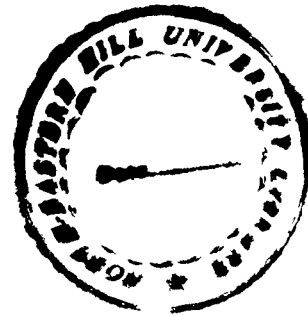


**The Concept of the Good Life
in the Traditional Thought
Structure of the Mao
Naga Tribe**

(ABSTRACT)

By

M. Daniel



Department of Philosophy

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
of the Degree of Doctor of philosophy in Philosophy
of North Eastern Hill University, Shillong**

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The Concept of the Good Life in the Traditional Thought Structure of the Mao Naga Tribe

(A B S T R A C T)

“What is the good life for humans?” is a question asked and answered by philosophers down through the centuries. Since this question is related to human behaviour, to human free will and intellect, the debate about it is never closed. Peoples and cultures view the ‘good life’ variously, though certain common threads can be traced in these varieties of views. Some of these varieties of answers include hedonism, the view that pleasure is the ultimate good, Platonism, the view that knowledge of the good leads to right actions, Aristotelianism, the view that good life is the life of happiness achieved by adherence to the ‘Golden Mean’, utilitarianism, the view that an action is right if it brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number and the ethics of the *Bhagavad-Gita* called the *Niskamakarma vada*, the view that an action is good if it is done without desire for the fruit.

The systematic philosophical study of the elements of 'good life' is called ethics and great philosophers have developed imposing ethical structures. Very often, ethical writers relied on an analysis of human behaviour in general to come upon their ethical conclusions. However, other than a single philosopher's views of ethics, cultures, communities and peoples have had their own unsaid ethical laws and views of the 'good life.' These views were the backdrop for their actions and outside this universe of discourse it was difficult to understand human actions within these communities. My thesis is about one such ethical universe of discourse, that of the Mao Nagas. As a closely knit tribal community, living close to their land and close to one another, there was nothing regarding what was good or bad written or documented within the Mao tribe. These injunctions were, instead, so very natural to everyone in the community that they lived, moved and had their being in it. They imbued the spirit of 'good life' according to their own ethos, instead of talking and thinking about it. Speaking of 'ethos', what I mean here is a 'worldview'. A worldview is the sum total of the elements of a conceptual system with which a people deal with every aspect of their personal and social life whether the culture or community is conscious of it or not.

A world view... is that part of a conceptual system, which is crucial in the articulation of a culture's view of man's place and role in the world, his relationship to things other than himself (including other men) and also his relationship to himself. Concepts which are crucial in the constitution of a world view would be such as the following: man and his specific capacities, man's destiny and his pursuit of it and man-women, man-child, man-animal, man-nature, man-alien, man-god relationship and so on. (Sujata Miri, *Khasi World View: A Conceptual Exploration*, Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1988, p.2)

My thesis is about Mao concept of 'good life' within this larger context of the 'Mao Worldview.' Although the traditional Maos did not talk and think about their conception of 'good life' (the spirit of this particular notion of good life, nevertheless, permeated their being; they lived it rather than talking about it;

“for tribals, it is ‘rationality in the concrete’ that makes sense” [Temsula Ao, “Human Resource Management in Ao Society,” *Rationality and Tribal Thought*, ed. Sujata Miri, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004, p.188]), I intend to ‘talk and think’ here about the traditional Mao idea of good life. In the simplest form —after living within the community as a Mao—, the Mao idea of good life may be said to be “a happy and fulfilled life.” In the language of the Maos, good life is called “*Chohrii Kayi*”. While the translation of this term into English is difficult, the idea may be translated as ‘a life

of fulfillment, self-reliance, dignity, industriousness, honesty, simplicity, egalitarianism, friendliness, justice, absence of disease, wisdom, wealth sufficient to sustain oneself and building up a harmonious family and community.' Largely, they believed that a good life is a life of happiness.

The Maos lived in isolation and under their own rule even up to the end of the nineteenth century. However, their society was cohesive and effective in bringing about a 'good life' for the vast majority of their tribesmen and women. Among the sixteen Mao villages, there was a type of understanding and there was no practice of headhunting among these villages as the Maos took out headhunting expeditions mainly to the Maram and the adjacent Angami villages. Each Mao village was an independent unit of rule much like the Greek city states of yore. The Maos were proud practitioners of their own indigenous religion and culture until the arrival of Christianity towards the end of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of Christianity and modern education also began the wilting of the cultural bedrock of the Maos. The British imposition of law and order also contributed to the cultural marginalization already begun. Together with practices like headhunting, several of the cultural practices and

traditional institutions were discouraged by both Christianity and the British rulers who called them sinful and illegal. One can say that the traditional practices, once a vibrant cultural worldview of the community, remains today mainly in the form of curious museum relics of antique days.

Every culture and its worldview has a conception of 'good life.' People come together to live in a community, pledge themselves to each other, adhere to certain unwritten or written code of conduct, believe in certain supernatural realities and practise certain rituals for favour of these realities – all these they do with a single aim of leading a 'good life', a life that brings happiness to them individually and collectively. They bind themselves into a community because of the realization that their prospect of good life could be enhanced by doing so, and by doing it, they come to inherit and live out a conception of good life and achieve a certain sense of fulfillment. Due to the post-Christian and medieval trend in human thought and its heritage of over-spiritualism, there was a trend of watering down the material aspects of good life. I find the traditional Mao conception of good life very balanced in its approach to both the

spiritual and the material; here we are far removed from dichotomies of all kinds.

I believe that this study could not have come timelier. Disappearing of those who lived in the oral milieu and the difficulties of those of the present to get into the pulse of the oral traditions, makes the present study significant, since it is still trying to gather whatever is left in the oral tradition from the point of view of the 'good life' lived by the Maos in the traditional times. Though there have been a few socio-anthropological studies on the Mao community, to the best of my knowledge, no philosophical study has ever been undertaken on the Mao Naga tribe's traditional concepts and views. I rely heavily on the Mao oral traditions, stories, myths, legends, proverbs, wise sayings, folk songs and the traditional practices and their meanings as related to me by the elders of the community, who I think, have had some taste of the preliterate oral society of old. My main assumption here is that though the Mao world is no longer available in its living palpable form even to the Mao people themselves, it is possible to imaginatively reconstruct that form of life in an abstract, general and functional way.

The dissertation consists of the following seven chapters. The introduction deals with the argument of the thesis and its methodology and approach. A prelude to the Mao Naga tribe and to their situation and context, certain assumptions and definitions used in the thesis, a brief survey of literature, etc., are also incorporated into this chapter.

In the second chapter entitled “The Concept of Good Life: A Philosophical Exploration,” I examine the Aristotelian and Kantian notions of ‘good life’ critically. For Aristotle, together with the finer virtues, material accessories, comforts and certain circumstances of life played a great role in bringing about the fulfillment of ‘good life’ for a person. Hence, good life is not entirely dependent on the individual, although he/she is the main player in its enactment in his/her life. However, for Kant the good life is purely a detached moral life, which has to be sought for its own sake. The autonomous individual, undaunted by the circumstances and society, can bring about good life for him/herself according to Kant. Hence, in this chapter I conclude that Aristotle’s notion of good life resembles that of the Maos more than that of Immanuel Kant.

In the third chapter, “The concept of Good Life in Traditional Mao Thought”, I first deal with the Utilitarian conception of good life before coming to the Mao conception proper and show that the Utilitarian notion of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ has close affinity to the Maos’ communitarian notion of ‘good life.’ It is not that for the Maos the individual is not important, but for them individual is not the unit of life in the Mao village. The village is itself the unit and the happiness or the unhappiness of the individual depends on his/her relation to the community.

The fourth chapter, “The Mao’s Vision of *Omei* (Man) and the Good Life,” is an analysis of the Maos’ vision of the human being. Every weltanschauung has as its integral part a vision of the human being on the basis of which they perceive the role the humans have in life. The chapter explores the nature of humans, their relation to the world, to God and to others in the community, the Mao beliefs about after life etc. For unveiling the Mao vision of *Omei*, I depend heavily on the Mao myths and legends.

The fifth chapter, “Mao Religion and Its Relation to Their Moral Beliefs,” attempts to develop and exhibit the concept of

good life as enshrined in the Mao Naga religion. They believed in one Almighty God (*Oramei*) and also in many lesser spirits, both good and evil. They used to offer many types of sacrifices and offerings to propitiate the deities and several *Manes* (religious taboos) constituted their rituals. The Maos had an anthropomorphic conception of the deity and a similar conception of after life as well. By analyzing the religious beliefs and practices of the Maos, I wish to show their connection to the Mao notion of good life.

In the sixth chapter, “Virtues and the Good Life”, I examine the Mao notion of virtues and the various virtues that were held in high esteem by them in order to demonstrate their connection to good life. Even after embracing Christianity, the Maos still hold in high esteem personal qualities like bravery and love for adventure. My endeavour in the chapter is directed to demonstrate that the Maos’ notion of virtue was not in the Aristotelian order of ‘quality of the soul’ only; instead, they believed in other qualities like courage and aesthetic enjoyment (*chokhru kosopfoo*) as an integral part of good life. I also examine whether such a conception of virtue has any relevance in the context of a purely spiritualistic account of virtues.

My conclusion, besides being a summary of the findings of the core chapters, is an attempt to show that even in their post-Christian era, the Maos still have not given up their basic notion of good life. Though Christianity has become their religion, they are still guided in their day-to-day life by their primeval notion of good life. Change of religion has not necessarily led to the change in their deeper moral beliefs. I also examine the erosion of the social fabric that has nevertheless taken place in the community due to the onslaughts of modernity. I argue in the conclusion that a creative integration of modernity, change and continuity of the once vibrant tradition that gave meaning to the Mao way of life within the context of change will be the best way to deal with the present ambiguities of the community.

When one compares the old order of the Maos with the new, at the first sight there might appear to some a lack of virtue in the old. In the new order virtues like self-sacrifice, abstinence, abnegation, renunciation, humility, love (even for the enemy) etc. are the virtues. In the old order an altogether different classification of virtues is provided: bravery, friendship, fidelity, honesty, pride, excelling in certain activities etc. Which order is right? Which is superior? I show in my conclusion that in a

balanced view that appreciates both the spiritual and the material, there cannot be a categorization of 'low' and 'high' of the old and the new orders.

Falling back on MacIntyre's notion that there is no core conception of 'virtue' as such, I cannot fail to see the credibility and the worth of the Mao conception of virtue and the good life, with all its peculiarities and uniqueness. There is a rationality in every tradition, just as there is a rationality in the Mao tradition. The notion of 'rationality' that we have today is itself the reason for the modern Mao – for that matter, of all cultures on the fringes – tendency to devalue their own cultural heritage. The modern conception of rationality is influenced by the scientific ideal which is decidedly Western. What gives value to an action is the worldview of the collective community. Hence, even in the face of modernity this worldview should somehow survive the onslaught. As MacIntyre points out, "Some core of shared belief, constitutive of allegiance to the tradition, has to survive every rupture." (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Duckworth, 1988, p.356). Tradition is not merely a way of life; it is also a way of doing things, thinking, a form of rationality. Within it is enshrined a vision of the world, a

vision of the good and the bad, of good life, of rationality and truth. Unless we take these seriously and encounter the new challenges, new worldviews and paradigms and the challenges of modernity within this cultural landscape, we have the problem of rootlessness, alienation from our own being and the consequent meaninglessness. The right approach to take is that of Mahatma Gandhi who while appreciated whatever was good in the Western worldview, culture and language, refused to be blown off his feet.

Courage, adventure, fidelity, friendship etc., are still the ruling virtues among the Maos and not Christian renunciation or forgiveness. Christianity has a very severe code of sexual ethics. This too has not had a great effect on the Mao way of life. Though the virtue of amorousness is not pursued vigorously today, intermingling of the sexes from their early stages in life is not frowned upon. Marriage is generally for love. The spirit of communion which is absent in the modern world is still a lived in reality among the Maos. In fact, the Christian fellowship is taking the place of the erstwhile social gatherings and revelries of the youth dormitories. The life of the unified village is still prevalent, though this atmosphere is vitiated by the presence of

competing Christian denominations. As in the past, the joy of communion makes room for celebrations and mirth even in the present times among the Maos. The Maos view life as a joyous event, a continuous act of celebration. The pessimistic, despondent view of life which is very much part of the modern vision that gave rise to a philosophy of pessimism, existentialism, is absent even today among the Maos.

The focus of the Mao conception of good life per se, lies its emphasizes on 'balance'. In however rough and ready a manner, the Maos defended their belief in the balance of the spiritual and the passionate/emotional, the religious and the material, the moral and the natural. Christian morality gives no place to human instincts, passions, emotions, their deep seated drives and whatever comes natural to them in its schemata of strict moral laws. The harm done to humanity by this type of morality has been copiously written about – a neurotic obsession with guilt, a morbid concept of sin, oppressive caging of the individual spirit, a hypocritical parade of virtues and so on goes the list. Not giving proper care to our emotional natural life and not respecting our inner drives leads human beings to the edges of insanity. Conservative morality has been one-sided and gave



scant respect to the 'natural aspects of humans'. In fact, it is forgotten completely that accepting and coping with them is an important aspect of gracefully growing up. The deconstruction of the aberrations of traditional morality had been achieved without match by Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche. Nietzsche had shown how the 'will to power' became the foundation for saintly asceticism, legalistic morality or mindless brutality. Of course, the opposite type of morality which glorifies materialism is also equally harmful and most people see it as unacceptable to them. This is harmful because it is just another manifestation of the assuredness of conservative morality: while one glorified adherence to supposedly superior moral laws, the other glorified the superiority of a free, listless and unspiritual life.

The Mao notion of good life is a midway between these two extremes. It celebrates the natural joys of life and does not imprison the human spirit. At the same time, there is a spiritual-religious supporting ethos to bring harmony into social and individual life. A sense of equilibrium ruled their moral thinking. One hopes that by embracing the severity of Christian ethics, the Maos do not distance themselves from this balanced vision of human life.

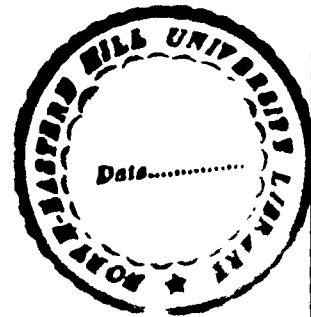
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Department of Philosophy



**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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March, 2004

I, Mr. M. Daniel, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form a basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis had not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy.

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Many people helped bring this dissertation to its completion. I gratefully acknowledge and express deep appreciation to all of them who have made this research project possible.

Professor (Mrs.) Sujata Miri (presently also Dean of the School of Humanities and Education, NEHU, Shillong) efficiently guided me in this research programme. With her for support, I never lacked in advice, ideas, research approach or insights. Prof. Miri went out of her way to make time for me even in her busy schedule. In the process, I have come to know her not only as the supervisor of my thesis, but also as a wonderful person who taught me a lot more things about life. I thankfully acknowledge my indebtedness to her. I am also very grateful to Prof. Mrinal Miri, Vice-chancellor, NEHU who was a constant source of encouragement and support for me. Some of his insightful thoughts on tribal philosophy and worldview stirred me to take up the present research project and see to its completion.

I am grateful for what I learned from my other teachers of the Department of Philosophy, NEHU and from my friends, companions, research-fellows and fellow-hostellers at NEHU. I also thank the non-teaching staff of the Department of Philosophy for their ready assistance in all matters relating to the office. Without such support and encouragement, I admit, this thesis would not have come into being.

