary reality among the Khasi tribe in north-eastern India to this day. There exists a bounty of folklore on *U Thlen* that has been circulated and documented within the tribe and such folklore, whenever produced, brings about polarising effects and opinions. In the domain of Khasi folk narratives, *U Thlen* commands a very special place as one of the most iconic malevolent figures from which a subsequent *nongshohnoh*<sup>3</sup> or *menshohnoh*<sup>4</sup> phenomenon emerged. According to Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, *U Thlen* is “an evil creature of supernatural powers” (Nongkynrih 2001: 147).

As a cultural phenomenon, any mention of instances or cases regarding *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* receives special attention from the Khasi tribe and it is treated with deep concern: mainly in the form of public opinion and print, as well as local media coverage. In the recent past, the legal system of India has also been urged to act upon the problem that has emerged out of either the *U Thlen* or *nongshohnoh* narrative. The police department and the law court have been asked to intervene, which has often times produced no conclusive outcome. To the legal system, *U Thlen* is often described as an intangible superstition over which no legal process and treatment can be granted; conversely, the Khasi tribe, to a considerable extent, still perceives *U Thlen* and the *nongshohnoh* as real socio-cultural phenomena.

Instances of contact and experiences with the *nongshohnoh* assert that the folklore concerning *U Thlen* potentially offers an expression of a reality that could suggest the existence of a problem that is yet to be properly scrutinised and understood. In relation to this, an informant whose name has been purposely changed to Bah Hon (male, 56 years old) was interviewed on May 21, 2022 due to his family’s previous association with *U Thlen* as the *nong-ri thlen*<sup>5</sup>. His identity has to be kept secret due to the sensitivity of this issue within the Khasi society and it was also requested by him<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, memorates from the author’s own childhood, pertaining to the *U Thlen* narrative, are included for further speculation into the *nongshohnoh* narrative as well.

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1 The letter “u” is connotative of the male gender.

2 The Khasi tribe is the only Mon-Khmer speaking tribe in India. They are a collective of seven sub-tribes: Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Lyngngam, Maram and no longer existing Diko. The Khasi believed in the existence of sixteen tribes making the collective. However, only seven chose to dwell on earth while the remaining nine stayed back in the heavenly abode. They are an oral culture and do not have their own script, but eventually adopted the Roman script for writing after it was introduced by Thomas Jones, a Welsh missionary in the 1840s.

3 *Nongshohnoh* implies a cut-throat who is responsible for catching a human and extracting blood or other items which are then used as commodity of exchange between the keeper family of *U Thlen* and *U Thlen* itself.

4 The terms *menshohnoh* and *nongshohnoh* are used interchangeably.

5 *Nong-ri thlen* is the indigenous term for *U Thlen* keeper.

6 He did not talk very much and chose to not answer many questions. He hardly wore a smile, and was deeply reflective throughout the interview.

The folklore regarding *U Thlen* and, by extension, *nongshohnoh* has also taken new definitions over the years in Khasi society and has also affected, often-times negatively, the social outlook of the Khasi cultural group. At a primary level, the narrative on *U Thlen*'s origin in folk belief and narration becomes of vital importance. Throughout the Khasi-Jaintia Hills inhabited by the Khasi people, there is a variety of lore associated with *U Thlen* that has coloured the imagination and belief on the entity. Similarly, the alleged cases and incidences linking *U Thlen* to the *nongshohnoh* become significant when it comes to formalising an understanding of the socio-cultural phenomenon that has continued to remain an enigmatic and problematic aspect of Khasi folklore and society.

### ***U Thlen* in Folklore and Written Records**

In order to understand the contextual association between *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* in the Khasi community, it is necessary to first understand the folklore of *U Thlen* and its association with its first keeper, which I reproduce from sources such as Gurdon (1907); Gathoh (1937); BarehNgapKynta (1967); Mawrie (1981); Nongkynrih (2001) to reconstruct the *Thlen* narrative.

