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Psyche and the Sacred Land: Myth of Dain Thlen

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ABSTRACT

Psyche of the people grows out of the land that nestles them. The intrinsic connection between land and soul of the people is preserved in mythology, wherein Khasi mythology is one example. The sanctity of the land is reflected by the belief that the Bleis or the gods inhabits the caves and the hills; rivers and the waterfalls. The land is alive as the soul is full of life. This paper aims to reflect and interpret the Khasi myth of Dain Thlen to understand the entwined aspect of psyche and land. The methodology will follow the school of Carl Gustav Jung—Analytical Psychology. Ka Kma Kharai, is the daughter goddess who is free wanderer, wild, independent as the landscape of Meghalaya is. She is who promises magic; she is mysterious, shape-shifter and dark as the cave—mother of the sacrificial cult of the nongshohnohs. The goddess represents the part of psyche in us that has the capacity to understand the uncanny world of occult that appears immoral. She also symbolises the dominance of femininity in Khasi tribe. The goddess, the dragon uncle and serpentine son keep the cult fertile by infusing with blood and power. The practitioner of such a cult attains powers through act of sacrifice that is why the Thlen is cut—Dain Thlen.

Key Words: Mythology, Analytical Psychology, Meghalaya.

INTRODUCTION

The Legend of U-Thlen

“U Thlen is one of the legendary Khasi gods, whose worship is limited to a few clans and families. From participation in it all right-thinking Khasis recoil with loathing and horror, inasmuch as it involves the perpetration of crimes, for this god can only be propitiated by offerings of human sacrifices, with many revolting and barbaric rites.

The clans who are reputed to be the devotees and worshippers of the Thlen are regarded with aversion and fear throughout the country, and to them are attributed many kinds of atrocities, such as the kidnapping of children, murders and attempted murders, and many are the tales of hair-breadth escapes from the clutches of these miscreants, who are known as Nongshohnohs. Within quite recent times murders have been committed which are still shrouded in mystery, but which are said to have indications that the victims were killed for the purpose of Thlen sacrifice.

The following folk-tale purports to give an account of the origin and propagation of U Thlen, the most remorseless and cruel of all the Khasi deities.

According to tradition the Hima (state) of Cherra was, in olden times, the haunt of many famous Bleis (gods) who dominated the lives of men. These deities were said to dwell in certain localities, which in consequence came to be recognised as sacred places, and frequently to be called after the names of the Bleis. Foremost among these gods was U Mawlong Siem, and the hill where he was supposed to dwell is called after his name to the present day, and the inhabitants of certain villages still offer sacrifices to him.

In common with mankind, U Mawlong Siem is described as having a family, who, also in common with mankind, took pleasure in dancing and festivity. It is said that people sometimes hear the sound of revelry and the beating of drums within the mountain, supposed to be the drums of U Mawlong Siem beaten to the accompaniment of the dancing of his children, the sound of which invariably portends the death of a Siem or some great personage.

The only one of his family whose name and history have been transmitted was a daughter called Ka Kma Kharai, which signifies one that roams about in trenches or hidden nooks. She was well known in the Blei-world, and she

possessed the power of assuming whatever form she pleased. She often assumed the form of a woman and mingled with mankind without anybody suspecting her identity. Many of the Bleis sought her in marriage, but U Mawlong Siem, her father, would never give his consent, lest his prestige be lowered among the Bleis.

There was one suitor whom Ka Kma Kharai specially favoured. He was the god of Umwai, but her father forbade the union so sternly as to dispel all the hopes of the lovers. This so angered the young goddess that henceforth she rebelled openly against her father, and by way of retaliation she encouraged the attentions of strange and undesirable lovers.

When it was discovered that she was with child, she fled from her home, fearing the wrath of her father, and put herself under the protection of her maternal uncle, who lived in the Pomdloi cave, and was one of the famous dragons, or Yak Jakors of the country. In this cave a son was born to her, who proved to be a monster of hideous aspect, having the form of a snake and the characteristics of a vampire, who could be appeased only when fed with human blood. This monster they called U Thlen.