I acknowledge my appreciation to the Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), New Delhi that awarded me with a much needed Junior Research Fellowship to complete this research project.

My research programme had a lot to do with random interviews and discussions with several elders and intellectuals of the Mao Naga community, both at Mao in Manipur and in Shillong. I must say that, without exception, all of them have been extremely pleased to help me out and part with precious information and views. I appreciate and acknowledge the kind favour of all of them, especially of Mr. M. Ashoohru, Principal, Model English High School, Mao, Mr. M. Mahriili and Mrs. A. Besa, Mr. K. Adahrii, Mr. K. Koda and Mr. K. Losii – all from Kalinamai Village; Mr. N. Salew, the Chief of Makhel Village,

Mr. N. Salew from Pudunamai Village. Among them all stands out my mother, Mrs. L. Komuhra, who has been backing me relentlessly and helping me to collect Mao legends, myths and stories from the many elders of the community who live in very rural areas. My thanks are due also to my brother and sisters who also helped and encouraged me throughout this research programme.

Finally, my sincere appreciation to Dr. Siby K. George, Programme Coordinator, State Resource Centre, NEHU, for typesetting and proofreading this dissertation with utmost care, and for his friendship and encouragement.

I dedicate this work to my late father, Mr. A. Mathibo, whose memory has been a constant source of inspiration to me while I worked on the Maos' conception of good life.

Place : Shillong

Date : 31.03.04.


M. Daniel

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“What is the good life for humans?” is a question asked and answered by philosophers down through the centuries. Since this question is related to human behaviour, to human free will and intellect, the debate about it is never closed. Peoples and cultures view the ‘good life’ variously, though certain common threads can be traced in these varieties of views. Some of these varieties of answers include hedonism, the view that pleasure is the ultimate good, Platonism, the view that knowledge of the good leads to right actions, Aristotelianism, the view that good life is the life of happiness achieved by adherence to the ‘Golden Mean’, utilitarianism, the view that an action is right if it brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number and the ethics of the *Bhagavad-Gita* called the *Niskamakarma vada*, the view that an action is good if it is done without desire for the fruit.

The systematic philosophical study of the elements of ‘good life’ is called ethics and great philosophers have developed imposing ethical structures. Very often, ethical writers relied on an analysis of human behaviour in general to come upon their

ethical conclusions. However, other than a single philosopher's views of ethics, cultures, communities and peoples have had their own unsaid ethical laws and views of the 'good life.' These views were the backdrop for their actions and outside this universe of discourse it was difficult to understand human actions within these communities. My thesis is about one such ethical universe of discourse, that of the Mao Nagas. As a closely knit tribal community, living close to their land and close to one another, there was nothing regarding what was good or bad written or documented within the Mao tribe. These injunctions were, instead, so very natural to everyone in the community that they lived, moved and had their being in it. They imbued the spirit of 'good life' according to their own ethos, instead of talking and thinking about it. Speaking of 'ethos', what I mean here is a 'worldview'. A worldview is the sum total of the elements of a conceptual system with which a people deal with every aspect of their personal and social life whether the culture or community is conscious of it or not.

A world view... is that part of a conceptual system, which is crucial in the articulation of a culture's view of man's place and role in the world, his relationship to things other than himself (including other men) and also his relationship to himself. Concepts which are crucial in the constitution of a world view would be such as the following: man and

his specific capacities, man's destiny and his pursuit of it and man-women, man-child, man-animal, man-nature, man-alien, man-god relationship and so on.¹

My thesis is about Mao concept of 'good life' within this larger context of the 'Mao Worldview.' Although the traditional Maos did not talk and think about their conception of 'good life' (the spirit of this particular notion of good life, nevertheless, permeated their being; they lived it rather than talking about it;

“for tribals, it is 'rationality in the concrete' that makes sense”², I intend to 'talk and think' here about the traditional Mao idea of good life. In the simplest form—after living within the community as a Mao—, the Mao idea of good life may be said to be “a happy and fulfilled life.” In the language of the Maos, good life is called “*Chohrii Kayi*”. While the translation of this term into English is difficult, the idea may be translated as 'a life of fulfillment, self-reliance, dignity, industriousness, honesty, simplicity, egalitarianism, friendliness, justice, absence of disease, wisdom, wealth sufficient to sustain oneself and building up a harmonious family and community.' Largely, they believed that a good life is a life of happiness.

The Maos lived in isolation and under their own rule even up to the end of the nineteenth century. However, their society

was cohesive and effective in bringing about a 'good life' for the vast majority of their tribesmen and women. Among the sixteen Mao villages, there was a type of understanding and there was no practice of headhunting among these villages as the Maos took out headhunting expeditions mainly to the Maram and the adjacent Angami villages. Each Mao village was an independent unit of rule much like the Greek city states of yore. The Maos were proud practitioners of their own indigenous religion and culture until the arrival of Christianity towards the end of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of Christianity and modern education also began the wilting of the cultural bedrock of the Maos. The British imposition of law and order also contributed to the cultural marginalization already begun. Together with practices like headhunting, several of the cultural practices and traditional institutions were discouraged by both Christianity and the British rulers who called them sinful and illegal. One can say that the traditional practices, once a vibrant cultural worldview of the community, remains today mainly in the form of curious museum relics of antique days.

Every culture and its worldview has a conception of 'good life.' People come together to live in a community, pledge

themselves to each other, adhere to certain unwritten or written code of conduct, believe in certain supernatural realities and practise certain rituals for favour of these realities – all these they do with a single aim of leading a ‘good life’, a life that brings happiness to them individually and collectively. They bind themselves into a community because of the realization that their prospect of good life could be enhanced by doing so, and by doing it, they come to inherit and live out a conception of good life and achieve a certain sense of fulfillment. Due to the post-Christian and medieval trend in human thought and its heritage of over-spiritualism, there was a trend of watering down the material aspects of good life. I find the traditional Mao conception of good life very balanced in its approach to both the spiritual and the material; here we are far removed from dichotomies of all kinds.

I believe that this study could not have come timelier. Disappearing of those who lived in the oral milieu and the difficulties of those of the present to get into the pulse of the oral traditions, makes the present study significant, since it is still trying to gather whatever is left in the oral tradition from the point of view of the ‘good life’ lived by the Maos in the

traditional times. Though there have been a few socio-anthropological studies on the Mao community, to the best of my knowledge, no philosophical study has ever been undertaken on the Mao Naga tribe's traditional concepts and views. I rely heavily on the Mao oral traditions, stories, myths, legends, proverbs, wise sayings, folk songs and the traditional practices and their meanings as related to me by the elders of the community, who I think, have had some taste of the preliterate oral society of old. My main assumption here is that though the Mao world is no longer available in its living palpable form even to the Mao people themselves, it is possible to imaginatively reconstruct that form of life in an abstract, general and functional way.

The dissertation consists of the following seven chapters. The introduction deals with the argument of the thesis and its methodology and approach. A prelude to the Mao Naga tribe and to their situation and context, certain assumptions and definitions used in the thesis, a brief survey of literature, etc., are also incorporated into this chapter.

In the second chapter entitled "The Concept of Good Life: A Philosophical Exploration," I examine the Aristotelian and

Kantian notions of 'good life' critically. For Aristotle, together with the finer virtues, material accessories, comforts and certain circumstances of life played a great role in bringing about the fulfillment of 'good life' for a person. Hence, good life is not entirely dependent on the individual, although he/she is the main player in its enactment in his/her life. However, for Kant the good life is purely a detached moral life, which has to be sought for its own sake. The autonomous individual, undaunted by the circumstances and society, can bring about good life for him/herself according to Kant. Hence, in this chapter I conclude that Aristotle's notion of good life resembles that of the Maos more than that of Immanuel Kant.

In the third chapter, "The concept of Good Life in Traditional Mao Thought", I first deal with the Utilitarian conception of good life before coming to the Mao conception proper and show that the Utilitarian notion of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' has close affinity to the Maos' communitarian notion of 'good life.' It is not that for the Maos the individual is not important, but for them individual is not the unit of life in the Mao village. The village is itself the unit and

the happiness or the unhappiness of the individual depends on his/her relation to the community.

The fourth chapter, “The Mao’s Vision of *Omei* (Man) and the Good Life,” is an analysis of the Maos’ vision of the human being. Every weltanschauung has as its integral part a vision of the human being on the basis of which they perceive the role the humans have in life. The chapter explores the nature of humans, their relation to the world, to God and to others in the community, the Mao beliefs about after life etc. For unveiling the Mao vision of *Omei*, I depend heavily on the Mao myths and legends.

The fifth chapter, “Mao Religion and Its Relation to Their Moral Beliefs,” attempts to develop and exhibit the concept of good life as enshrined in the Mao Naga religion. They believed in one Almighty God (*Oramei*) and also in many lesser spirits, both good and evil. They used to offer many types of sacrifices and offerings to propitiate the deities and several *Manes* (religious taboos) constituted their rituals. The Maos had an anthropomorphic conception of the deity and a similar conception of after life as well. By analyzing the religious beliefs and

practices of the Maos, I wish to show their connection to the Mao notion of good life.

In the sixth chapter, “Virtues and the Good Life”, I examine the Mao notion of virtues and the various virtues that were held in high esteem by them in order to demonstrate their connection to good life. Even after embracing Christianity, the Maos still hold in high esteem personal qualities like bravery and love for adventure. My endeavour in the chapter is directed to demonstrate that the Maos’ notion of virtue was not in the Aristotelian order of ‘quality of the soul’ only; instead, they believed in other qualities like courage and aesthetic enjoyment (chokhru kosopfoo) as an integral part of good life. I also examine whether such a conception of virtue has any relevance in the context of a purely spiritualistic account of virtues.

My conclusion, besides being a summary of the findings of the core chapters, is an attempt to show that even in their post-Christian era, the Maos still have not given up their basic notion of good life. Though Christianity has become their religion, they are still guided in their day-to-day life by their primeval notion of good life. Change of religion has not necessarily led to the change in their deeper moral beliefs. I also examine the erosion

of the social fabric that has nevertheless taken place in the community due to the onslaughts of modernity. I argue in the conclusion that a creative integration of modernity, change and continuity of the once vibrant tradition that gave meaning to the Mao way of life within the context of change will be the best way to deal with the present ambiguities of the community.

When one compares the old order of the Maos with the new, at the first sight there might appear to some a lack of virtue in the old. In the new order virtues like self-sacrifice, abstinence, abnegation, renunciation, humility, love (even for the enemy) etc. are the virtues. In the old order an altogether different classification of virtues is provided: bravery, friendship, fidelity, honesty, pride, excelling in certain activities etc. Which order is right? Which is superior? I show in my conclusion that in a balanced view that appreciates both the spiritual and the material, there cannot be a categorization of 'low' and 'high' of the old and the new orders.

Falling back on MacIntyre's notion that there is no core conception of 'virtue' as such, I cannot fail to see the credibility and the worth of the Mao conception of virtue and the good life, with all its peculiarities and uniqueness. There is a rationality in

every tradition, just as there is a rationality in the Mao tradition. The notion of ‘rationality’ that we have today is itself the reason for the modern Mao – for that matter, of all cultures on the fringes – tendency to devalue their own cultural heritage. The modern conception of rationality is influenced by the scientific ideal which is decidedly Western. What gives value to an action is the worldview of the collective community. Hence, even in the face of modernity this worldview should somehow survive the onslaught. As MacIntyre points out, “Some core of shared belief, constitutive of allegiance to the tradition, has to survive every rupture.”³ Tradition is not merely a way of life; it is also a way of doing things, thinking, a form of rationality. Within it is enshrined a vision of the world, a vision of the good and the bad, of good life, of rationality and truth. Unless we take these seriously and encounter the new challenges, new worldviews and paradigms and the challenges of modernity within this cultural landscape, we have the problem of rootlessness, alienation from our own being and the consequent meaninglessness. The right approach to take is that of Mahatma Gandhi who while appreciated whatever was good in the Western worldview, culture and language, refused to be blown off his feet.

Courage, adventure, fidelity, friendship etc., are still the ruling virtues among the Maos and not Christian renunciation or forgiveness. Christianity has a very severe code of sexual ethics. This too has not had a great effect on the Mao way of life. Though the virtue of amorousness is not pursued vigorously today, intermingling of the sexes from their early stages in life is not frowned upon. Marriage is generally for love. The spirit of communion which is absent in the modern world is still a lived in reality among the Maos. In fact, the Christian fellowship is taking the place of the erstwhile social gatherings and revelries of the youth dormitories. The life of the unified village is still prevalent, though this atmosphere is vitiated by the presence of competing Christian denominations. As in the past, the joy of communion makes room for celebrations and mirth even in the present times among the Maos. The Maos view life as a joyous event, a continuous act of celebration. The pessimistic, despondent view of life which is very much part of the modern vision that gave rise to a philosophy of pessimism, existentialism, is absent even today among the Maos.

The focus of the Mao conception of good life per se, lies in its emphasis on 'balance'. In however rough and ready a manner,

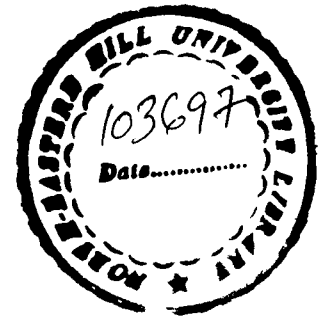
the Maos defended their belief in the balance of the spiritual and the passionate/emotional, the religious and the material, the moral and the natural. Christian morality gives no place to human instincts, passions, emotions, their deep seated drives and whatever comes natural to them in its schemata of strict moral laws. The harm done to humanity by this type of morality has been copiously written about – a neurotic obsession with guilt, a morbid concept of sin, oppressive caging of the individual spirit, a hypocritical parade of virtues and so on goes the list. Not giving proper care to our emotional natural life and not respecting our inner drives leads human beings to the edges of insanity. Conservative morality has been one-sided and gave scant respect to the ‘natural aspects of humans’. In fact, it is forgotten completely that accepting and coping with them is an important aspect of gracefully growing up. The deconstruction of the aberrations of traditional morality had been achieved without match by Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche. Nietzsche had shown how the ‘will to power’ became the foundation for saintly asceticism, legalistic morality or mindless brutality. Of course, the opposite type of morality which glorifies materialism is also equally harmful and most people see it as unacceptable to them. This is harmful because it is just another manifestation of the

assuredness of conservative morality: while one glorified adherence to supposedly superior moral laws, the other glorified the superiority of a free, listless and unspiritual life.

The Mao notion of good life is a midway between these two extremes. It celebrates the natural joys of life and does not imprison the human spirit. At the same time, there is a spiritual-religious supporting ethos to bring harmony into social and individual life. A sense of equilibrium ruled their moral thinking. One hopes that by embracing the severity of Christian ethics, the Maos do not distance themselves from this balanced vision of human life.

Notes and References

- ¹ Sujata Miri, *Khasi World View: A Conceptual Exploration*, Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1988, p.2
- ² Tamsula Ao, "Human Resource Management in Ao Society," *Rationality and Tribal Thought*, ed. Sujata Miri, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004, p.188
- ³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Duckworth, 1988, p.356



Chapter 2

The concept of Good Life: A Philosophical Exploration

In this chapter, I make an analysis of two philosophical conceptions of ‘good life’ as an introductory treatment before I make a study into the Mao conception of good life in the chapters to follow. The two philosophical conceptions mentioned are of Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. I have chosen these philosophers and systems not randomly but with a purpose. All in all, this chapter of my thesis is meant to be a critical examination of the philosophical concept of good life as envisaged in the two philosophers mentioned and to pinpoint the core elements of ‘good life’ for the purpose of setting the stage for delineating the concept of good life as understood by the Mao tribe later in the thesis.