According to the widely accepted lore, *U Thlen* was said to be ostracised and shunned by his grandfather, a Khasi deity – *U Mawlong Syiem* (the chief patron deity<sup>7</sup> of Mawsmat<sup>8</sup>), from birth for being an aberration and a deformed creature. *U Thlen* was subsequently abandoned by his mother – *Ka Kma Kharai* (the Goddess of Caves and hollow cavities on the Earth) as well. A cave at Pomdolo Falls, Sohra became the haunt and nestling ground of this entity, who grew in disdain of the humans who worshipped the deities and attained their favour while *U Thlen*, the grandson of a deity, was abandoned to his own isolation. According to the lore, *U Thlen* would grow in size and strength by feeding on humans who moved about the market route between Rangjyrteh<sup>9</sup> and Sohra. He would earn people's fear and hatred by catching and feeding on stragglers who travel in the odd numbers<sup>10</sup>. As a supernatural entity, he could shape-shift to the form and size of other animals, however, the shape of a constrictor was considered his favourite to hunt and devour a human whole.

This folklore also holds another dimension in which *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*<sup>11</sup> (God the Creator and Keeper), the Khasi's highest God, requested the

7 Chief patron deity – refers to village deities that reside and overlook the well-being of a certain village.

8 Mawsmat is a village located at a short distance towards the south of Sohra (erstwhile Cherapunjee), in Meghalaya, India.

9 This village no longer exists. However, its ruins can still be found close to Sohra.

10 The *U Thlen* is known to hunt people especially when they travel in odd numbers. Stragglers who are either left out from a conversation or lagging behind will become his prime victim.

11 *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw* refers to the highest of God in Khasi faith.

aid of another patron deity of the Khasi, who was known as *U Suidnoh*<sup>12</sup> (God of Health and Restoration), to intervene and rid the land of *U Thlen* as the latter had been terrorising the humans with an aim to destroy every single one. *U Suidnoh* devised a plan to rid the lands of *U Thlen* by having him swallow massive iron balls heated to bear a resemblance to fatty white pork. Following the defeat of *U Thlen*, people from the Khasi hills and the plains of now Bangladesh were called to feast on the cooked remains of the serpent. However, an important condition was made to the gathered humans – they were to consume all of the remains of *U Thlen* and not supposed to take any with them to their homes or leave anything for the following day (Gatphoh 1937; Nongkynrih 2001).

Unknown to gathered mass of people, an old woman kept a piece of the serpent flesh to offer her son, who was absent at the feast. She stored the meat in a basket and had every intention of handing it to her son, but, strangely, failed to recall that she was to offer it to him. It was narrated that a number of days had passed; the old woman was sitting in the kitchen when that piece of *U Thlen*'s flesh spoke from within the basket. She opened the basket to find a small snake (*U Thlen* resurrected) who asked her to keep him and, in turn, promised her riches and wealth, which eventually seduced the old woman. This was the turning point in the *U Thlen* narrative; the old woman was made wealthy by *U Thlen*. He could see how she could no longer detach herself from her wealth, and so asked her for a sacrifice in return for keeping his word. She offered him goat's blood, which infuriated him. He made a stern demand for human blood, failing which, her family would become victims instead. Driven by the attachment to material wealth and fear for her family's well-being, the old woman agreed to *U Thlen*'s demand, initiating the *nongshohnoh* phenomenon.

This narrative does not outwardly conclude with *U Thlen* being revived; instead, it took on another dimension highlighted by the formation of an association or a pact between *U Thlen* and its first keeper, who would be known as the *nong-ri thlen*. *U Thlen*'s engagement with the old woman in human speech reveals that Khasi folklore asserts that an association between humans and supernatural beings, such as *U Thlen*, is possible and forms the basis of a belief that is still considered real today. This cultural lore also points out how such an association between a Khasi individual or a family with *U Thlen* can be sustained by a pact of mutual benefit.