Unlike his mother, U Thlen could not transform himself into any likeness but that of a snake, but he had power to diminish or to enlarge his size at will. Sometimes he appeared so small as to be no bigger than a string of fine thread, at other times he expanded himself to such dimensions that he could swallow a man bodily.

In those days there was much intercourse between the Bleis and mankind. The latter were privileged to attend the Iew-blei—the fair of the Bleis—at L ynghingkhongkhen, the way to which passed the Pomdloi cave, and many unwary and unprotected travellers fell a prey to the greed of U Thlen and his associates.

The commonest mode by which these poor unfortunates were lured to their doom was through the blandishments of Ka Kma Kharai, who approached them in the form of a woman merchant, and dazzled them with the brilliancy of the jewellery she offered for sale. She refrained from killing her captives on occasions, but induced them by promises of riches and immunity to pledge themselves to the services of U Thlen, her son. To such as these she gave a magic ring, known in ancient lore as the Yngkuid Ring (Sati Yngkuid) which was believed to possess magic that enabled the owners of the ring to obtain all the desires of their hearts, but this magic was dormant until the owners fulfilled their obligations to U Thlen and brought him human victims to feed upon.

The method by which U Yak Jakor captured his victims was to waylay lonely travellers and to club them to death. U Thlen himself, when he grew old enough, also hunted men to death, so that between the three murderers the ravages made upon mankind were becoming grievous and intolerable.

Mankind sought divinations and offered sacrifices to the gods for the cessation of these atrocities, upon which a Durbar of the Bleis was called. U Mawlong Siem, who was a powerful Blei and a blood-relation of the murderers, overruled the Durbar, declaring that no authority could deprive the Bleis, or the demons, of any power they possessed, be it for good or for evil; but to mitigate the distress of mankind a decree was issued, restricting the number of people to be devoured to half the number of captives. If U Thlen captured two victims, one was to be released, if he captured ten, five were to be released. It transpired, however, that this decree helped but little to allay the sufferings of mankind, for murders continued at an appalling rate.

Mankind again sought divination and took counsel together, and it was made evident that the only one who could successfully help them was U Suidnoh (the fleeting demon), an erratic and insignificant being who haunted the forest of Lait-rngew to the north of Cherra. The Khasis hitherto had never recognised him as worthy of homage, but they went to offer him sacrifices then, according to the divinations. U Suidnoh volunteered to rescue them, but affirmed that the Snake could never be overcome without the sanction of a Blei, and inasmuch as the Bleis of the Cherra Hima had already refused their aid, he urged them to go and sacrifice to U 'Lei Shillong—the god of the Shillong Mountain—and to invoke his aid and win his favour. So, mankind offered sacrifices to U 'Lei Shillong, and received his sanction to wage war against U Thlen.

U Suidnoh, equipped in all his strength, went forth to Pomdloi and ordered the Khasis to bring to him many fat pigs and goats. These he killed and carried regularly to feed the Thlen in the cave, and this was the manner in which he made his offering. He bored a large hole in a rock roofing the cave, so that the carcasses might be passed down without being seen by U Thlen, and so he would not discover that they were not human bodies. He assumed the voice and manner of a Thlen worshipper and called out: "My uncle, I have brought my tribute, open your mouth that I may feed you." U Thlen is described as being slothful and sleepy, never rousing himself except to seek food. When he heard the call from above he would shake himself and expand to a great size, and open wide his jaws, into which the meat offering was thrust. In this way mankind had respite for a time, and the hunting of men ceased.