Though the great early Greeks enjoyed a very speculative edge to their philosophizing activity and both Plato and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) built up imposing metaphysical edifices,

Aristotle's ethical views were not very speculative. Rather, he developed a more empirical and practical approach to ethical problems. His *Nicomachean Ethics* is a fine example of the analysis of ethical language used by ordinary people. Instead of enquiring into the nature of 'good life in general for all' by reflection alone, he tried to analyse behaviour of the average man and woman in everyday life and their moral language. Unlike pure metaphysics, he was convinced that the science of ethics did not have absolute conclusions. Speaking of this vagueness in approach, he remarks: "We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better." (EN: I,3)¹ With his emphasis on the practical and the particular, admitting that in ethics truth can be pointed out only 'roughly and in outline', Aristotle rejected Plato's notion of the Idea of the Good as the summit of the good person's wisdom. He categorically says: "...we are enquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our enquiry would have been of no use." (EN: II,2) May I point out here that in this way Aristotle was closer to the Mao preoccupation with the good life in the concrete rather

than in the abstract. By this analysis, Aristotle came to the conclusion that ordinary people were very well in agreement that some people led good lives while others led bad lives. Aristotle realized from his probing examination of people's lives that 'happiness' was a common component of the lives of people who were thought to be living 'good lives.' Hence, he came to the conclusion that a good life was a life of happiness, but agreed that the nature of happiness envisaged by different people differed widely. The extensive quote from *Nicomachean Ethics* below summarizes this point:

What is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour; they differ, however, from one another—and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great thing that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is good in itself and causes the goodness of all these as well.(EN: I,4)

Regarding the varieties of the conceptions of happiness, Aristotle concludes that the *summum bonum* of human action, happiness, should be something that falls in line with the proper nature of

the human person and not elements that have shortfalls within their conception, like pleasure, honour, fame etc. “Happiness, then, is something final, self-sufficient, and is the end of action.”(EN: I,7) Just as a good or excellent flutist is judged by his/her skill/function, human beings too should be judged by his/her proper function with regard to the end of their actions. The proper function of humans, according to Aristotle, is “an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle.” (EN: I,7) In this generalizing of the concept of ‘good life’ and tying it to the notion of happiness, which in turn is traced back to the rational principle in human beings as an end in itself, Aristotle is close to Socrates and Plato.

Aristotle goes on to say that ‘happiness’ is not possible without excellence in our ‘proper function’, that of being rational creatures. Just as a flutist is called excellent when he/she plays the flute at his/her best, a human being qua human being is called ‘excellent’ when he/she puts his/her rational powers into the best use. Aristotle rightly claims that putting the rational powers into the best use implies a rather pleasant life. This means that happiness as he spoke of it in *Nicomachean Ethics* did not exclude the useful and pleasant skills of life that add to the

quality of life. Aristotle argues in the following way, that the pleasantest thing for humans as per their nature, is being virtuous, although the pleasure derived from other useful skills is not discarded:

Their life (life of the good, virtuous) is also in itself pleasant. For pleasure is a state of *soul*, and to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant; e.g. not only is a horse pleasant to the lover of horses, and a spectacle to the lover of sights, but also in the same way just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general virtuous acts to the lover of virtue. Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself. For, besides what we have said, the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly... If this is so, virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also *good* and *noble*, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree, since the good man judges well about these attributes... Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world...(EN: I,8)

Happiness is seldom achieved once and for all; neither is happiness achieved in inaction or passivity. The happy life, which is the same as the good life, is a life of activity— virtuous acts, rational acts and plainly mundane and useful acts, all make up the good life. He says: "...so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life." (EN: I,8) Happiness is an

activity of the soul in accordance with excellence. One brief moment or duration of happiness does not make a good life; rather it should be judged from the complete perspective of one's life: "For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy." (EN: I,7)

Unlike Plato's and Socrates' notions of 'good life', Aristotle admits certain down-to-earth fragility to the notion of human happiness. He admits that there are elements outside our control that can play a role in our happiness or unhappiness. In this world a completely happy life is not possible. Material conditions and certain amount of good fortunes also play a role in our happiness, but these, for example, are to a certain extent out of our control. And hence the fragility of human happiness. He says: "...many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age... and one who has experienced such chances and had ended wretchedly no one calls happy." (EN: I,9) In this notion of the 'fragility of human happiness' Aristotle is closer to the Mao notion of 'good life' not as an endless sea of calm but one that is determined by good and bad fortunes as well as good and bad

acts. As with the Maos, Aristotle believed that material comforts and earthly goods also determined our happiness and good life.

For he says:

Yet evidently... it (happy, good life) needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the luster from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death... happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue. (EN: I,8)

Good life for humans is the life of happiness; happiness is the adequate development and 'excellent' exercise of human capacities. Happiness is the end of virtuous acts, and virtue comes both as a god-sent gift and as result of training and learning. Happiness is "a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind". (EN: I,9) Complete virtue and certain external goods and circumstances make people happy. Aristotle notes that people are praised for their virtuous actions and blamed for their non-virtuous actions. Hence, the external goods etc., though are ingredients of happiness, virtue is primary. He writes, "By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and

happiness also we call an activity of soul.” (EN: I,13) Since ‘happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue’(EN: I,13) Aristotle proceeds to look upon the nature of virtue itself so that he could come upon more clearly the nature of happiness.

He speaks of intellectual virtues that have to be learned and moral virtues that become part of us as a result of habit. Just as people become builders by building, so too they become just by doing just acts. Education in the good habits from early stages is important, ‘as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education.’ (EN: II,3) A virtue in general, according to Aristotle, is a ‘state of character’; it is a disposition. For Aristotle, excess or defect of a disposition will make it not virtue but the right intermediate between these two extremes would make it a virtue. He, then, defines virtue as a mean between two extremes. If to the general question ‘what is good life for people?’ Aristotle’s answer is that it is a life of happiness, to a more specific question ‘how should we behave in order to achieve happiness?’ Aristotle replies with what is commonly known as the ‘Doctrine of the Mean’, or more popularly ‘the Golden Mean.’ He writes:

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of what it is, i.e., the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme. (EN: II,6)

Several examples may be used to show the 'mean.' Courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness; liberality, between prodigality and frugality; pride, between vanity and humility etc. Aristotle admits that some actions and passions do not have a 'mean', like spite, shamelessness, envy, adultery, theft, murder etc. There are three kinds of dispositions, according to Aristotle: (i) excessive, (ii) deficient, and (iii) virtuous, of which the first two are vices.

The doctrine of the mean leads to the conclusion that there are various correct ways of living for various people. What is good for one may not be good for another. One cannot also tell a priori what the correct way of living for someone is. This may be ascertained only by the trial and error method of experimentation. Aristotle was an empiricist and relativist in ethics. Happiness, which is the end of virtuous acts, too, lies between the mean. In

order to be happy, people must avoid the extremes and act moderately. This, in nutshell, is Aristotle's teaching on 'good life.'

According to Aristotle the life of perfect virtue is a unified whole. In this condition, one cannot possess one virtue and not another. "For men are good in but one way, but bad in many." (EN: II,6) For this, he holds, reason should become the guiding principle of human action. He calls this use of reason as the practical sense or practical wisdom. "...for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues." (EN: VI,13) The role of reason in ethics is this 'practical wisdom' which helps us to ascertain the 'mean', which one should remember, does not lie in the geometrical middle, but in the middle, relative to the thing and relative to us. Aristotle says: "...to feel them (pain and pleasure) at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue." (EN: VI,6) As this is a delicate prospect, being virtuous is not easy. It takes a lot of balancing, for which 'practical wisdom' is the guide. To quote further:

Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get anger – that is easy – or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. (EN: II,9)

The measure of virtue in any particular situation, then, is the person, but the person who judges it according to the practical wisdom. One who does it is also the good person, who leads a good life. Hence, according to Aristotle, there is no strict measure of virtue; virtue is what good people do. Regarding what pleasures to choose, Aristotle says: “But in all such matters that which appears to the good man is thought to really so. If this is correct, as it seems to be, and virtue and the good man as such are the measure of each thing, those also will be pleasures which appear so to him, and those things pleasant which he enjoys.” (EN: X,5)

If virtue is the disposition to choose to behave in a certain way according to practical wisdom, can one be blamed for every non-virtuous action or be praised for every virtuous action? According to Aristotle, there are certain conditions, within this broad framework for praise and blame. One can be praised or blamed only for voluntary actions and an action done under

compulsion or ignorance is not blame worthy. How do we recognize if something was done under compulsion or ignorance? Aristotle's answer would be 'through practical wisdom.'

In Aristotle's discussions on good life, he speaks about the question 'what is the 'best good'? Since virtue is the activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, what is most virtuous and good in humans is that which activates the best in us. The best in us is the mind, the rational capacity. Hence, the life of contemplation is the best life, because it activates the best in us. It is also the happiest life. For Aristotle, 'best' always means the most 'self-sufficient', which here is the mind. He says:

...the activity of reason, which is contemplative seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself... and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness... and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that his will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life... (EN: X,VII)

Hence, as with his metaphysics, the concluding portion of Aristotle's ethics, is starkly impersonal. In his metaphysics, the highest good is God who thinks Himself. Similarly, unattached contemplation, imitating the life of God to the extent possible, is the end of Aristotle's ethics. Something like thinking of the other or doing good to the other is not the ultimate good in his scheme.

It rather is private contemplation that gives the greatest happiness. For he says:

But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. (EN: X,VII)

As we have seen, Aristotle's preoccupation is with what type of living can be considered a good life. However, enquiry of **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) is not about 'good life' but about moral life, ethical life. His concern is not with happiness or fulfillment as such but with 'duty for duty sake.' Kant does not ask the question 'what is the good life for humans?', but 'what is the difference between a person who acts morally and one who does not?' Kant believed that human beings, due to their nature, had the capacity to live morally according to certain strict principles, which he calls 'the categorical imperative.' While in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant discarded all arguments so far made for the existence of God, soul or immortality as insufficient in reference to pure reason, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, he argued that moral laws required that people be rewarded justly for their moral actions, and since this was not happening in this life, he inferred in reference to practical reason that there must

be eternal life and there must be God who is the just judge. He also thought that in the present life people who were wicked were apparently happier and more successful. Before I go into some of the important details of Kant's intact ethical system, I must remark here that Kant's notion of moral rigour is very much in distance from the Mao concept of good life. My aim here is to show this difference, rather than any similarity, except for the notion of 'duty for duty sake.' While the Maos did not believe that every action was to be done according to some categorical principle of duty, they believed that some actions had to be done just for their own sake, like being honest, truthful, keeping the promise etc.

How does Kant defend God, freedom and immortality after discarding them in his first *Critique*? He argues that while they are untenable if one goes by pure reason since they are not backed up by experience and are not a priori, they are tenable and are postulates of practical reason, that is, statements of the conditions for the application of reason for the determination of the will in right action. Human beings are not subjects of knowledge only, but they are also agents of action. Just as there are universal and necessary conditions for knowledge, there are

also necessary and universal conditions for how we ought to act. Practical reason is concerned with what is right and not with knowledge or truth. Thus, synthetic a priori principles of practical reason are not necessary truths, but judgements about the necessary and universal conditions of right action, that is, of moral duty and obligation. The concern in his second *Critique* is not the a priori conditions of knowledge but the a priori demands of reason for moral action, with a metaphysic of morals.

Kant's primary emphasis is the role of reason in morality. He applies his famous Copernican Revolution to practical reason just as he did to theoretical/pure reason. Just as all experience and knowledge should conform to certain a priori concepts like space and time, all morality should conform to certain a priori concepts like God, freedom and immortality. Therefore, Kant sets out to do a transcendental enquiry into the practical life of humans just as he did into the a priori conditions of experience and knowledge. Hence, ethics is also a theoretical science for Kant albeit from the purview of practical reason. Kant thought that reason, the rational calls of duty, were totally opposed to our inclinations, and hence the need to propound a philosophical justification to rational adherence to the moral life, and not to the

life of inclinations. Kant writes in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*:

Man feels in himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty presented to him by reason as so worthy of esteem— the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, whose total satisfaction he grasps under the name of ‘happiness’. But reason, without promising anything to inclination, enjoins its commands relentlessly, and therefore, so to speak, with disregard and neglect of these turbulent and seemingly equitable claims (which refuse to be suppressed by any command). From this there arises a *natural dialectic*— that is, a disposition to quibble with these strict laws of duty, to throw doubt on their validity or at least on their purity and strictness, and to make them, where possible, more adapted to our wishes and inclinations; that is, to pervert their very foundations and destroy their whole dignity— a result which in the end even ordinary human reason is unable to approve.

In this way the *common reason of mankind* is impelled, not by any need for speculation... but on practical grounds themselves, to leave its own sphere and take a step into the field of *practical philosophy*... Thus ordinary reason, when cultivated in its practical use, gives rise insensibly to a *dialectic* which constrains it to seek help in philosophy, just as happens in its theoretical use; and consequently in the first case as little as in the second will it anywhere else than in a full critique of our reason be able to find peace.(GMM: 73)²

According to Kant, a merely empirical study of human behaviour misses out on the contribution that reason can make to practical life. It also fails to yield any moral law that is universally and necessarily valid. The distinctive hallmark of Kant’s ethics is the emphasis on reason. He insists that the a priori foundations of morality should be discovered by practical

reason alone and not empirical investigation, because the latter cannot discover principles that are necessarily and universally valid, and the 'ought' of morality should be so. The origin of the moral law should not be sullied by experience; it should be an aspect of practical reason itself. Hence, at the outset, we must remember that Kant, unlike Aristotle and Hume, believed that there are universally valid moral principles, which everyone should abide by if they wished to be moral. This is the difference between the two questions mentioned above: 'what is the good life for humans?' and 'what is the difference between a person who acts morally and one who does not?'

In his ethical system, Kant strove to justify the principles of God, freedom and immortality, which he dumped as rationally unjustifiable in his study of pure reason, and to draw up a criterion of moral decisions, a principle of morality that will allow us to determine what actions are morally right and wrong. However, what finally comes across forcefully to the reader of Kant's ethics is only that certain principles like God, freedom and immortality must be true if our morality is to be objectively valid. It would also appear as though Kant is forcefully creating

the truth of these principles for the rational justification of moral laws.