In written records, narratives concerning *U Thlen* are seldom omitted and often included in discourse relating to the Khasi religion and worldview. One of the earliest records on ethnography, *The Khasis*, first published in 1907 by Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon, provides, in great detail, the laws and customs of the Khasi tribe under section III – Human Sacrifices. Gurdon alludes to the Assam Gazette, August 1882, to talk about what he first considers “an

12 *U Suidnoh* is a patron deity who resides in the northern part of Sohra. His abode is said to be located in the sacred grove of Laitryngew. He was considered to be a powerful deity, who was also worshipped by people who dwell in the plains of Bangladesh – previously known to the Khasi as Shilot.

interesting superstition: The tradition is that there was once in a cave near Cherrapunji, a gigantic snake, or *thlen*, who committed great havoc among men and animals” (Gurdon 1907: 98). He also mentions the association between *U Thlen* and the *nong-ri thlen*:

When a *thlen* takes up its abode in a family there is no means of getting rid of it, though it occasionally leaves on its own accord, and often follows family property that is given away or sold. The *thlen* attaches itself to property, and brings prosperity and wealth to the owners, but on the condition that it is supplied with blood (Gurdon 1907: 99).

However, getting rid of *U Thlen* is simply mentioned as an act of throwing away “all the money, ornaments, and property of that house or family” (Gurdon 1907: 101). This is not necessarily the case, according to a reported account by Bah Hon, a person previously associated with *U Thlen*. The following was noted:

Families associated with a *Thlen* cannot [get] rid [of] the entity by simply discarding the material gains that the entity has provided and the *Thlen* will never leave on its own accord. The family must leave behind everything! There is no knowing how the *Thlen* will follow you. [...] We left our house in the nude (to rid of the *Thlen*), and it was late in the evening. We were acknowledged, given blankets to cover and allowed to walk freely. It was the only way to rid ourselves of it.

Another record concerning *U Thlen* can be observed in a *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India*, first published in 1979 under Khasi and Jaintia Hills District. In it, the narrative of *U Thlen* appears in a section on religion. While the *Gazetteer* failed to adequately record the Khasi faith, it did not fail to mention *U Thlen* as a “curious superstition” written about in great detail. However, the text observed that the *U Thlen* narrative had also enabled the *nong-ri thlen* and *nongshohnoh* phenomenon to exist; and it was seen as a social problem negatively affecting Khasi society as follows: “Many families are known or suspected to be *nong-ri thlen*, or keepers of the *thlen*, and murders are not unfrequently committed in consequence of this awful superstition” (Allen 1979: 488). This continues to be a pervasive problem that is still tackled by society at a certain magnitude today. More recent writings relating to *U Thlen* continue to emerge in historical and sociological records as well. Hamlet Bareh (1967) places the *Thlen* narrative within the chapter on Religion. In it, the belief and exercise associated with this entity is identified as:

occult household practice [...] spread through marriage, kinship and trade transactions [...]. Contact with the days of modern science, spread of electricity, power, heavy road traffic, increasing volumes of trade – probably

these and other factors have decreased the number of *Thlen* worshippers as well as the *menshohnoh* and *dakus* to catch any victim possible in a secret place and feeding the monstrous spirit (Bareh 1967: 355–357).

Based on this writing, it is apparent that the *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* continue to exist as an engaging discourse that constantly challenges the Khasi society. H. O. Mawrie also observes a similar aspect in *The Khasi Milieu* (1981). Mawrie engages with the notion of *U Thlen* and its keepers, among other entities, in the context of the contemporary in the following manner:

In contemporary Khasi society, there are people who have no fear of sins of incest and sacrilege and keep the devils as their household deities and worship them. These deities bring the keepers wealth material prosperity and splendour. These deities are of different types having different qualities. Amongst these the less evil are *Ka Lei Khuri*, *Ka Raliang*, *Ka Taro*, *Ka Lasam*, *Ka Sabuit* and others and the ferocious ones are *Ka Shwar*, *Ka Bih* and *U Thlen*<sup>13</sup>. Families who keep these devils as their household deities (*U Phan U Kyrpad*)<sup>14</sup> have their own way of worshipping these deities and offering sacrifices to keep them content, failing which the deities will bring ruin and even death to the members of the family or the household which keeps them (Mawrie 1981: 42).