It was evident, however, that they must resort to some other measures, for it was impossible to continue to keep up the supply of fat animals. The Khasis began to grumble at the extravagant proceedings of U Suidnoh, but he always replied to their complaints with the words, "Koit, koit," signifying that all was well. After a time, he told them to hire the services of U Ramhah, the giant, to assist him in his final struggle against the vampire. When U Ramhah came he bade him build a smelting-house near the cave, and to make a pair of giant tongs, and such was the strength of U Ramhah that it only took him one day to build the smelting-house and to make the giant tongs. Next day U Suidnoh told him to heat a large piece of iron, and to bring it when it was red-hot in the big tongs to the rock on the top of the cave. When this was done U Suidnoh called out according to his custom: "My uncle, I have brought my tribute, open your mouth that I may feed you"; so, the Thlen shook himself and expanded his body to a gigantic size, and opened his jaws for the offering, whereupon the red-hot iron was thrust in. Upon this there followed the most terrible contortions of the Thlen's body, as he tossed about, writhing in his death agony, till the earth shook so violently that U Suidnoh and U Ramhah swooned from the concussion. When the disturbance subsided, and they had revived, they looked into the cave and found U Thlen lying dead.

U Suidnoh sounded a big drum to summon the people together, and great jubilation and dancing took place when it was announced that their enemy was dead. From that time the Khasis have offered sacrifices to U Suidnoh, and he is held in great honour.

The people held a council to consider how to dispose of the body of the Thlen, and it was decided that to make their triumph complete it was better to prepare a feast and to eat the body of U Thlen, so the carcase was dragged out of the cave and was divided on a flat rock into two portions. One portion was given to the people of the plains from the East, to be cooked after their manner, the other was given to the Khasis from the hills and the West to be cooked after their manner. The marks of the axe are said to be seen on the rock to this day, and the place is called Dain Thlen (the cutting of the Thlen). The hole which was bored by U Suidnoh in the top of the cave is also said to be visible to this day.

It happened that more people came to the feast from the plains than from the hills; moreover, they were accustomed to eat eels and snakes, so they considered the Thlen meat very palatable and savoury. They ate the whole of their portion and departed to their villages happily, and they were never afterwards troubled by Thlens. On the other hand the Khasis were unused to the flesh of reptiles, and they found the Thlen meat very unsavoury and strange-flavoured, so that when their feasting was done, a great portion of the meat was not eaten.

This caused no little perplexity, for it was deemed possible for the Thlen to come and reanimate the unconsumed portions of his body, so they kindled a big fire to burn all the fragments of meat to ashes, after which they gave a glad shout, believing themselves for ever safe from the ravages of U Thlen.

A certain woman, whose son had neglected his duties and stayed away from the feast, was sorely troubled in her mind, fearing that some ill luck might befall him, and a curse come on the family, because her son had wilfully disregarded the feast of conquest. While helping to gather the fragments of meat for burning, she surreptitiously hid a piece in the fold of her dress to take home to her son. When she reached her house, she put the meat away in a covered vessel pending her son's arrival. When the son returned, he brought news of many misfortunes which he had met that day, and particularly of the loss of much money, which loss he attributed to his neglect of the important feast; but when his mother told him how she had contrived to bring him a little of the Thlen meat, he was somewhat cheered, hoping that by this participation he might be helped to retrieve his fallen fortunes. To their dismay, when they uncovered the vessel, there was no meat left, only a tiny live snake wriggling about. They were preparing to destroy it when the little snake began to speak to them in their own tongue, beseeching them not to kill him. He said he was U Thlen come back to life, and that he was there by the decrees of the Bleis to bring them good fortune for as long as they gave him harbour and tribute.

It was a great temptation, coming as it did, when they had met with great losses, so, without thinking much of the consequences, they allowed the Thlen to live, harbouring it in secret without the knowledge of outsiders.