What is Kant's supreme principle of morality? Here, Kant has an important distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative is conditional: 'if you want 'a' in circumstances 'b', then do 'c'.' Here, action is dependent on desire and several other factors. A categorical imperative, on the other hand, is unconditional: 'do 'd', in circumstances 'e.' It is independent of the factors mentioned in the case of hypothetical imperatives. They admit no exceptions; one ought to follow them to be moral, no matter what one's feelings, desires are. According to Kant, it is rational for us to give heed to the categorical imperatives unconditionally, by referring to itself and not in reference to anything personal. It is, in fact, totally impersonal. Kant writes:

We shall thus have to investigate the possibility of a *categorical* imperative entirely *a priori*, since here we do not enjoy the advantage of having its reality given in experience and so of being obliged merely to explain, and not to establish, its possibility... the categorical imperative alone purports to be a practical *law*, while all the rest may be called *principles* of the will but not laws; for an action necessary merely in order to achieve an arbitrary purpose *can be considered as in itself contingent, and we can always escape from the precept if we abandon the purpose*; whereas an unconditioned command does not leave it open to the will to do the opposite at its discretion and therefore alone

carries with it that necessity which we demand from a law. (GMM: 87)

Kant's supreme moral principle is, thus, a categorical imperative that we ought to follow in order to be moral. This supreme principle of morality is such that it is necessary and universal, binding on all rational creature by virtue of reason alone. In his *Groundwork* Kant arrives at the following as this principle: "*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" (GMM: 88) He also offers a slightly varied version of the same principle immediately after this first formulation in the *Groundwork* as: "*Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.*" (GMM: 89) One may immediately point out three distinctive features of this principle: (i) it is synthetic since no contradiction is produced by denying it, (ii) it is a priori as it lacks any empirical content, and (iii) hence it serves as an example of pure reason at work, legislating not for knowledge or truth, but for our practical life.

According to Kant, a maxim is a subjective principle of action; it expresses the subjective intention of an agent in doing an action. The categorical imperative is not a maxim, but a rule or mechanism for morally choosing among maxims. It is

something like a sorting device that separates morally acceptable individual actions from morally unacceptable ones. The categorical imperative refers not to the content of the maxim but their form, as it is purely formal a priori ground of morality. The categorical imperative has the character of a law, that is, it has a universal, universalizable form. It is important to note here that for Kant acting morally and acting rationally are one and the same thing; to act on a morally unacceptable maxim is to act contrary to reason. He says: “Everything related to the empirical then falls away of itself; for if *reason entirely by itself* determines conduct... it must necessarily do so *a priori*.” (GMM: 94)

All actions, all volitions of the will have ends or goals. Kant says that if an ‘end’ is prompted by a desire, it has only conditional or relative value in relation to whether it is useful to satisfy the desire or not. But if something can be sought for its own sake, then it has absolute value and it is an end in itself. Kant claims that human beings, on account of their rationality — because as rational creatures they are able to determine their actions in reference to the categorical imperative—, are ends in themselves, possessing absolute value, and hence they are called

persons, as opposed to things. As rational creatures we are the sources of all relative values or maxims. This absolute worth of persons, Kant refers to as their dignity. Hence, for Kant, it is absolutely forbidden to use human beings as ends to our use or purposes. This would amount to deny their inherent worth as self-determining rational beings. From these conclusions, Kant draws another form of the categorical imperative, which is generally called the ‘principle of humanity.’ It reads: “*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*” (GMM: 96)

Kant defines the will as “a power of determining oneself to action *in accordance with the idea of certain laws.*” (GMM: 95) For Kant, a ‘good will’ is the most priceless thing in the world, and for an action’s total credibility, it has to be in perfect accordance with ‘good will.’ The very first statement of the first chapter of *Groundwork* reads:

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*. Intelligence, wit, judgement, and any other *talents* of the mind we may care to name, or courage, resolution, and constancy of purpose, as qualities of *temperament*, are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and hurtful when the will is not good which has to

make use of these gifts of nature, and which for this reason has the term '*character*' applied to its peculiar quality. (GMM: 61)

'Good will' is the best use of reason in its practical employment; it is will plus reason. It is reason in the act. Now, how do we judge an action's perfect accordance with 'good will'? Kant says that acting morally is more than doing just what the law tells us to do. We should act not only *in conformity with duty* (duty of being in perfect accordance with the categorical imperative while acting), but also *for the sake of duty*. For example, a shopkeeper should not cheat his customers not because if he/she does the business would be ruined. With this intention if he/she does not cheat the customers, he/she is nevertheless acting in accordance with duty. But this is not enough, because the intention is all wrong. He/she should not cheat *for the sake of duty*. Kant contends that our actions possess genuine moral worth and agents deserve moral praise only when our actions conform to the moral law (they pass the test of the categorical imperative) and are done because they are our duty, done for the sake of duty (right intentions). We act in accordance with 'good will' when we act out of a sense of moral duty, doing what is morally right because it is morally right, from respect for the moral law. Kant defines duty as the practical necessity of acting on the principle of

humanity or the categorical imperative. However, it must be mentioned that Kant does not mean here that good intentions are all that is enough. Merely having a good intention in being kind is not the good intention mentioned here. Good intention here means the good intention of being loyal to the categorical imperative, the principle of humanity, the test of universalizability. As pointed out earlier, the 'good will' is the only thing in the world which is good without qualification, and hence an action done in accordance with good will is good independently of its result. We may seek to do the morally right thing for the sake of duty, but external circumstances or contingencies may thwart our efforts. But since it is the willing to do one's moral duty for the sake of duty which confers moral value upon one's actions, these external conditions cannot rob our actions of their moral worth.

Kant conceived of an ideal 'Kingdom of Ends', much in resemblance to Plato's ideal state, where rational beings acted in accordance with the principle of humanity. By 'kingdom', Kant meant

a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws... Since these laws are directed precisely to the relation of such beings to one another as ends and

means, this kingdom can be called a kingdom of ends (which is admittedly only an Ideal). (GMM: 100 & 101)

Now, how does Kant defend the concept of freedom, God and immortality, which he claims to do at the beginning of the famed second *Critique*?³ There can be morality only if it was possible for us to act morally, and this possibility can come about only if we can act according to reason, that is, for the sake of duty and not simply because our inclinations determine us to act as such. A necessary condition of morality must, therefore, be our possibility of acting either in accordance with or against our obligations, duties. Hence, the 'ought' implies 'can'; this is Kant's argument for freedom. Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena allows him to maintain both that human beings are understandable as a natural objects subject to all the laws of nature, and that they are free from causal determinism, and therefore responsible for their actions and bound by the moral law. This two-standpoints doctrine is directed towards resolving one of the deepest underlying problems of Kant's moral philosophy, namely, consistently defending both the universal validity of science with its notion of universal causation and the objective validity of morality. The first *Critique* leaves open the possibility of considering humans, first, from the standpoint of a

natural object as an empirical self and, second, from the standpoint of a unifying self or consciousness lying 'behind' the natural order of phenomenal objects, as the transcendental ego. As the noumenal self, human beings exist outside the determining conditions of the natural world, and our actions need not be fully determined by antecedent causes as they are for the empirical self situated within the natural world. Kant's explication of the notion of freedom as the necessary condition of morality is therefore tied to his conception of the noumenal self or the transcendental ego.

For Kant, however, freedom from the laws of nature is not a sufficient condition for being a rational moral agent. Kant insists that freedom from causal laws is only a limiting or negative freedom. He contends that human beings are also free in a positive sense, free to think and act in conformity with reason and the moral law as determined by the formal principle of the categorical imperative. Considerations about freedom, rationality and morality belong together, for Kant. 'Will', 'rationality' and 'freedom' are intimately related in the noumenal characterization of humans as moral agents. Hence they are autonomous moral

agents; they are rational, free agents of actions. He rights in the

Groundwork:

Will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational. *Freedom* would then be the property this causality has of being able to work independently of determination by alien cause; just as *natural necessity* is a property characterizing the causality of all non-rational beings— the property of being determined to activity by the influence of alien causes.

What else then can freedom of will be but autonomy— that is, the property which will has of being a law to itself? The proposition ‘Will is in all its actions a law to itself’ expresses, however, only the principle of acting on no maxim other than one which can have for its object itself as at the same time a universal law. This is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Thus a free will and will under moral laws are one and the same. (GMM: 114)

The noumenal self is not lawless simply because it is not subject to the laws of nature. Freedom is not sheer randomness; nor is it whim or caprice; nor is it arbitrariness. Kant says: “We will therefore take up the concept of *duty*, which includes that of a good will, exposed, however, to certain subjective limitations and obstacles. These, so far from hiding a good will or disguising it, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth more brightly.” (GMM: 65) Kant defines freedom of the will as autonomy, which he explains as subjecting oneself to a law that one legislated for oneself as a rational agent. Though as empirical selves we are causally determined by our inclinations,

as noumenal selves we exist outside causal determinations and can be regarded as rational beings who are capable of acting simply because it is the rational thing to do. As a rational will, I am not simply subject to the dictates of the rational moral law, I am also the author of the law. When I respect the moral law, I act as a free, autonomous agent who follows the rational law legislated by myself as a rational being. Kant says: "Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of alien influences... the will of a rational being can be a will of his own only under the Idea of freedom..."(GMM: 116) Hence, when we act out of respect for the moral law, we act rationally and freely, as Kant would say, *autonomously*. A law to which I cannot give my rational consent according to the universalization principle of the categorical imperative cannot be a moral law. If I do, I allow my actions to be determined by extraneous, or as Kant would say *heteronomous* causes, my inclinations. Freedom, for Kant, is, therefore, giving the moral, rational law for one's actions to oneself. Kant speaks of freedom as a kind of causality, a power of producing actions according to a rational, moral rule that one legislates for oneself. Autonomy is thus the principle of a rational will free from the influence of inclinations. In Kant's

view, then, a free will and will subject to moral laws are one and the same thing.

As I conclude this brief exposition of Immanuel's Kant's imposing ethical structure, I must say that it is a system as farther set off as possible from the Mao conception of 'good life', which is the prime concern of my study here. I do not intend to go through the several criticisms of Kant pointed out by his commentators in the last two centuries about the shaky nature of his defence of freedom and the problems with his dual notions of the self. Some, like Bertrand Russell, have gone to the extent of saying that his second *Critique* and the *Groundwork* were an attempt at undoing all his work in the first *Critique*. While this may be considered an exaggeration, one cannot put away the idea while reading Kant's moral philosophy that he was forcing his argument too much. It is never clear to the reader if Kant ever escapes the vicious circle of arguing from rationality to freedom and back gain to rationality. I must mention here that Kant, in his moral theory, is a rationalist pure and simple. The Maos do not consider human beings with such emphasis on rationality, though their concept of 'good life', coherent and reasonable as it is, belies certain notion of rationality. However, Kant sets human

empirical inclinations too far away from purely rational motivation. For instance, he says:

...an action done from duty has to set aside altogether the influence of inclination, and along with inclination every object of the will; so there is nothing left able to determine the will except objectively the law and subjectively pure *revere for this practical law*, and therefore the maxim of obeying this law even to the detriment of all my inclinations. (GMM: 68-69)

For Kant, unlike Hume, reason is not just the slave of the passions; rather, like Plato, Kant contends that reason can rule and serve as a motivator of our actions. Like animals, human beings frequently act according to inclinations, but unlike animals, Kant contends, humans possess a rational will, and we act according to this will when our actions are dictated by the rational deliberations of the will. Aristotle, on the other hand, was a great critique of this view of morality. He understood more realistically the problems of the internal war that humanity fights between the pulls of reason against the pulls of the will. This, I think, was understood very well by the Maos in their conception of good life.

For Aristotle, together with the finer virtues, material accessories, comforts and certain circumstances of life played a great role in bringing about the fulfillment of 'good life' for a

person. Hence, good life is not entirely dependent on the individual, although he/she is the main player in its enactment in his/her life. This way Aristotle is closer to the Maos. However, for Kant the good life is the purely detached moral life, which has to be sought for its own sake. The autonomous individual, undaunted by the circumstances and society, can bring about good life for him/herself. Hence, Kant may be said to be as far set up as possible in the question of comparison of his and the Maos' conceptions of good life.

Notes and References

- ¹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. W. D. Ross (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) Book I, Paragraph 3. Henceforth, Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* will be referred to as "EN" in the text itself with Book and Paragraph numbers, as "EN:I,3".
- ² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964) p.73. Henceforth, Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* will be referred to as "GMM" in the text itself with page numbers, as "GMM: 73".
- ³ Here, I intend to show only the defence of freedom since it is closely related to Kant's concept of morality. For the defence of God and immortality, please see Kant's second *Critique*.

Chapter 3

The concept of Good Life in Traditional Mao Thought

Before embarking on a discussion of the traditional Mao thought, in this chapter I give a brief account of the utilitarian notion of the good life.

The **Utilitarians**, I think, have much more in common with the Mao idea of good life than the highly rationalistic formulations of Kant. However, both Kant and the Utilitarians were looking for a criterion to judge a moral action as right and wrong, and not for an idea of good life as such. Interestingly at about the same time when Kant was developing his ideas on duty and the rational justification of the moral law in Germany, a very opposed moral theory was developing in England. The two famous Utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1831) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), are much more empirical than the rationalistic moral tendencies of Kant. They were also radically critical of the practices of their contemporary society. While

Kant read Hume for waking himself up from the 'dogmatic slumber', the Utilitarians also read Hobbes and Hume but continued in the same line of thought, whereas Kant persisted with rationalism of a more rigorous and critical type. One immediately visible point of difference in Kant and the Utilitarians may be noted here. Kant thought that morality should not be concerned with consequences at all. Instead, intention was all that mattered for Kant. If the person acted in accordance with the moral law, for the sake of duty, consequences were not of account at all. For the Utilitarians, on the other hand, what mattered were only the consequences.

The 'end of an action' is the measuring principle of the action's credibility according to the Utilitarians. Mill writes in the little booklet *Utilitarianism*:

All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and colour from the end to which they are subservient. When we engage in a pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem to be the first thing we need, instead of the last we are to look forward to. (U: 2)¹

Hence, for the Utilitarians, the test of right action is the result it produces. This is so because everything that one does is to produce an effect. Hence, Mill suggests that the end is what

determines the morality of the action. However, there is a great vagueness and crowding of ends of actions. There may be many ends for an action, and which of them is to be counted as the consequence. Both Bentham and Mill say that though this may be apparently true, on deeper probing we can know that the ultimate end of every action is 'happiness.' In this, the Utilitarian is going with Aristotle and the Maos, and against Kant, who thought that the end of every action was its adherence to the principle of humanity, if that action was to be called 'moral.' The Aristotelian question regarding the varying of the conception of happiness according to different persons is considered to be trivial by the Utilitarians, who think that at its core happiness is the same thing for all. Mill defines happiness: "By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure." (U: 7) And Bentham also says:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain and pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."²

There are two things here: one is about the fact of what we do (psychological hedonism) and the other is about what we ought to

do (ethical hedonism). In these terms the Utilitarians formulate the Principle of Utility, likened popularly to the slogan “The greatest happiness for the greatest number.” Bentham says: “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question...”³ This means that if the ‘party whose interest is in question’ is I, then I follow the rule of attaining the greatest happiness (pleasure over pain) from the action. This would sound a selfish interpretation of the principle of utility, which is not a moral interpretation. The Utilitarians give a moral interpretation to the principle of utility by insisting that what is ethically relevant is not my happiness or yours, but happiness in itself, of the greatest number. As Mill says it is “not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether.” (U: 12)

In case of doubt regarding what action to choose morally, the Utilitarian advice is to choose the action that produces the best pleasure/pain ratio overall, that is, for oneself and for everybody. The Utilitarians were not only thinking of private

individual actions but also of social action, since the great Utilitarians were also political radicals thinking of reforming their contemporary systems. The principle of utility was a tool for reforms, for pointing out social evils and inequalities.