Margaret Lyngdoh's (2015) essay *On Wealth and Jealousy among the Khasis: Thlen, Demonization and the Other* observed the prevailing problems posed by this very condition in Khasi society by mentioning that this very aspect of lore is still experienced within the social fabric of society as a real phenomenon which has produced numerous undesirable instances, problematic narratives as well as "noxious" legal cases. Because *U Thlen* can be attributed to a family's wealth and fortune, as Gurdon also pointed, it can sometimes be mistaken that a family's wealth is due to such familial association with *U Thlen*, resulting in grave consequences for the alleged family. Lyngdoh also mentioned the following:

The negative effects that this narrative has upon Khasi consciousness may be seen in the numerous incidents of violence and mob 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 (Lyngdoh 2015: 183–184).

13 *Ka Lei Khuri*, *Ka Raliang*, *Ka Taro*, *Ka Lasam*, *Ka Sabuit*, *Ka Shwar* and *Ka Bih* are other supernatural entities known to the Khasi apart from *U Thlen*. It is believed that these entities are also worshipped for the purpose of attaining wealth and fortune. These entities too are propitiated by some form of sacrifice after which they reward the keeper household. *Ka Shwar*, *Ka Bih* and *U Thlen* are considered to be the more malicious ones.

14 Household deities are known as *U Phan U Kyrpad* in the indigenous tongue.

### **Nongshohnoh: Experiences and Reality**

The *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* phenomenon, deeply ingrained in the social existence of the Khasi society has not only been tried and examined from varied academic perspectives; regional news portals have also reported on the instances relating to the same. The online archive of *The Shillong Times*, English news daily in Meghalaya, India was analyzed and the following information was collected. Terminologies like “witchcraft” and “superstition” are collectively used by newspaper agencies to refer to most things supernatural – often associated with *U Thlen*.

According to *The Shillong Times* report dated April 24, 2013, a large number of related cases and incidences have been cited over a period of eight years. Here, I quote the brief report:

March 15, 2006: Five friends – Julie Lyngdoh, Norma Lakiang, Susana Kharumnuid, M Syiemiong and John Mawlot – were branded as sorcerers by villagers of Laitkyrhong under Mawkynrew C&RD Block of East Khasi Hills district. June 17, 2007: An angry mob torched five houses and two vehicles of Dhon Nongkynrih at Mawbseiñ village in Ri-Bhoi district after being alleged for practicing witchcraft. October 7, 2011: Three persons died in two localities in Sohra, East Khasi Hills district after they were lynched by villagers who accused them of being *men-shohnoh* (cut-throats) or those who worship *U Thlen* (a mythical serpent) in the hope of acquiring further wealth. April 27, 2011: The family of Phil Mawlieh and Joseph Tongwah, who reside in Pdeng Shnong locality at Mawlai Phudmuri, Shillong, was attacked by a mob following allegations that they were practicing witchcraft on Cynthia Massar. April 28, 2012: Johnson Marak, 64, a resident of Joiram village near Balat under Mawsynram constituency was asked to leave the village following saga of superstition that included a tale as incredulous as five women dreaming about him giving ‘something’ to people where they ‘died’. February 23, 2013: Jein Khongwet and her family were attacked by villagers of Wahl-yngkhat village in Pynursla C&RD Block of East Khasi Hills district on the allegation that she is practicing witchcraft. March 16, 2013: Three persons – Rikitlang Kharnaio, Stanly Jyrwa and Shaining Star Kharnaio – assaulted one Spendri Kharmyndai at Lempluh village, under Mawphlang C&RD Block alleging him of practicing witchcraft. April 23, 2013: Hundreds of villagers set a blaze the house of a businessman Trem-lin Nongsiej of Mawrynkang village near Mawsynram on the allegation that he was practicing witchcraft (Endless Cases of Superstition).