When U Thlen had fully regained his vitality, he demanded human sacrifices from them, which made them shudder with horror. But U Thlen was relentless, and threatened to devour them as a family, if they did not comply with his request, and when they saw one member of the family after another beginning to languish, fear for their lives drove them to hunt their fellow-men and to murder them, to propitiate U Thlen and to keep his good favour. Gradually U Thlen cast his sway over other families also, and won them to give him tribute. As his devotees increased, he reproduced himself mysteriously, so that in place of one Thlen living in a cave where everybody knew him to be, there arose many Thlens, living concealed in the houses of the Nongshohnohs who, to preserve their own safety and the goodwill of U Thlen, have become men-hunters and murderers, of whom the Khasis live in deadly fear to this day." (Rafy, 1920; pp. 58-67)

Hypothetical interpretation

Every land is alive, the hills, caves, rivers, waterfalls are imbued with spirit; and the land of Meghalaya is no exception. The landscape of Meghalaya is the abode of gods, goddesses, giants, spirits good or bad. In the myth, U Mawlong Siem is the god of hill and U Thlen—the serpent god that becomes a waterfall have been depicted as belonging to one family. Herein both Grandfather and the Grandson are the “spirits to a place”—genius loci. Marie Louis von Franz, a Jungian analyst, wrote that within a land there are certain places from where gods can be communicated with. These places are deemed “special” because they are the dwelling places of spirits. For instance, in Ireland there are fairy hills, belonging to the Celtic magical tradition, those marked areas are not to be disturbed for they are a part of the soul geography of the world hence preserving the essence of a place, enable the people of the land to stay connected to their sacred roots. Psyche experiences breaks in the perception of space. Eliade says that manifestation of the sacred—hierophany that separates the space sacred from profane. The sacred space is archetypal hence human soul keep returning back. The landscape is imagined and mythologized as Grandfather—peak, and Grandson—the waterfall. Where there are waterfalls there are mountains, hills or plateau. The myth is personifying the landscape as the family of Bleis or gods. The Dragon Uncle of the goddess is associated with Pomdolo caves. The spirit to a place regulates all the activities pertaining to that place. The places speak via myths that give voice to the spirit of the land. The myths of the landscape may speak about the objective psychic realities of the collectives or sometimes we project psychological aspects of our personality on these myths.

Father-Daughter

The Goddess can take any form yet she assumes the form of a woman and seek for relationship. Though in intimate relation woman wears many faces that are of a lover, seductress, mistress, muse, wife, friend, companion etc. Goddess Ka Kma Kharai rebels against father; her discord with the father mirrors her sexual dalliance with no strings attached. Bad relation with father makes her choose bad boys and, in the relationship, sex becomes very important. Such a girl unconsciously chooses partners with whom the relation goes as far as casual sex. For a woman father image is the first glimpse of her animus; her quality of relationship with the father mimics her relation with men later on in life so the goddess is a wanton, her behaviour is untamed, unrestrained and licentious even attention seeking for all the wrong reasons. Such a mother gives birth to a son who can have but one form i.e., serpent. Just as the Goddess sexually consumed men unrestrained likewise her son devours humans. Mother rouses the psychic energy and the son symbolize the fall of the same giving birth to rhythm in life.

Birth of Dain Thlen

Ka Kma Kharai is the formless goddess like the clouds that feed the many waterfalls of Meghalaya, her conflict with the father is the thunder and lightning in the clouds. The myth depicts her as wild and free-spirited soul personifying clouds and thunder that are untamed powers of nature. The goddess personifies the formless form of masses of clouds that pour rains all over the land of Meghalaya and U Thlen is the serpentine waters that is fed by the mother-cloud and then in turn after cutting the Thlen the snake meat is eaten by the people is the ever-flowing water cycle that nourishes the flora and fauna. People eating the fruits of water, symbolically represented as feasting on the flesh of the Thlen. The motif of mother feeding the son indicates the ever-repeating nature of this water cycle. The land of Meghalaya its beautiful terrains—the hills, the caves determine the flow of the water but the landscape itself gets carved and shaped by the forces of water. In the myth hills and the cavernous depth have been personified by U Mawlong Siem and the dragon—Yak Jakor. It is said that the cave of Yak Jakor that was known as Pomdolo cave preserves the stone that killed the U Thlen. The myth not just narrates the birth of a waterfall; it also brings to our sight the interdependent relation between various factors that preserves the biome. The bloody sacrifice of animals and humans relates on how the animal kingdom shares an antagonistic relation with the water cycle. The fauna has very little contribution to make on the water cycle but at the same time heavily dependent on it. Human activities harm this delicate cycle in the most adverse way and therefore in the cycle of consuming the waters to the fullest or consuming from the nature, animals and human suffer the harm done to the water cycle, in terms of variability of rainfall, climatic changes, depletion of sweet water sources. So, the image of Uroborus – the tail gets chewed up by its mouth-- We are the victims of our animosity.