Mill tried to temper down Bentham's radical Utilitarianism and tried to show that it was a moral system very much in line with that of the Christians, but more precise and measurable. He says:

As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. "To do as you would be done by," and "to love your neighbour as yourself," constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. (U: 18)

Regarding the actual working out of the principle of utility both Bentham and Mill differ. Bentham believed in the quantifiability of pleasure, but not Mill. Bentham believed that what mattered was just the quantity and that all pleasures were equal in value. But Mill believed that some pleasures were more worthwhile than others and for various people variously pleasures mattered. Mill says: "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." (U: 7) However, if this

were true, Bentham's claim that legislation could be made scientific (on the basis of the quantity of pleasure) is wrong. There is also a problem of distinguishing which pleasure is more desirable. Of course, for Mill the pleasure which is desired by more people is more worthwhile. However, it is impossible to come upon an agreement among people on which pleasure is better. In this dilemma, Mill gives a democratic answer: "On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures... the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final." (U: 11) Hence, majority counts in the final analysis for the Utilitarians.

The Utilitarians stand by consequentialism, that is, the view that the judge of the morality of an action is its result. The Utilitarians also uphold the principle of utility as the first principle of morality. But do they have anything to show that this is really the first principle, over and against the principles given by others? Bentham believed that everyone would be converted to Utilitarianism if they examined the other alternatives like asceticism, which according to him, (i) is never applied consistently, and (ii) has never been applied to government.

Mill's arguments in this connection seem to be even less compact. Ultimately, both Mill and Bentham agree that the principle of utility as the first principle of morality is self-evident and does not need proofs. Their attempt against this claim seems to have been mistaken.

I believe that the utilitarian consequentialist morality is pointing to something important, even if it cannot be proved. Utility plays an important role in morality. Some accuse the Utilitarians of aiming too low (pleasure). But Mill's argument that though pleasure and pain are things we share with animals, our happiness is different from those of animals. It is of a higher order, though ultimately it is all pleasure/happiness. He writes: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question." (U: 10) Some also say that the Utilitarian standard cannot be realized. Mill answers that even if it were true, the principle is still valid, since it would amount to minimizing unhappiness. He also argued that the criticism is exaggerated, since the Utilitarians do not advocate constant rapture but only that much happiness as would be

possible to attain in life, “not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing.” (U: 14) There are several criticisms against which Mill defends Utilitarianism, which I have no intention of pursuing here.

As a concluding remark on the Utilitarian conception of good life, I would like to point out that in cases such as ‘justice’ the principle of utility cannot stand. Can we execute an innocent person to mitigate a rioting mob and prevent the deaths of hundreds? The Utilitarian calculation seems to support such a view. Hence, it would seem that the claims of justice and the claims of utility contradict. Mill argues that this is apparent and not actual, that justice is a special case of utility. However, this aspect is still a tussle in Utilitarian ethics.

I believe that there is an important aspect to the Utilitarian morality. It stresses the aspect of pleasure that is undoubtedly an important motivating factor in human action and inaction, just as the Maos hold. Secondly, the Utilitarian emphasis on the social aspects of morality is very important in the egalitarian social structure of the Maos.

Mao Concept of ‘Good Life’ is my next concern in the present chapter. Among the Mao Nagas, the ‘good life’ is a life

of happiness and fulfillment. In the ensuing discussion, I will clarify the various components and ingredients of 'happiness' and 'fulfillment' and qualify 'the Mao concept of good life', dwelling on the various elements, —material, emotional and spiritual—, that make up a happy and fulfilled life.

In the traditional Mao community, there was no discrimination based on colour, creed, caste, status, position or power. This points to the 'egalitarian' nature of the Mao tribal community. Traditionally, the Maos lived a happy and communitarian life together, without the shades of modern ills like corruption, favoritism, nepotism and injustice. Their main priority was to strengthen the community through the sense of brotherhood and oneness.

The Maos, like most other tribal communities, lived a simple life, close to nature and close to one another in the community. In order to live a life of fulfillment and self-sufficiency, they toiled hard on the land. They practiced both *jhum* (slash-and-burn cultivation) and modern terrace cultivation as methods of agriculture. The Maos looked forward to a life of peace and tranquility, in the sense of being self-sufficient and avoiding tension and worry regarding the material means of

survival. Every able individual of both the sexes were expected to contribute towards the self-sufficiency of the family and village community. They worked hard so as to store food grains and firewood and to rear enough cattle for the whole year. Shortage of material means of survival or anyone becoming poor was thought to be a shameful prospect because the community looked upon 'poverty' as caused by idleness and sloth. However, through the people's inherent wisdom, those who were deservedly 'poor', like the handicapped, the widows and the orphans, were seen as such and they were not discriminated against. Instead, they were looked after by the members of the family or the extended family or those from the larger village community, who could afford to give them a helping hand. Nevertheless, an individual was expected to put in his/her best efforts to sustain him/her. In fact, the poor tried not to divulge their plight to the others, because they considered it shameful to be dependent on others. There were no beggars and institutionalized beggary was foreign to the Maos. In any case, if one did not work according to one's abilities, he/she received no support or supportive action from the larger community.

The fact that everyone worked is a pointer towards the egalitarian nature of the society. Since there were no other occupations, everyone was involved in agriculture. Even the village Chief or King (*Movuo*) also worked like everyone else in the field. There was no difference between the rich and the poor in the community; there was neither special status nor special treatment on account of one's wealth. The wealthy had no special rights over and above the general rights exercised by everyone.

However, becoming wealthy through hard labour was considered an aspect of the good life. It is the normal human tendency that people become greedier with the acquiring of more and more wealth. The modern examples of the powerful and the political class is a ready reference here. While the Maos considered 'becoming rich' as an ingredient of good life, they did not approve of greed. Corruptions, vulgar parading of one's wealth and exploiting one's fellow men and women were socially disapproved; in such eventualities, rather than acknowledging the person's wealth, he/she would be cursed by the deprived members of the society, although the latter case was rare in the Mao community. Their way of becoming wealthy was only through sustained hard work.

Anyone in the community could become rich and one's wealth was measured by the number of barns or 'obe' filled with paddy and the number of cattle, 'otu Morii,' that one possessed. The more he/she became rich the more he/she became humble and generous. As the accumulated wealth increased, the wealthy person invariably thought of performing the Feasts of Merit, which was considered to be one of the most respected offering to man and God. His/her aim was not to amass more and more to store for the future generations but to welcome everyone in the community, especially the orphans and the poor, who never had the opportunity to feast. The Feasts of Merit were also great levelers. They protected the egalitarian social structure from eroding. No body became excessively rich, so that their wealth never became a cause of social concern. Moreover, Feasts of Merit point to the tribal spirit of celebration and merry making. The Maos also conceived of life as a joyous event, full of unsurpassed joys and repeated celebrations.⁴

There is a saying in Mao 'Mazhe morona chiku kapi mei sii Ora no khrupule' which meant, that 'whosoever showed love to the orphans and took care of them were in turn blessed by God.' The rich people never ignored or disturbed the poor and the

orphans; instead they gave them food to eat, clothes to wear and even place to stay. They felt that this was their duty and were happy for it, since they thought that it was their moral obligation to bring joy and happiness to the needy. Everyone in the community was cared for and no one felt that he/she was left out.

The spirit of oneness and unity was also part of the Mao conception of the good life. “The spirit of oneness and the corporate faith of the community as a whole made them good citizens of the village – states.”⁵ There can never be a ‘good life’ when everyone in the community is pitted against the other. The concept of unity called for cohesion within the community, and social cohesion led to overall welfare. This also meant social responsibilities and duties on the part of the citizens. In order to produce ‘good life’, they were called upon to obey the laws and regulations of the community. These laws were unwritten, but were deeply ingrained into the very cultural fabric of the Mao people. The objectivity of these laws was unquestionable, and their value never doubted. The laws were said to be given by the forefathers; nonetheless, no definable origin can be traced in their regard. The contribution of the laws in the reign of peace and harmony within the village was truly great. They helped in

the maintenance of the social order and thus brought the concept of good life equally experiential to everyone in the community. Anyone found violating the customs, despite the rarity of such a prospect, was disciplined by meting out punishments. However, the general feeling within the community was love and owe for the laws of the land; everyone considered it necessary for the common good.

As I have mentioned earlier, Maos tried to give their best for their community, right from their birth until they breathed their last. This was a significant constituent of the collective good life of the community. There was a great sense of belonging to their village, nay, their 'soil' on which the ancestors toiled. One definite mark of identifying with the village community was contributing to the defence of the village in times of crisis, danger and external threat. It was considered a great act of honour to make this contribution of valour.

The institution of 'Bachelor's Dormitory' was a symbol of 'good life' that prevailed within the traditional Mao community. It was called *Morung* which meant 'dormitory'. In Mao the boys' dormitory is called 'Khruchi' and the girls' dormitory is called 'Lochi.' The *Morung* is the place where all the young men and

women were trained in community work and prepared for a respectable life in every imaginable way.

In their social behavior, observance of etiquette, sense of public service, obeying of laws and submission to discipline, the Nagas are model for others. Their training in morungs and the ladies dormitories taught them how to maintain the decorum in the midst of simplicity, what etiquette to be observed with regards to both the young and the old how necessary it is to respect the honour of the weaker sex and also how sensibility for the sick and the poor.⁶

The *Morungs* were training grounds for the 'good life.' There were separate dormitories for boys and girls, and the training they received in them stood the Maos in good stead during their adult life. As the young Mao grew and matured, he/she took care to do what they should do and what they should not. Decorum for public behaviour was given special emphasis in the dormitories. Their training in the bachelor's dormitories, helped the Maos to be honest, respectful and well-mannered. The effect of this training on general wellbeing of the community was spectacular. There was no theft; so much so, a completely filled barn after a good harvest could be left unlocked. The crime of rape was unheard of and respect for women was considered noble.

Having said that, the question of head hunting needs to be brought into the discussion here. The modern mind would consider this act as militating against the prevalence of good life

in Mao community. To the modern mind, it would also prove an ethically disturbing question, though it was not so to the traditional Mao mind. The Maos took 'head hunting' seriously which according to them operated within a strict universe of 'dos' and 'don'ts', the transgression of which rules led to severe punishments. Head hunting was not to disturb the harmony of the village community, which was conceived to be an oasis of peace. Head hunting was considered to be an important yardstick for measuring social status and recognition. A successful hunter of the enemy head could marry the girl of his choice. And the girl in turn loved to see her beloved with the enemy head. It was a symbol of masculinity and masculine valour. Women did not hunt heads formally but did so on rare occasions for avenging the death of a loved one or a beloved.⁷ Shimray, speaking of Naga tribes in general, says that "the warrior who scored a number of heads over his rival had the better chance to win favour and love of the fairest girl of the village for marriage."⁸ A youth who did not take the head of the enemies found it difficult to get a wife. The idea of head hunting was part of the Mao concept of good life, since good life also meant mundane happiness. Prestige and recognition from the community brings happiness to any person. In fact, the human need to be appreciated by other humans is one

of our deepest drives. A Mao who successfully hunted enemy heads was entitled to wear a special shawl, which others in the community were not permitted to wear until they did similar acts of valour. Victorious head hunters were also honored by the allotment of special seats on ceremonial occasions. Moreover, it was believed that failure as warriors in hunting heads of the foes, made them not only disadvantaged in this life but also in the life to come, as it would displease the ancestors and the cosmic forces. Hence, there were metaphysical implications on the practice of head hunting.

The Mao customary laws did not allow the hunting of heads within the village community. This was a fiercely punishable act that no one dared doing. Enemy was always alien and an enemy within the 'communion of the village' was not even conceived of. Head hunting within the village was not thought of as a way of easing social tension. For that there were other methods and authorities like the village council headed by the Chief. It should be remembered that

...head-hunting for purposes other than establishing village supremacy and valour was considered a criminal offence. This was so, for the one who hunted the head was believed to become affluent, and some might, for selfish reasons, resort to it. Hence, head-hunting was not to be performed

on the members of the head-hunter's village by him... So, head-hunting was performed on strangers and enemies.⁹

Given the metaphysical and existential implications of the practice of head-hunting, the practice cannot be branded barbarian from our perspectives of today. In fact, the practice of honouring valour at war is a custom that is prevalent all over the world even today. Courage as a virtue received lavish praise from Aristotle.

I have made passing mention of the Maos' festive attitude to life, while speaking of the Feasts of Merit as part of the egalitarian social structure. However, the festive attitude was not a mere mental framework for the Maos; it also had concrete cultural expressions. As an agrarian people, the Maos were engaged in toil throughout the year, except in times of festivals, which were four in number: (i) *Chithooni* festival was celebrated after the harvest while sowing new seeds for the new crop; it was the inaugural festival for the fresh agricultural season and continued up to six days. (ii) *Chijini* festival was celebrated for only one day. This festival was celebrated to mark the transplantation of the paddy plants. The village chief would start by transplanting the first plant. (iii) *Saleni* festival was celebrated for five days. This festival was considered the most

important of all the festivals of the Maos. *Saleni* festival was celebrated just after the completion of rice planting and included a physical sanctification ceremony. (iv) *Onooni* festival is celebrated for one day only. This festival is celebrated to propitiate God and for seeking His blessings to prevent hailstorms from destroying the sprouting and standing paddy plants in the fields. One must remember that in the areas where the Maos live in today's Manipur, incessant rains and hailstorms are common.

Celebrating during the festivals had no 'status symbol'; that is, it was not considered a closed door affair where the rich and the poor, the learned and the rustics, did things differently. Celebration, instead, was a community activity, in which everyone participated in the same festive activities. Singing folk songs together, dancing and visiting relatives and friends with rice beer (*hayé zhichu*) and cooked meat (*oso*) are activities for festive occasions. On festival days, community works such as repairing and cleaning of village ponds, and widening and clearing of the paths used by the forefathers while migrating from the place of origin called "*Makhel*" to the present village were undertaken. On festive evenings, after the completion of the

community works, the male folk would collect a mug of rice beer from every household for drinking together with the delicacy of prepared meat in the nightfall, comfortably ensconced near the bonfire and accompanied by merry making, singing and chanting melodious musical sounds to their heart's satisfaction. One may ask if the Maos believed in the Epicurean or Carvaka concept of pleasure. This was not the case. They neither believed with Epicurus that the material cosmos is a purposeless physical form made of variously shaped atoms moving through empty space, nor with the Carvakas that the ultimate components of the world were the four elements, earth, water, fire and air. However, the Maos believed that enjoyment and celebration were parts of a good life. They were not inhibited by the overburdening concept of 'guilt', which is so much part of Semitic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Maos gave great importance to free revelry and a cheerful demeanor. Probably, this gave them strength to carry on with their otherwise difficult life of toil and sweat on the hilltops. The Epicureans and the Carvakas believed in the principle of 'eat, drink and make merry' because they believed in nothing beyond the material world. The Maos instead believed in life after death and so did not subscribe to a philosophy of unbridled pleasure. They had an abiding ethical

sense. Leading a 'good life' in the present world was a prerequisite for leading a 'good life' in the next. They believed in the conservation of value. However, they conceived of pleasure as an ingredient of happiness; but pleasure for them meant social celebrations and healthy revelry, which were all guided by certain unwritten community principles. In fact, upon the present day canvass of disintegrating social structures and failing democratic institutions, one may look upon the Maos, or the general tribal attitude of carefree reveling, for inspiration.