The eight cases highlighted above occurred over a brief period of eight years (2006–2013), showcasing the transcendence of lore that can become a scary reality to individuals who have suffered if not worse – while the worst has also happened to the unfortunate. The incident involving the destruction of



the property of Tremlin Nongsiej of Mawrynkang village on April 23, 2013 also involved the local authorities, who expressed the following:

Enough is enough and we will not accept the argument that it was the decision of the Dorbar to attack the house of anyone who is allegedly practicing witchcraft (Call for Awareness against Illogical Beliefs 2013).

The incidences that occurred in 2013 were so grave that the state machinery through the Department of Arts & Culture, Meghalaya organised a two-day regional seminar in Shillong on the May 3–4, 2013 on “Superstition in the Tribal Cultures of the Northeast: a Study of Myth and Reality”. H. H. Mohrmen, one of the contributors in the seminar, wrote to *The Shillong Times* and expressed his findings as follows:

*U Thlen*, the *Taro*, *ka Bih* etc. are part of the Khasi Pnar belief system which has been inculcated in the minds of the people from one generation to another. We grew up believing that the *nongshohnoh* exists and is lurking around the locality to catch us and to feed our blood to *U Thlen* a kind of serpent [...]. I am not defending superstition, neither will I outrightly dismiss myths, legends and traditions as superstition, which is a complex issue because it is in the realm of the spirit. I am not condoning the violence and madness that has happened. Any act of vandalism need to be condemned in the strongest terms and such acts of violence find no mention in our culture and tradition. But I would rather like the educated Khasi Pnar to look at the wisdom behind these legends and beliefs and interpret them in the new light (Mohrmen 2013).

### The *Nongshohnoh* Phenomenon

If the *U Thlen* narrative exists in the realm of discourse and ideas, the *nongshohnoh* is no doubt a cultural phenomenon. Folk narratives assert the existence of contact between the supernatural entity *U Thlen* with the *nong-ri thlen* and *nongshohnoh*, which, as a unique Khasi cultural creation, serves to realise the lore. But how does one attempt to explain such a phenomenon? Is the phenomenon even real? Here, I present a number of experiences collected from my respondent (Bah Hon) as well as three personal experiences or memorates. This folklore has been related in the author’s family from the point of view of the author’s maternal uncle known as Fam<sup>15</sup>, who was a resident of Sohbar village, a border village of Meghalaya, situated at a distance of 12 kilometres south

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15 Fam’s name has been altered for the purpose of this text as it deals with the personal narratives articulated in the author’s family; the individual concerned is now deceased. The incident narrated occurred during the afternoon hours on an extremely hot day in 1970s. This story is still related in the author’s family to highlight the dangers and problems the *nongshohnoh* gives to the inhabitants of a village called Sohbar.



of Sohra. In the 1970s, Fam had an experience that made him flee from his *bri*<sup>16</sup> until he reached the safety of his village. It was said that Fam was resting his back on a beetle nut tree and was sleeping during the hottest hours of the day (post-noon) since it was difficult to work then. It was during such a time that a rock thrown at the beetle nut tree woke him up. Soon, another rock hit the tree. He got to his feet and ran. He would go on to claim that he dared not wait for the third strike. The two stones hitting a tree were warnings (a feature of the *nongshohnoh* at Sohbar). He would mention that he was being stalked by a *nongshohnoh* and was lucky to have heard the two strikes.

The narrative above was circulated after I experienced something similar along with my sibling and our young uncle and aunt in the same aforementioned village. It happened during the early 2003 and I was still a pre-teen – too young to be familiar with the *U Thlen* folklore. It was a late evening; all of us have already gone to bed. The elder people, including my mother and grandmother, slept in our great-grandmother's hut while we slept in an adjoining hut belonging to our great-grand aunt. We were awakened by a sudden and forceful shaking of our hut's door. We understood that there was someone trying to pry the door open which led to our sudden and shrill scream "U At! U At! U At..."<sup>17</sup>; as swift and sudden as it was, it ended. Our scream woke up all the elders in my great grandmother's hut. But they observed no one.