Cult of the Nongshonohs

U Thlen is associated with gaining wealth. The Nongshonohs – the keepers of the Thlen are known to conduct human sacrifices in order to gain wealth or a magical increase in wealth that the magical ring—Yngkuid promises its owner. The ring firstly represents the vow of servitude and reciprocity between Thlen worshipper and the deity. The ring is the image of the cycle of feeding that binds both the parties. The worshippers of Thlen will feed Thlen with human blood and in return Serpent god will make the Thlen keepers family overflowing with wealth. Feeding the Thlen not just involves bloody sacrifice but the snake also consumes by giving sickness.

The symbol of people getting devoured by Thlen and people devouring Thlen shows the dynamic world of consumerism where life gets consumed in earning wealth and in life we go on consuming wealth. This uroboric design of consumers' life is called bhog that sums up all human desires big or small, consumption and suffering.

U Thlen embodies wealth. Dragons and serpents are known to be protectors of treasures. Water is a good metaphor for wealth and dynamics of economy is represented by U Thlen. In India, expression regarding monetary wealth in Hindi—‘it is raining money’ or when too much money is invested resulting in little to no gains it is expressed as ‘money has flown away like waters’. Such expressions show close affinity of the two concepts that here in the myth has been symbolically represented as the python god. The myth portrays that this snake has a magical power to enlarge or diminish itself symbolising the nature of desires in human that grows and declines, desire seduce us like Thlen seduce its keeper to let it live. We all nourish our desires, kill for it and also be killed by the same. At times, we all symbolically eat Thlen meat or save it at another. Just like the Thlen could regrow and become monstrously big, human desire are just the same our collective ambition can grow out of hand.

The cult Nongshonohs revolves around the Ka Kma Kharai and U Thlen. Ka Kma Kharai can assume multiple forms just like Goddess Shatrupa, consort of Brahma assumed all the forms of animal to give birth to all kinds of species to actuate the creation of life on earth. In Mahaniravana Tantra, the great Goddess—Mahakali has been called the formless, yet she takes countless forms and has been called the original form the archetypal feminine who is the “creatix, protectress and destructress”(Avalon, 1953; p. 72). Ka Kma Kharai is the wild goddess who is the womb for the serpentine waterfall, the preserver of the son and the devourer of men.

From Jungian point of view U Thlen is the projection of the collective shadow. Marie Louise von Franz in one of her interviews said that when the personal dark aspects of personality remain un acknowledged by the collectives then it opens gateway to the collective evil i.e collective shadow.

U Suidnoh and U Ramhah are deities associated with natural resources—sacred groves and minerals of earth. These are the endowments of the earth that takes care of human needs. They represent man’s heroic abilities to conquer and utilize resources. U Suidnoh is also known as a goatherd—a heroic image that can lead people of the tribe into transformation. The myth shares a transformation that is taking place in terms of sacrificial offerings. First, there are human sacrifices then animal sacrifices. Earlier times, Aztec people ritually performed human sacrifices to Sun-God for human blood was considered to fuel the Sun to keep on rising and shining over them. In Assam, Kamakhya Devi received buffalo sacrifices. But in time, sacrifices have become psychological or the bloody sacrifice has been replaced by giving gifts and offerings. Margaret Lyngdoh (2015) writes that the “protective defence” against nongshonohs is to carrying handful of rice or eat earth (Lyngdoh, 2015; p. 169). This act symbolically means to satiate, to adequately nourish oneself in all respect so that our poverty should not feed the desires, so that our desires don’t become hungry monsters, and to remember the heroes U Suidnoh and U Ramhah.

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