Leading a healthy disease-free life is also a vital component of good life, according to the Maos. It is their belief that when a person is suffering from any illness, he/she cannot enjoy life, cannot 'celebrate life' to its fullest. Further, good health was considered more valuable than a great deal of wealth. In the community, at any given point in time, one may notice this difference: a poor healthy person celebrating his/her life and a rich unhealthy person struggling with his life. In this, the Maos would consider the case of the first person infinitely more valuable than that of the second person. Health is more for good life than wealth; poor health paralyzes the body from proper functioning and brings life to a halt. Moreover, people who lived

in a subsistence economy like the Maos, could not afford the luxury of being sick and waiting for its cure. Further, among the Maos, a sick person's life became totally meaningless since he became dependent on the community and could not contribute to it. This was unthinkable to a Mao, since he/she was greatly aggrieved by the prospect of becoming a parasite.

Another aspect of the Mao's concept of good life was a harmonious family with obedient children. Children were considered the parents' treasure and like in most communities, barrenness was considered the woman's greatest shame. The Mao society is patriarchal in its social structure. When a male child is born to the family there is celebration to thank God for the gift of an inheritor to the family property, custodian of the family lineage and guardian of the parents in their old age. Only the male members were the legal inheritors of the family property. The ancestral property could not be given to the girl even if there was no male members in the family; instead this was inherited by the nearest among the clansmen. However, if someone had only female issue, he may give to his daughter(s), the property that he acquired through his own hard work. This has to be clearly distinguished from his ancestral property. Someone who has both

sons and daughters may give to his daughters property that was brought by his wife in the above manner. In short, a girl could get only the property that was acquired by her father's hard work or that was brought by her mother. In the Mao community the lion's share of the property goes to the youngest son of the family and he has the responsibility to look after his parents when they grew old. The youngest son got the house of his father where the parents also would live, but the eldest son got the paddy field of his choice. In cases where the family has 5 or 6 sons, everyone would get a share of the paddy field, farms and woodlands. In such cases, the father's possessions would be divided and distributed to the sons, even if the share is small. As the youngest son takes the ancestral house, the other sons construct new houses after they get married and live there with their wives and children. The father's decision is final and binding in all respect and no complaint can be raised in that regard. The parents consider it their fortune to have more sons, even if they do not have enough property to give to them all. The others in the community would appreciate and praise the family with many sons. When the children obey their parents and bring happiness to the family through a harmonious life, the family is considered to be living a good life by the community.

I have given these sociological components of the Mao life to show the intimate link between the moral and the social aspects of their good life. Personality traits such as spontaneous friendliness and treating people equally are considered to be characteristics of people who lead good lives. There is also a wonderful spirit of sharing among them. When they bring anything special like vegetables, fruits, fish, meat etc. they share it with their friends, neighbours and relatives. When an unknown person or a stranger from a different village or community comes to a village to sell or buy domestic animals or basketry, he/she is helped, fed and looked after by the host in every respect. Hospitality is considered a virtue by the Maos. When people of the village are in trouble, help is rendered without expectation of reward and without discrimination of any sort. Contentment with one's conditions of life is considered an ingredient of good life. Saving something for the future due to the uncertainties of tomorrow was detestable to the Maos. They instead, shared the excess of today and hoped for the best for tomorrow. It was part of the Mao idea of a good life that good people did not eat or drink too much during community feasts on account of their hunger or poverty at home. In stead, they controlled themselves, in order to guard their honour and dignity.

Honesty and truthfulness were considered important aspects of a Mao's good life. Cheating another or telling a lie meant more than committing a crime. Honoring a promise and keeping one's word were considered characteristic features of good people. The power of the 'word' was immense in the traditional Mao society; a promise need not have been signed and sealed. It was enough to be 'spoken'. The spoken word was taken as the 'promise.' In the Mao community of the olden times, a person became a laughing stock if he/she changed his/her words every now and then; he/she would be avoided like a leper even by best friends. 'Action' was the characteristic of the Mao and not sweet thoughts and empty promises. In their conception of the binding nature of promise, the Maos are in accord with the Indian epic, Ramayana. When his second wife, Kaikeyi, asked King Dasaratha to keep his old promise and send Rama to the forest, though the King was extremely perturbed and 'drowned in the sea of sorrow' on account of his love for Rama, he was still requesting only to the unrelenting Kaikeyi to change her mind. He was perturbed because he knew he had to keep his promise, despite the unexpected and vicious demand from his wife. Finally, when the inevitable was told to Rama by Kaikeyi herself in front of her distressed husband that what was promised to her by the King had

to be fulfilled by Rama, or if he failed to keep the promise he was to be called an *adharmin* (immoral person), Rama responded: “But certainly, my mother, I will go at once to the forest dressed, as you say, in tree-bark and deerskin. *I will not let my father break his word.*”¹⁰

However, a ‘lie’ could be used for the good of the community in general. For instance, in the dormitory, the senior trainer, sometimes used mock alarm to test the youths’ strength and capability; the trainer also spoke lie for the same reason. In this regard it is permissible, for it is good and useful to the society and does not corrupt the community. Regarding promises, no written record was maintained but the strength of the ‘oral promise’ was enormous. When property was sold or bought, no written document was made. The Maos feared that going against these precepts of good life would bring them eternal peril and curse upon their progeny.

As for good life among young people, the Maos considered giving respect to old people as the exemplary form of good life that a young person could lead. The elders were respected for their experience, authority and wisdom. When the elder spoke, the younger person listened attentively; certain food items were

reserved only for them. It was thought that if young people tried to enjoy these items, they would suffer from eye sickness, short life, dumbness and premature grey hair.

In sum,¹¹ Maos' conception of good life was not idealistic like that of Plato or rationalistic like of Kant. However, there are certain metaphysical elements like the belief in retribution, similar to the doctrine of Karma in Indian Philosophy, the Maos believed that 'good actions here on earth' brought about 'good life hereafter.' Nonetheless, their concept of good life was not over-averse to the idea of pleasure or material prosperity. The Maos were pre-occupied with the practice of good life from the common-sense point of view, rather than being preoccupied with a theoretical framework of morality. They have both material and spiritual aspects in their concept of good life. A life of mere merry making, gutsy head-hunting, material abundance and good health was not a good life, though all these aspects were components of good life. Together with these, the Maos conceived of the inner qualities of honesty, frankness, charity and sharing as equally important qualities of good life. One may lament that many of these aspects are today gradually but surely going out from the social fabric of the Mao community. This is

the price one has to pay for the acceptance of modernity and its baits.

Notes and References

- ¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Oskar Piest (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949) p.2. Henceforth, Mill's *Utilitarianism* will be referred to as "U" in the text itself with page numbers, as "U: 2".
- ² Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) p.1
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.2
- ⁴ About this aspect of 'celebrating life', I shall deal in more detail in a later section.
- ⁵ R. R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas* (New Delhi: Samsok Publication, 1985) p.131
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49
- ⁷ This is clear from the following Mao legend. "Once upon a time a girl named Kapeini had a brother named Ariiji. Ariiji was skilled in battle and was good in everything; this made him famous and loved by all. There was another brave man, Akaji, in another village. However, he was not as skilled in battle as Ariiji was. One day they fixed a day to face each other in one-to-one battle at an appointed place and time. Since he was not as skilled in battle as Ariiji was, Akaji hatched a secret plan to trick Ariiji to death. He brought his friends from the village to hide near the battle arena. In the battle Akaji could not overpower Ariiji, and so he gave signal to his friends to attack and kill Ariiji, which they did successfully and took his head. Kapeini moaned the death of her brother. But there was none, neither his own brothers nor his friends in the village, ready to avenge the death of Ariiji. Hence, Kapeini decided to do the same. When she sought permission from her parents and brothers, they told her that it was an impossible task since she was a girl. Kapeini prepared good food and carried it in a Tiffin; she also took a sharp sickle hidden in her basket as she went to Akaji's village. On her way she met the parents of Akaji, who were going to the field. They asked her where she was going. She replied that she was going to meet Akaji. Then his parents directed her to their house, saying Akaji was at home. When she reached Akaji's village, she met him and he took her to his house. On reaching the house, Kapeini told him that she brought good food for him. Then she asked him if he wanted to have food first or make love to her. He chose the latter first and Kapeini was ready in a moment to make love to Akaji. In the act of making love, she took out the sharp sickle and cut off Akaji's male organ, killed him and took his head home in her basket. On her way back, she met Akaji's villagers and his parents, who saw blood dripping out from her basket. When they asked her about it, she told them that Akaji had generously killed a dog for her and gave her the head. They asked her to

stay back in their house for the night, which she gently refused. While proceeding to her village, Kapeini met many more people from Akaji's village but lastly she met a lame man from that village coming out of the field. She asked him if there was anyone coming after him. When he said 'no', she told him that she had avenged the death of her brother by tricking and killing Akaji. Thus passing the message to Akaji's village, Kapeini moved fast towards her village. On reaching her village gate, she sent the message to her brothers and other men in the village to come and take Akaji's head, but no one believed her that a girl like her could take the head of Akaji. Finally her younger brother came forward and took the head of Akaji to the village. Everyone marveled at Kapeini's valour and success."

⁸ R. R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, p.73

⁹ C. P. Alexander, "Ethos and Postulates of Nagas: A Philosophical Approach," *Rationality and Tribal Thought*, ed. Sujata Miri (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2003) p.126-127

¹⁰ *Ramayana*, trans. Kamala Subramaniam (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988) p.111 (Italics mine)

¹¹ I reserve a more detailed treatment on several aspects of good life according to the Maos for a later chapter.

Chapter 4

The Mao's Vision of 'Omei' (Man) and the Good Life

Every culture or worldview revolves around certain conceptions of the human being, the world and God. In fact, the sum total of such notions and the way humans comport themselves in their society in accordance with these notions, we call culture. These together form a living life-form which is lived coherently by the members of such a society. Traditional tribal societies, which were not fragmented like modern societies where cultures, religions and languages merged, dominated and mostly ate into the less forceful worldviews, were more coherent in terms of these 'forms of life.' Among the three concepts mentioned above, the concept of the human being was central to the Mao worldview. Their theology (notions of the spiritual realm) and science (notions of the empirical realm) were carved out of this central figure, the human being. Just as the Mao way of life, their conception of the human being also was all-inclusive and multifaceted. Spiritual, temporal, social, political, moral and

natural aspects of the human being were bound together into a neatly woven mantle in this perception of the human being.

In this chapter I look deeply into the Mao concept of the human being with special reference to the following aspects: (i) origin of the human being according to the Maos, (ii) nature of human being and the relationship between mind and body, (iii) purpose of human life, (iv) relationship between humans and their world; the environmental concern, (v) relationship between humans and God; the spiritual concern, (vi) patriarchy and the status of women, (vii) after life, and (viii) the ideal man and woman according to the Maos.

Stories of the *origin of the human being* are an integral part of every culture. Rightly directed conceptual analysis of these legends should concentrate not on their factual value but on their conceptual value. These stories point to certain way the human being is perceived. Each culture defines the totality of the human being in certain way. This totality is not just an individual totality but the totality of relationships and the totality of *being* human. In these pointers lies the value of these legends.

The following is the myth of the origin of the human race.

Dziilimosiirro lived under a banyan tree (*marabou*) in Makhel village in today's Senapati area of Manipur.¹ No one knew wherefrom she had come and Dziilimosiirro was herself more than a human being and had divine powers. She conceived in a mysterious fashion and clouds encircled her and her dwelling place. In this manner, Dziilimosiirro gave birth to three sons, *Okhe* (Tiger), the eldest, *Ora* (god)² and *Omei* (human being), the youngest. Among the three brothers, the youngest son, *Omei* was the favourite of the mother because he took good care of her even more than the other two sons. Since the way of thinking, doing works and the eating habits of the three sons differed so widely, *Omei* decided that they should live separately. He also felt that his two elder brothers did not fulfill their responsibilities and duties as they should but always depended on their youngest brother.

When they took turns to look after their aging mother, *Okhe* used to feel every part of his mother's body with a desire to check which part would be the most delicious to have once she died; during *Ora*'s turn, he used to cause fever to his mother. While *Okhe* and *Ora* made their mother sick by the end of the day, *Omei* made her feel comfortable and happy by giving her the right food, massaging her body and attending to all her needs. Such affection prompted the mother to pray to God to let her die on the day when her youngest son was nursing her. She told *Omei* to bury her in his kitchen and plant his oven upon her tomb to cook his food. She requested her beloved son not to disclose this matter to her eldest, *Okhe*, for the tiger would then feast upon their mother's body.

One day when *Ora* was looking after Dziilimosiirro, he was overcome by despondency in doing his duty and plotted to kill his mother by giving to her chilly soup to drink. However, his plan backfired and his mother became healthier after drinking the soup. Dejected by this turn of events, *Ora* approached his brother *Omei* and enquired if he would take only mature chilly or even the tender ones too. *Omei* replied that he would take both. Upon this

declaration, Ora decreed that human beings would die not only in their old age but also in their youth. (The Maos believe that if Omei had made the right choice, his race would die only old.)

As time passed by, Dziilimosiuro's wish was fulfilled and she died happily in the arms of her favourite son, who buried her just as she wanted him to do. In the evening Okhe came to enquire about his mother and when he learned that his mother had died and was buried, he requested Omei to show him the grave. Omei refused to do so but asked him to find it out by himself as their mother was buried within their compound itself. Okhe could not find the grave even after searching every corner. (Hence, the Maos believe that there is no harm in building a house over the tomb and cooking food in it.)

After their mother's death, the three brothers wanted to inherit the ancestral property. Omei knew that there was no possibility of living together with his brothers. Hence he struck upon a plan and declared a competition, which was agreeable to his brothers. The competition was to strike a target (prodzii) and the one who struck it first would dwell in the land of their ancestors. The Prodzii was made of shrubs and was kept at a distance. Omei knew that he could not compete fairly with his brothers and so hatched a plan. He made a catapult and shot the prodzii before his brothers could do. And hence, Omei inherited the land of his forefathers; Okhe was sent to Evele (jungles) and Ora to Kashi (a place where humans could not dwell).

From Omei was born Alew, who married a miraculous maiden, Charani. She bore him three sons, Alapha, the eldest, Tutow and Khephio, the youngest. Alapha is known as the forefather of the Kolamei (everyone but the Nagas and the Meiteis); Tutow is known as the forefather of the Meiteis (Manipuris) and Khephio is the forefather of the Nagas. The three brothers lived happily and one day decided to go for a picnic, for which Alapha was to bring a cock (Hudzii), Tutow fish (Khochu) and Khephio a young mithun (ozhu pfune). Everyone was ready as per programme and when they were about to eat Alapha's hudzii, it crew inside the pot. Alapha asked the hudzii to calm down and allow them to eat it, which it did and had a good helping of

the *hudzii*. Similarly when they were about to eat Tutow's *khochu* it also turned alive, but relented to Tutow's request to eat it. When they came to Khephio's *ozhu pfune*, there was no such problem and found it to be very delicious. During their brother's absence, both Alapha and Tutow put their hands into their brother's pot, overcome by a desire to have more of the *ozhu pfune*. When Khephio returned he found his brothers with their hands in the pot, which got stuck in it. Seeing this, he advised his brothers not to steal from others to eat without the owner's consent. The two elder brothers were ashamed of their action and apologized to their younger brother. After the meal the three brothers set for themselves a contest on who would jump over the dung heap of the *ozhu pfune*. Alapha, though was successful, slipped off at the finishing point and touched the dung heap with his hand. (The Maos believe that this is the reason why the descendants of Alapha wash their hands before meals.) Tutow was not successful and fell right on the top of the heap. (The Maos believe that this is the reason why the descendants of Tutow take bath before their meals.) Khephio, in his turn, was completely successful in jumping over the heap. (The Maos believe that since Khephio was completely successful his descendants had no need to wash hands or take bath before their meals.)