Another such incident occurred while I was a student at a reputed private school in Shillong<sup>18</sup>. I was a student of class three or the third standard and not more than nine years old. There, I shared a close friendship with Dolph (a boy around my own age), one of the few friends I had as a child. He would tell me many stories about his family and of his half-fish-like sister whom his grandmother used to bathe. To me, then, all of his stories were either fascinating or strange, but they were nonetheless interesting. He would share many stories like these – many of which I did not pay proper attention to or have forgotten and I would recount them all to my mother. This is where things would change. I lost my school sweater after I had left it in a mountain of sweaters and joined my friends for a game of football. Our parents came to pick us up and so one by one, we stopped playing and collected our belongings. Unfortunately for me, I could not find mine. My mother scolded me for it, but I did all I could to find my sweater. I asked the school guards, had a look at the lost and found. I never found mine! My mother and I accepted that it must have been picked up and claimed by someone else. After a few weeks, Dolph said that he saw my sweater in his house. I did not even ask him anything. As always, I informed my mother, once I got back home, and she was alarmed by such news. The following day, I was told to ask and find out if Dolph mentioned seeing my name

16 *Bri* is a War-Khasi term that is used to denote a family/clan farmland.

17 The word *At* is used in the context of War-Khasi communities to refer to a *nongshohnoh*.

18 The name of the school has been purposely removed due to the controversial nature of the narrative. Names of anyone concerned are altered in this narrative as well, apart from the incident, to protect the identity of all involved. It all happened to the author.

badge on the sweater. I was the only one who wore a name badge in my class. The following day, my mother requested an audience with my friend's mother from the school authorities and demanded my sweater be returned intact with the badge. My friend's mother denied ever seeing my sweater and uttered these words in everyone's presence, including mine, "It is not ours". All arguments stopped. Back at home, my mother would tell me "it's all right, you will be fine. You will not be harmed now"<sup>19</sup>. I never got back my sweater, but Dolph returned my badge after a few days. The following year, Dolph and his siblings changed school. I never saw him again.

Similar situation was described in account of Bah Hon: "I do not like to talk about my family's past but it is known by many. I need not go to the details. Our family did not only abandon the family house, we also abandoned our village because we wanted to be clean from all of that".

In more recent times, *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* have also been treated with scepticism and doubt. Not everyone experiences such strange phenomena and some have even opined of either *U Thlen* or *nongshohnoh* as nothing more than a metaphorical exercise that is used for the advantage or disadvantage of people and families. *U Thlen* is sometimes seen as an effective tool to exact personal grudges and sway public opinion. The mob lynching is perhaps the scariest of realities to come out of this social condition in Khasi society. *The Shillong Times* reported on a case as recent as December 2016, which had occurred in Sohiong, Meghalaya, where the city police rescued a person from a crowd, who were contemplating to lynch him for allegedly practicing witchcraft (*U Thlen* keeping). Even with the man rescued, the police who investigated the matter could not bring about a swift resolution to the issue on the basis of a general lack of evidence.

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19 This is another aspect of the *Thlen*, *nong-ri thlen* and *nongshohnoh* relationship – the human sacrifice ceremony. Not all victims of the *Thlen* must be murdered for the sacrifice to take place. According to Bars (1973) *Thlen* is defined as "devil in the shape of a snake supposed to be kept and reared by some clans in Khasi Hills. (It is propitiated with human blood and the nail-tops from fingers and toes or, failing these, human hair and pieces of the garment of the victim clipped with silver scissor. It is believed to bring wealth to his keeper. The people of Khasi and Jaintia Hills are in constant dread of being murdered by the keepers of this monster)" (Bars 1973: 933). P. R. T. Gurdon in *The Khasis* also mentioned that the ritual generally occurs "at the dead of night, costly cloths are spread on the floor of the house of the *thlen* keeper, all the doors are opened, and a bras plate is laid on the ground in which is deposited the blood, or the hair, or a piece of cloth of the victim. All the family then gathers round, and an elderly member commences to beat a small drum, and invokes the *thlen* [...] the spirit of the victim (called *Ka Rngiew* in Khasi) appears, and stands on the plate, laughing. The *thlen* begin to swallow the figure, commencing at its feet [...]. By degrees the whole figure is disposed of by the boa constrictor [...] the person expires" (Gurdon 1907: 100–101). Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (2001: 147) also elucidated on the effects of the human sacrifice ceremony as follows: "a kind of deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, grows thin and weak, with a strange bloatedness about his face and belly". One of the ways to inhibit the ceremony is by causing the keepers of the *U Thlen* to deny, refuse or reject their *Thlen's* role, thereby rendering the entity incapable of completing the ceremony. The other mechanism is the *Kynthah narsaw* rite performed by the queens of select Khasi chiefdoms, especially those who trace their lineage to divine entities.

