

Legend of the Shillong Peak (Meghalaya)

Shillong Peak, the highest mountain in the Khasi hills, once used to enjoy the renown of being full of romance and mystery, and was sacred to the spirits and the gods. A vast forest extended from this mountain across to the north of the country. In this forest dwelt demons and dragons who cast evil spell upon any person who happened to spend a night in the forest and the unfortunate person could not shake himself free from the spell.

In the mountain lived a god, unknown to the ancient Khasis, and unworshipped. One day a male child was born in the Khasi community. He grew up as a wise man endowed with a great insight which enabled him to understand mysteries. People called him U Shillong and revered him. It is he who discovered the existence of the great god in the mountain. He enlightened the people on the greatness of the god and advised them to offer sacrifice and reverence to him. He taught them how to perform rites to please him. The name of the god was unknown even to U Shillong and people named him 'U Lei Shillong', the god of U Shillong. People gave this name to the god, because U Shillong was the first to pay homage to the god. Gradually, the god came to be called 'the god of Shillong', the peak itself called the Shillong peak and even the present town is called Shillong in token of veneration to the wise man.

Even today the god Shillong is the most revered of all the Khasi gods, and altars have been raised on hilltops of Jaintia in his honour. Though sacrifices are often offered at distant shrines, the god lives in the Shillong mountain, more especially in the sacred "grove on the summit of the peak itself, which is a familiar landmark in the country.

Judging from the tradition ascribed to the god, he was regarded as a benevolent and benign deity, forbearing in his attitude towards human beings, particularly those who entered his forest to hunt, and guarding them against evil spirits. He endowed U Suidnoh, a Khasi hero, with wisdom and power to defeat and subdue U Thlen, the great snake god and vampire from Sohra (Cherrapunji in Bengali), and saved Ka Thei and her sister from the clutches of the merciless demon, U Ksuid Tynjang.

Tradition has it that the god Shillong had a family consisting of a wife and three daughters. The three daughters have been assigned important places in the folklore of the Khasis. One of the daughters took on the form of a Khasi maiden in order to live with mankind, and she married a handsome Khasi youth and became the ancestress of Khasi chiefs. The other two daughters transformed themselves in playful fits into two rivers. Below is the story of how the Goddess came to live with mankind.

Hundreds of years ago there was a cave called the Cave of Marai, in the vicinity of the place now known as Pomlakrai. At a little distance from the Cave of Marai stood a high perpendicular rock. Young cowherds gathered there and enjoyed themselves, playing around the rock and playing on their flutes, while their cows were grazing on grasses that had grown in profusion there. They practised archery as their favourite pastime. The rock was too high for them to climb.

One day when the cowherds came as usual over to their rendezvous round the rock, they saw, to their greatest surprise, a beautiful maiden sitting on the top of the rock. How did she climb to the top of the rock? they wondered. The maiden was looking wistfully at them. The cowherds got frightened and ran back to their village, Myllem, leaving their cows grazing by themselves. When the news was spread among the villagers, they gathered together at the public meeting place to consult among themselves about what

to do. They decided to go over there and see for themselves whether the maiden that the cowherds had seen sitting on the top of the rock was an apparition or a human being. Taking along scimitars and ropes they went over to the rock.

When they reached the rock, led by the cowherds, they really saw a beautiful girl sitting on the top of the rock. Her exquisite beauty and her rich apparel monopolized their thought. There was in the village no girl so beautiful and possessing such rich apparel. She might have hailed from another place and a rich family. But how had she climbed to the top of the rock? they found themselves wondering. Somehow she had climbed to the top, but could not climb down the rock so she was sitting helpless, they thought. They took it upon themselves to save the girl. But they knew not how to climb the steep and slippery rock. So they were coaxing her into climbing down the rock, but the child did not respond to their coaxing and kept on sitting.

Chief among the rescuers was a man called U Myllem Ngap who was respected for his sagacity and valour. He attributed the child's refusal to be coaxed to her fear to venture unaided down the steep and slippery rock. He sent some of his comrades into the jungle to cut down some bamboos and bring them over. When they had brought the bamboos, U Myllem Ngap joined them into a pole long enough to reach up to the top of the rock. He then beckoned at the child to take hold of it, but the child was sitting on, unperturbed.

Gradually the day was beginning to wane and evening was drawing in. The rescuers were on the verge of giving up hopes of rescuing the child. But they could not bring themselves to leave her to her fate on the top of the rock. Suddenly an idea dawned upon U Myllem Ngap when he saw a tuft of wild flowers growing near the rock. He quickly gathered a bunch and fastened it to the end of the long pole and held it up in the child's view. The moment the child saw the flowers, she uttered a cry of delight and held out her hand to take them. U Myllem Ngap promptly lowered the pole and the child moved towards it. But before she could grasp the flowers, the pole was again lowered. Other rescuers were watching with bated breath the process of getting the child down the steep and slippery rock. To their great relief the child was brought down to the ground little by little, step by step.

As U Myllem Ngap had rescued the child, she was entrusted to his care and was given the name 'Pah Syntiew' which means 'Lured by Flowers'. This name was given because her name and origins were unknown. U Myllem Ngap took her to his house and adopted her as his own daughter. He had no children of his own.

Under the care and affection of U Myllem, Ka Myllem Ngap grew up into a woman of incomparable beauty and her fame spread far and wide and far beyond the periphery of the village. She excelled other girls of the village in dancing, and taught them dancing and singing. She initiated and instituted the Virgins Dance which is still today popular among the Khasis. Besides, she was so worldly-wise that even his foster father consulted her on all familial affairs and on all matters pertaining to the ruling of the village. She displayed such tact and judgement that people from other villages came over to her to have their disputes settled,

When she reached the marriageable age U Myllem Ngap bestowed her in marriage upon a man possessed of wisdom and prowess embalmed in the Kgasi folklore and remembered as U Kongor Nongjri. She gave birth to many sons and daughters who were all noble and comely.

After her children had grown up, she called them together and revealed to them who she was. 'I have often told you of U Lei Shillong, the mountain

god,' she said. 'I am his daughter. He permitted me to live with mankind for a period to teach them many things. The time for my living with mankind has almost come to an end and the time of my returning to my native element has drawn near.' On hearing this, her children started crying and sobbing out a request to her not to return to her native element. 'Do not cry!' she said, wiping tears from their eyes. 'I can't stay on beyond the time given me. I shall stay on just a few days with you. Harden your hearts to bid me farewell.'

A few days later Ka Pah Syntiew walked away alone in the direction of the Cave of Marai. No one accompanied her, for they had got to know who she was and her time had arrived for her returning to her native element. Her descendents known to this day are two of the leading families of Khasi chiefs of Syiems. In common parlance these two families, the families of Khairim and Myllem, are still called 'the Syiems of Shillong' or 'the Syiems of god.'