After this picnic, the three brothers lived separately due to limitations of space in Makhel village and in memory of the good time they had together, they erected a stone which is said to be found even to this day in Makhel village.

From Khephio came the great Naga family and as the population increased they decided that they should separate to different regions of the hills. Before their departure, they assembled at a place called Shajouba and planted a wild pear tree as a mark of their solidarity and identity as a big family descended from the same ancestors. Just as the tree branched out to different directions, they would depart to different regions but would remain a single family like the roots of the tree. The Maos remember and honour this tree, which is still said to stand in Shajouba village. The Maos believe that Shajouba is the place from where their Naga ancestors separated to different areas of the Naga Hills and would unite again one day.

A wild pear tree called 'Chutibu' was planted at upper Sajouba at the time of their dispersal. At the time of parting, they took oath under this Chutibu that they will unite again one day. In olden days the falling of any branch of this sacred tree (Chutibu) was observed in all parts of Angami, Sema, Lotha and Rengma countries and all other Naga areas as strictly taboo and nobody was allowed to go to the fields in order to appease the gods and also in token of sorrow or fear of the unseen spirit. The Nagas were forbidden to cut even a branch of this tree for the fact that the one who breaks a branch of Chutebu is said to have died at the spot and also for the superstition that rain and storm may start instantly.³

The Mao myth of the origin of the human race is heavily loaded with the privileged place of the humans in the universe. In the first place, among Dziilimosiiro's three sons, *Omei* was her favourite. He was genuinely gifted with the right combinations of intelligence, will, physical abilities and motivations to look after his mother and win her favour. *Okhe* was ruled by his physical desires and instincts and *Ora* by his divinely gifted powers. *Omei* on the other hand was showered with gifts of nature and of grace. He was the right one to live in the land of his forefathers and look after the earth. *Okhe* and *Ora* due to this reason had to bid farewell to their ancestral land and live away from *Omei*, in the forest and in the place where *Omei* could not dwell. It was not that *Omei* was superior to the other two. In fact *Okhe* was physically superior to him and *Ora* in his divine powers. But

Omei had the right combinations of powers and gifts to live upon the land of his ancestors.

However, one should not be misled to think that Omei was to rule the land and 'subdue' nature in the way that Adam was to do in the Genesis. The very fact that Dziilimosiiro gave birth to the three sons, who admittedly represented the various aspects of life in the universe, and they lived together for a time, points to the concept of close sense of oneness with everything in the universe that is so much part of the Mao cultural landscape. Instead, what is unmistakably painted in this story is the picture of human being who is genuinely gifted to be specially attached to his ancestral land, family and all that the Maos considered a part of their heritage. In fact, Omei was the genuine one to occupy the ancestral land not only because he won the contest, but, and more importantly, because he looked after his mother with human touch, earned her favour and buried her as per her wish and cooked his food upon her grave in perpetual memory. He alone of the three sons knew where the mother was laid to rest. While the 'human factor' was not superior according to the Maos, it was uniquely special. The absence of the human factor made Dziilimosiiro sick and uncomfortable. Hence the story

points to the special place of the human being amidst everything in the universe.

In the Mao tradition human beings are creations of God and Dziilimosiiro's mysterious origin points to this. Though there is no detailed theological motive in the story itself, the fact that Dziilimosiiro was the only ancestor points to divine intervention. Moreover, the Maos traditionally believed that humans were created by *Oramei*.

The story has two specific parts: (i) dealing with the origin of the human race and, (ii) dealing with the development of the human race. While the first part concentrates on the unique place the human being occupies in the universe with non-human beings, the second part dwells on the special place that the Naga family occupies.⁴ After the separation of the three sons of Dziilimosiiro, we are told about the special status of the Naga ancestor Khephio. The Maos knew a lot about the Meiteis, their neighbouring people, and so the story speaks about their ancestor too; and all other races were put together as having a single ancestor. What is special about Khephio? In two ways he was special: he had finer manners or social skills and better physical abilities. Khephio was distraught when his brothers showed their

greed for more of his tasty preparation. It was Khephio who prepared the tasty *ozhu pfune*; it was he who won the contest after the meal. Leaving the rationalization of their own rules of cleanliness, the story paints a picture of the valiant and dignified Naga ancestor. In fact, the Maos are a proud tribe, both in valour and in their own dignity.

Another aspect of the story is its very down-to-earth picturization of the human race. It extols ordinary and typically human virtues like affection, valour, honour and dignity, ingeniousness and the like, and not ethereal virtues like self-sacrifice or religiousness. It extols the tribal spirit of connectivity to the land and one's kith and kin; the sense of solidarity that it tries to picture about the whole Naga family.

The Mao conception of the human being is a very natural and normal 'human being.' It may be mentioned here that it is this conception of the human person that rules the Mao concept of good life as well. Good life is the ordinary and the normal.

What is the *nature of the human person* according to the Maos? The Maos had a wholistic conception of the human person, who was thought to be a well blended combination of mind, body, will, emotions and spirit. It is a wrong notion that the Maos (or

the other tribals of Northeast India) conceived of the human person mainly from the physical point of view. It may be more proper to say that while the more complex cultures conceived of the human person dichotomously, placing undue importance on human mind, the Maos developed a more integrated understanding of the human person.

The human faculty of intelligence was given adequate emphasis in the Mao tradition. An intelligent person was considered special. He/she was given special responsibilities to fulfill on behalf of the community. For example, in matters of disputes a knowledgeable person's opinion was respected. If, for instance, someone were to fail in coming back home after a gathering on account of drunkenness, he was reprimanded saying that 'even animals know where to sleep and eat but you don't seem to be knowing.' Such behaviours were considered shameful and not proper to the human person who was intelligent enough to behave better. Whenever disputes occurred between villages, the intelligent ones used to be picked up for representing the village and negotiating with the disputing village. Although physical powers and bravery were the most important qualities of a good headhunter, clever strategizing was also important.

However, intelligence was not specially rewarded by external marks like awarding a shawl or giving them a special place in ceremonies. It was rather considered the most 'normal' thing for a human person. Behaving reasonably, thinking rationally and taking decisions on such basis was considered a very ordinary aspect of human life. Even more than intelligence the Maos gave importance to will power. Standing unchanged on one's promise was considered a sign of character. Those with strong will and determination were considered natural leaders in the community. In human relationships, emotions were the cementing factor. Emotional attachment between the family members, the kinsfolk, villagers and among others in the tribe used to be very strong among the Maos. The role of emotions was rightly exemplified in the way how children, invalids and old people were looked after in the traditional Mao society. Physical abilities and charm were also of great significance among the Maos. Aesthetic enjoyment (the ability to enjoy pleasures of the body and beauty) was considered a virtue.⁵ Good looks invited praise and appreciation. Feminine beauty was considered a gift of nature. However, among the males valour and physical abilities invited appreciation from others. Without these characters it was difficult for a man to get a woman of his choice in marriage. The

Maos believed in after life.⁶ They believed in the rewarding of actions one performed in this life hereafter. This called for good actions on which depended the good survival of the spirit after the death of the body.

Hence, we may conclude that the Maos had a wholistic understanding of the human person, which placed adequate emphasis on his/her mind, body, will, emotions and spirit.

One fundamental question that is asked in any culture's vision of the human being is about *the purpose of human life*. What was the purpose of human life according to the Maos? Of course, in all these issues, we basically have to look to the Mao oral traditions. In these traditions the question regarding the purpose of human life is not directly raised. On the other hand, questions like what is the most important thing in life, what is basic for a good life are asked. In one such tradition, the interlocutor asks what is most important in life. The first answer he comes across is that it is a fertile and vast paddy field. This is later abandoned as the most important thing in life because landslides may come and destroy a fertile and vast paddy field. Then he thinks that it is a rich collection of cattle. However, since cattle may be destroyed by an epidemic this also is

abandoned as the most important thing in life. Then he thought that a number of barns filled to the brim is the most important thing in life. This too is abandoned after the consideration that a huge fire may destroy all the barns. Finally the interlocutor thinks that a girl who comes to her husband's household after marriage and plants the three stones to make the oven to prepare food for him and the others in the family and takes care of the whole family environment is the most important thing in life. In the folklore, the interlocutor finally consoles the woman saying she had nothing to be afraid of since she was the most precious thing in life.

Hence, the Maos considered that the purpose of human life was to lead a good life. The good life involved both material and spiritual aspects; that is, just as merry making, gutsy head-hunting, material abundance and good health were parts of good life, so also were the inner qualities of honesty, frankness, charity and a spirit of sharing and the social aspects of community spirit and a family where children and parents respected, loved and cared for one another.

According to M. Ashiho, a village elder from Kalinamai, the purpose of human life according to the Maos may be summarized as follows:

- To procreate offsprings for inheriting and protecting the God-gifted land of their forefathers
- To procreate offsprings to make them serve the parents when they are old and infirm
- To procreate offsprings for perpetuation of their race.

To fulfill these purposes of life, Mao parents took care of their children and nurtured them so as to enable them to lead a good life physically, mentally, morally and spiritually, so that through their good life and deeds the society may live together harmoniously and peacefully for all the time to come.

Another important aspect of the Mao vision of humans that I intend to discuss here is the Mao conception of the *relationship between humans and their world*, which has important consequences on today's much talked about environmental concern. While today's environmentalists speak of saving the Planet Earth basing on empirical fear about the degradation of the environment, the Maos believed in a spontaneously loving relationship between the environment and the humans. They

called a clear sky "Orachimadai Apfu", meaning 'Father Sky', and the landscape "Ojimashe apfii", meaning 'Mother Earth.' The cosmic elements that sustained all life forms were considered sacred and revered. The Ojimashe is called apfii because she is mother of all life forms, the rich fountainhead of all that one needs to nourish oneself, the loving agent who takes care of everything that the feeble humans, beasts and cattle, birds and fishes, and all life in different forms need, the eternally fruitful one. Orachimadai is called Apfu because he nourishes Ojimashe Apfii with rains and the seasons. T. C. Hodson writes:

Among the Tangkhuls and Mao Nagas it is believed that the world was once a waste of water with neither hills, nor trees, and that the deity imprisoned below made such huge efforts to escape that hills emerged. To this some of the Mao Naga villagers add the belief that the sky is the male principle and the earth the female, and that an earthquake is as it were their conjugal embrace, whence all fertility, all growth on the earth, has its origin.⁷

The Maos never exploited nature or extracted too much from it. They never even considered nature economically but only as the sustaining agent. No one took more from nature than was required. They also never shied away from taking what was the gift of nature, because they believed it was a loving provision of the Ojimashe Apfii. In fact such a way of looking at nature cannot be termed exploitation of nature but more appropriately 'being

sustained by nature.’ When a human population was only being sustained by its habitat, there was no degradation of the environment. “Hunting and gathering does not upset the ecological balance of an area; the human population is in fact limited by the availability of food and therefore does not present a threat to other animal populations.”⁸

For the Maos the whole cosmos was established in a cooperative spirit and the survival of one of its elements was not to interfere with that of another. The spirit of competition with nature was considered forbidden. The story of the lad, Chaki Pfu Chahre, who competed with the wind and other elements of nature, bears witness to this.

There once lived a very special lad by the name Chaki Pfu Chahre, whose birth was heralded by the blowing sound of the wind. When the wind started blowing unusually, people began to wonder whose day was it and they knew it was Chaki Pfu Chahre’s day. As he grew up, Chaki Pfu Chahre began to compete with various elements of nature. When the winds stormed upon the landscape, Chaki Pfu Chahre could even race ahead of the wind; when the heavens poured down rain, he could dash ahead of the first downfall; when the first rays of the sun fell upon the mountain peaks and gradually spread across the countryside, Chaki Pfu Chahre could sprint ahead of the sunbeams as well. Can a man race with a wild deer and overpower the child of the forest? Chaki Pfu Chahre could do even that; he could also give a successful chase to the red-tailed bulbul. To say the least, Chaki Pfu Chahre was very proud about his achievements and could not even wait for the next day or sleep before he could achieve the next

feat. As the new day dawned he let off a white cock across the landslide and was preparing to go to the field to work. Chaki Pfu Chahre wanted the girls to carry his tools and tiffin so that he could compete with the landslide but the girls refused. Nonetheless he decided to compete and raced across the landslide. It was difficult and braving the landslide Chaki Pfu Chahre caught hold of the branch of a fig tree. Alas! as he was clinging on to the branch, his body was torn asunder by the powerful landslide except the clinging hand. Chaki Pfu Chahre's parents and villagers mourned his death wailing why did he have to compete with the mighty landslide? As Chaki Pfu Chahre's spirit departed from the body, it asked which was the wonder bird. His spirit was told that it was the cuckoo bird and he became that. The cuckoo flew about and tried to settle on a banyan tree and could; then it landed on a fig tree and began to sing in beautiful tunes. The spirit was to eat the caterpillar (*pfunepihri*), which Chaki Pfu Chahre disliked and so he thought of saving his sister, Ichiini, from having to eat the *pfunepihri*. So Chaki Pfu Chahre carried away Ichiini to the place where she did not have to eat *pfunepihri* and lived happily thereafter.

The traditional Maos made creative uses of the elements of nature without any tinge of exploitation. For example they made fire by a method of friction. Friction was caused between a split piece of bamboo and a piece of wood near which dry leaves or grass was placed. When the bamboo twine was pulled this was and that around the wood-piece by stamping upon, a friction was caused which produced fire. Such creative uses of the elements of nature brought them close to nature and produced in them a reverence for it.

I quote one more Mao legend to highlight the non-exploitative character of the Maos' relationship with nature.

Once upon a time a group of people went to Bekhe near Shajouba to dig out stones from a hill. When they were in the process of digging out the stones, to their surprise the stone bit the lever (*jumphra*) and began to talk. It said, "Why are you moving me from my place? You should not be moving me from my original habitat because I have done you no harm. Don't try to remove me from where I am; I will never leave this place." Then the lever also turned into stone and the group of diggers went away frightened. This story is used among the Maos to instill respect for nature.

The *relationship of men and women among the community* played an important aspect of the Mao's life and vision. Of course, it is well known that the Maos like the other Naga tribes and the tribal people everywhere organized themselves into village states, as the saying goes 'Each Village A Sovereign State.' Exclusiveness from other peoples living nearby was a characteristic of tribal peoples all over the world. As Shimray comments:

The village-states were self-sufficient and independent units. Each village owned independently cultivated land, salt lake, domestic animals, etc. and maintained sufficiency in rice and vegetables. They lived simple, contented and happy life.

...It was a compact and solid state and as such every Naga could enjoy all rights, fulfill duties and submit to the iron discipline.⁹

Within the village the Maos enjoyed community sense and common life to the fullest possible level. Every person was not merely an individual but he/she was more importantly a member of the social unit. An individual existing by himself/herself or individualism or fight for the individual's particular rights was an idea foreign to the Maos. Instead each individual existed for the village state. The Maos believed in a strong monarchical system of Kingship and to the king allegiance was due. However, the King was the head of the Village Council which was the decision making body and he could not independently make any decision. The social rules were so very frank, open, egalitarian and protective of the social interest that keeping them was not considered a burden and rebellion against the norms was almost absent. The King was not the actual administrator of the village; the administrators were the representatives of the clans. The King was more meant for keeping to the religious rites than for administration.

If so how do we say that the Mao society was egalitarian in nature? Everyone lived a similar form of life and the social divide was not created. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the feast of Merit was a great social leveler. The

application of force to maintain law and order was hardly necessary as everyone thought it fine to keep to the social rights and duties. The Mao society presents a pattern of dictatorship of the law and fluid democracy. While everyone obeyed the law, no one felt suffocated by it.