Discourse, in matters pertaining to the *nongshohnoh*, especially in the twenty first century, is highly sought by people from within the society to address a problem as old as the lore of *U Thlen* itself. According to James Lyngdoh, the *U Thlen* and *nongshohnoh* phenomenon is

[...] very disturbing and dastardly trend taking place in our social fabric in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is yet to voice its protest and condemnation against these so-called self-styled vigilantees who are all out to rid out society of *Thlen* and *menshohnohs*. Even the Church is a mute spectator to this tragedy. The fact of the matter is that in our Khasi society, when you are affluent you are branded a *menshohnoh*; and if you are living from hand to mouth, you are a *nongtuh* (thief). It all comes down to envy (Lyngdoh 2011).

Phrang Roy, in his letter to the editor of *The Shillong Times*, expressed the shared concerns of many:

I think we need a more proactive social research work by our educational institutions into these real social problems of our communities so that the public can have a deeper and more informed dialogue on this real and simmering problem of today (Roy 2013).

Similarly, Stefferson Malngiang, in the same edition of the online daily paper raised the following:

I am really amazed at how strong this word *Menshohnoh* is and how it has impacted our society. Apparently, it's a sort of label used to frame a person so as to cover up personal issues and grudges [...]. Disorder and maladjustment can happen in a society. Should we live by a set of archaic beliefs and turn a blind eye to the enlightened laws? Or are we ready to set up standard protocols to eliminate the pain that creeps into our bloodstream? After this incident we live in fear lest anyone labels us a *menshohnoh* and kills us because we have no defence against a mob. Should the government and elected representatives play politics at the cost of the people's safety and welfare? (Malngiang 2013).

An October 21, 2020 issue of *The Shillong Times* also raised the idea of introducing legal measures following a number of newly surfaced incidences concerning the same. The daily reported the Home Minister's statement as follows, "Lahkmen Rymbui confirmed on Tuesday that there was no move to bring any law in this regard »as of now«, although there are some within the MDA Government who favour the idea" (No move for law to deter menshohnoh 2020). The macabre incidents and deaths on the basis of suspicions or witchcraft pose serious concerns to the people of Meghalaya.

## Conclusion

Margaret Lyngdoh rightfully noted an important concluding remark in her observation of the issue, “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 *U 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” (Lyngdoh 2015: 184). The social mechanisms that exist in Khasi society today clearly consider *U Thlen* not only as folklore of a group of people; *U Thlen* represents belief that is tangible and real, oftentimes, with terrible consequences through the *nongshohnoh* and the mob lynching. One of the few mechanisms to tackle this social malignant issue depends upon relying solely on the powers endowed on the queens of select Khasi chiefdoms, which are believed to be able to cast away *U Thlen*’s powers of oppression. However, this belief further enforces the *Thlen* narrative. The calls for resolutions and legal mechanisms are at their most earnest. Perhaps no other period in Khasi history has observed such urgency to re-evaluate and re-examine this folk tradition. Until our folklore and social mechanisms address the cultural implication of *U Thlen* and the *nongshohnoh*, the relationship between folklore and experience will inevitably remain the living scary reality of the Khasi.

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