The Maos never thought in terms of individual gains; rather they thought in terms of the community. They worked, sang songs, danced, ate their food, involved in pursuits of enjoyment and social feasts, performed religious rites – all in groups. Everyone contributed to the welfare of the community. No one built a house or maintained the jhum field alone. Another characteristic feature of the Mao society was the free intermingling of both the sexes from their youth. Of course there were times when girls could not enter the group of boys, like during hunting and religious rites. Disputes were settled through dialogue and through swearing. No records were kept but the ‘word’ was considered record enough.

Regarding the Maos’ community spirit, the prevalence of two innovative and interesting practices may be mentioned here: Ava Kochu and Chokhroh Kasa. These two systems together form the cooperative system of work, contributing to cohesion, unity,

solidarity, togetherness, singleness of purpose and community spirit within their society. Under the Ava Kochu system a few individuals collected themselves together to work in the field of each of their group members by rotation and the duration of work was generally one-man day. It was common that boys and girls from the dormitories grouped themselves together for such purposes and there was no gender restrictions for groups formed for purposes such as these. Such group works were also an occasion for joy and celebration. In fact, for a Mao there was no greater joy than being in the group of his/her peers. On such occasions, meat and rice beer were served in plenty for keeping them in good spirits, healthy and in a mood of enjoyment and fun. Chokhroh Kasa is, on the other hand, a more intensive and occasion-based work activity. For example, if someone's paddy field was destroyed by a landslide, he/she would invite the whole village or representatives from all the families to work on a given day in his/her field to restore it for cultivation. Usually the inviting person had to feed the others on the day with meat and rice beer. When such invitations came, it was considered obligatory for the villager to oblige. These systems throw light into the unselfish nature of the Maos' community spirit in the olden times.

For the traditional Mao, the 'other' is his/her community member and this 'other' is very much part of his/her own social self. There was no attempt to dominate, suppress or belittle the other. The other's aspirations, frustrations, joys and sorrows, victories and defeats were considered 'mine' too. In short, we may conclude that social relationships between individuals in the community among the Maos was almost ideal and is worthy of imitation by people of modern societies where estrangement and loneliness of the human being is at its peak.

The *place of women in the largely patriarchal social setup of the Mao society* is another issue that I wish to consider here. Patriarchy among the Maos was more a social control system which allowed a lot of equality to the women. It was a mechanism rather than an attitude that considered women on a lower status than men. Certain social functions only men could perform. Women could not hold leadership roles of kings and village councilors; they could not perform religious rites; they could not join men on the battlefield, except on rare occasions to avenge the death of a beloved or a dear one; they could not take part in the game of hunting; roles of men and women were well distinguished in the folkdances; property was handed down

through the male progeny; children traced their lineage through the father; a girl could not propose to a boy in marriage; men usually took decisions in the family, village and community. Besides rules such as these, there was no suppressive tyranny of the women in the Mao society, as may be found in most societies.

Males and females mixed freely in social gatherings and usually in most aspects of daily life. The Mao conception of womanhood is noble. The woman is the mother in a broad cosmic sense. Just as she gives birth to the child and nourishes the child, she also nourishes the earth and the environment. It is she who is to remind her husband regarding what to plant and reap in a season. In love and marriage, the male is expected literally to win the love of his woman. As pointed in a folk story above, a good woman who is the mother of a family is considered the most important thing in life. She affects the spirit of the family and the society and is the nourishing agent of the social life of the Maos.

The relationship between humans and God played an important part in a Mao's life.¹⁰ The spiritual concern was not an overriding phenomenon in the Mao tradition as may be thought of in Medieval Christian Europe. It was however one of the aspects of human life; it was utterly necessary to complete the picture of

human life. The Maos believed that they were created by Oramei, the cosmic force. The relationship between God and humans in the Mao tradition is not one of a personal love relationship, but a relationship ruled by awe, wonder and fear of the cosmic force. They believed that a life lived not in accordance with the concept of good life, would be punished by God. Thus fear of God ruled every activity of the individual Mao.

And they believed that sacrificing to God and propitiating the deity was an important step to a happy life. In their religious rites, for example, they offered live chicken and let it off during religious ceremonies believing that it was offered to God to propitiate him. This, they believed, would bring prosperity to the village and guard it against epidemics and other misfortunes. Offerings of eggs for guarding the village against incidental fire and other particular offerings for various contingencies were offered. Actions that would violate divine laws had to be avoided since punishments like hail storms, earthquake etc. would be sent by God.

Another important aspect of the Mao's relationship with God was that he/she always thought that divine anger would affect him/her not individually but collectively the whole

community. Hence, moral actions were a social responsibility and not merely an individual's adherence to a code of conduct. In every case of a catastrophe like a hailstorm, an earthquake or a thunder-storm, the elders in the village got together and uttered a common curse called okhro-echa, meant for whosoever had displeased the deity. This was believed to be the most direct way of talking to God and it was believed that just as the curse was uttered the thunder-storm or whatever calamity would clear off. The okhro-echa was pronounced in the following words: "Eh Oramai, nibo kosomaisii mahriino tokritharuo, eyihi zhomazhepio, echongho no nepri nikhe kakhai ho-e. (a) Oramai kobo kosomaisii otu hena khrule lo-o (spits). (b) Oramai kobo kosomaisii ememai phikhrule lo-o." (Oh God! whosoever offends you punish them with death but save us from harm, for if you don't defend us we can neither serve you food nor drink. Let those who displease you go under this stone; let those who displease you go under the feel of the Maos."

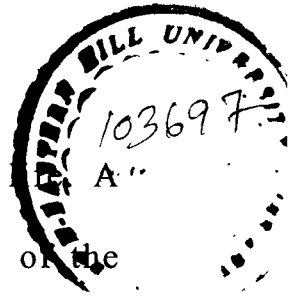
The curse was to be uttered at the place where the okimakitu (stone symbolizing the seventh and the last stage of the feast of merit) was planted. When the curse was to be uttered, not

even the newborn baby was allowed to sleep in the house. Such was the Mao's awe and wonder at the power of the cosmic deity.

Let me here briefly refer to the *Mao conception of life after death*¹¹. Of course, the question for continuation of life in some form after one's death is a universal desire among humans. "Throughout history Man has clung to the belief that the end of his bodily life does not mean a final extinction of his consciousness and personality. The craving for another life beyond the gates of death is deeply rooted in human sentiment."¹² The preoccupation with afterlife, as I have discussed in detail in chapter six, almost ruled the actions of men and women in most societies from time immemorial. In fact the stringent prescriptions of the moral code and its religious bias are based on such a notion. This was not the case among the Maos, not because they did not believe in afterlife, but because they had a more wholistic conception of 'good' or moral life. In their view, the good life was not overtly spiritual; they did not praise the virtues of self-abnegation or a style of life that negated the world or the body. Hence, the Maos had a healthy attitude to life and believed that such a manner of living would lead them to 'good life' hereafter as well. They also believed that actions that went

against these broad prescriptions of good life, increased their chance of being attacked by the evils forces on their way to the land of the dead once they died. This was a constant reminder to lead a good life, since a good life ensured a smooth journey to the land of the dead. No one knows about the nature of the land of the dead or about the way life would be led there. However, it was believed that in the land of the dead, rice would be yellow mud (*nishu*), meat would be decaying wood (*osiisiira*) and wine would be muddy water (*vodzii*). This should not be taken as a derogatory conception of afterlife. It was believed that the dead enjoyed having such food as would be tasteless to those alive. This might have been a way of contrasting how different afterlife would be to life in the world.

Like most ancient peoples, the Maos believed their departed kinsmen lived in a world of their own. There was an anthropomorphic conception of the departed spirits. They believed that in the land of the dead men and women carried on their own way of life; they did cultivation, hunting and all that people here on earth do. Dao, spear, shield, food and rice beer, dress etc. of the dead person were put into the grave under the belief that these items may be of use to them in the other world.



Propitiating the ancestors was a part of the Mao's daily ritual. A bit of meat or rice from the day's meal and a few drops of the hayi zhichu (rice beer) were set apart near the fireplace for this purpose. It was believed that if this was not done, the ancestors would not protect or defend or cause good things for the transgressor. Appealing to the departed kinsmen for help and offering them food and drink were a common habit among the Maos. The Mao's reverence for the ancestor is a pointer towards their belief in a spiritual realm of survival after death.

The dead were rolled in mats and buried in their own ancestral land. The bodies of those who died unnatural deaths like drowning, falling from a tree, burnt to death, killed by a wild animal etc. would not be buried in the village but outside it, and their bodies would be taken near to the grave and pushed into it with the legs and not hands. The Maos feared such deaths and thought that something unwarranted might happen to them if they touched the body of such a person last. However, in the ancient times the Maos did not bury their dead but kept the body on platforms erected for the purpose. The rationale behind this practice was the thought that the dead were still with them. However, this practice was gradually changed since seeing the

body of the dead over and again sent them to bouts of despondency and grief. This also hampered their normal activities of life like cultivation. Hence, the custom was abandoned by the Maos even before the coming of the British.

Let me recapitulate some of the virtues regarded as ideal in the Mao social framework. The ideal Mao man was a compendium of the various Mao virtues or excellences. He is generous in sharing his resources and in helping anyone of the community in need. He is likely to be fortunate to have enough wealth to perform a feast of merit. He is brave and skilled in battle and has brought home many enemy heads and heads of wild animals after hunting. He is a skilled sportsman and has won honours in the village's sporting events. He has a marvelous physique which invites the attraction of young girls. His capacity for aesthetic enjoyment is proverbial and in his youth before marriage he was a darling of the most beautiful maidens of the community. In the work front, he is second to none; his industriousness none can compete with. He is wise in whatever decisions he takes and is respected in the community by virtue of his wisdom. In all probability, he is a master of the Mao folksongs and entertains his audience at social gatherings with

his charming songs. The ideal Mao man is a loyal and faithful friend; he is ready to lay down his life for his friend and brings home the head of the foe who kills his friend. In battle he is even ready to share enemy-heads, the prized battle treasure, with his friends. He is faithful to his family and the community; his honesty is crystal-clear for every one to see. His spirit of communion with every one of his clansmen is immediately recognizable. He is outstanding in respect for the elders and follows their advice to the word. And in his turn, he gives wise counsel to the younger ones in the village. His circle of 'good life' is complete by having obedient children and a wife who is the lamp to his household. He strictly abides by the *gennas* proclaimed and faithfully fulfills his duties to the deities.

The ideal Mao woman was a compendium of the various Mao virtues or excellences, especially those typically feminine excellences. She is generous to help the needy, the orphans and the widows in the village community. She is proud when the men folk are in battle and prepares food for them. She is graceful, charming and beautiful, and her hand is sought in marriage by the most amorous young man in the community. Her nimble hands produce marvels in the work field; her gentle hands weave

wonderful attires for the family. She is wise in managing her household; she is a blessing to her husband and a wonderful mother to her children. She is the model that every young woman in the community looks up to. In the social gatherings, she captures everyone's attention by her melodious songs. She is brave and loyal, and would send her husband or sons to battle bravely. She is rock faithful to her family and the community, and wears the virtue of fidelity like a royal diadem. As the day dawns, she gets up before anyone else in her household and keeps ready firewood and water for preparing food for the family. In the evening, she is the last to get to bed. She keeps the *gennas* truthfully and brings the blessings of *Oramai* for her household. She is outstanding in her respect for the elders; follows their advice to the word; and gives wise counsel to her children. She brings up her children in the best way and they follow her instructions lovingly. To her husband she is the most precious thing in life.

Notes and References

¹ There is also a Mao folk song regarding the origin of the human race. The song goes as follows:

Hoe lehe Makhrie no omai hrii karai hriipra

From Makhel came forth the first man

Makhrie ohrii hidu Shiipfu Chorow nasii heno

From Makhel came also, Chorow, the forefather of the Maos,

Heno zhohe adai mai kono mikriikhru, kolakhru mozhua hriichoe.

Who today look up to the Meiteis and the Mayangs and live,

Hoe zho ime pfuna no mikriikhru kolakhru mozhua hriichoe.

The Maos – they today look up to the Meiteis and the Mayangs and live.

Arulo ko atelu lijiko vakrii doe no,

We then swelled in numbers and made new paths,

Heno chi ime dziihi buate doeno.

‘cause our land became small for us.

Hudzii oramoro pfuii oji pfokili ohe fiisho.

With a cock to offer God, we set up our home in every hill.

Fiisho otoo phudo raso datha pfothu pfuki rasii so fiisho,

To the god of the hill we offered the sterdy calf as we settled in,

Fiisho matae Shina maizho tolu koroku,

Unto the border of Viswema, we shall reach,

Fiisho matae mikriimai chi tolu koroku.

And even unto the land of the Meiteis, shall our hills be.

Siikue zho ime pfuna no omai pro doe phibe no akro doeno.

The Maos shall thus grow and their limbs and legs aplenty.

Heno shukakrii maiwo ophi kokhai oba kokhaiwoda.

Let the the others stay fixed and their hands unstretched,

Woda zhohe dolua mepfuna piphre koleji imepfuna,

But the Maos will stretch forth and prosper.

Pfuna chikohu opo kohu khusii zho koku kaji wosii asoleji emepfuna.

They shall be known for their great land.

² The literal translation of ‘*Ora*’ is difficult. In my interaction with the Mao elders, I came to understand that ‘*Ora*’ is the divinely empowered spirit. ‘*Ora*’ can be both good and bad. I have used ‘god’ with lowercase ‘g’ to mean *Ora* and for ‘*Oramei*’ I use ‘God’ with uppercase ‘G.’ *Ora* and *Oramei* would roughly tally with the ultimate (Brahman) and the *devas* (gods) of Hinduism. *Oramei* is the creator of everything, including *Ora*; but *Ora* is different from *Omei* and is more powerful.

³ T. C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1996) p.56

⁴ In fact, the story is commonly accepted by the Angami, Lotha, Mao and the Sema Naga tribes.

⁵ See chapter 6 for more on aesthetic enjoyment as virtue.

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- ⁶ See a later section of the present chapter for a more comprehensive treatment on 'after life.'
- ⁷ T. C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, p.127
- ⁸ "Hunters and Gatherers," *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mankind*, Vol.16 (London: Marshall Cavendish Limited, 1979) p.2003
- ⁹ R. R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, pp. 46 & 47
- ¹⁰ I will deal about Mao religion in a more detailed manner in the next chapter of this dissertation. Here my concern is only regarding the *human-God relationship*.
- ¹¹ A more detailed account of the Mao conception of afterlife will be taken up in the next chapter.
- ¹² "The Afterlife," *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mankind*, Vol.19 (London: Marshall Cavendish Limited, 1979) p.2418

Chapter 5

Mao Religion and Its Relation to Their Moral Beliefs

In all cultures, human beings make a practice of interacting with what are taken to be spiritual powers. These powers may be in the form of gods, spirits, ancestors, or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected. Sometimes a spiritual power is understood broadly as an all-embracing reality and sometimes it is approached through its manifestation in special symbols. It may be regarded as external to the self, internal, or both. People interact with such a presence in a sacred manner—that is, with reverence and care. Religion is the term most commonly used to designate this complex and diverse realm of human experience.

In this chapter, I look at Mao religion in some detail and explore its connection with the Mao concept of morality and the good life. In this connection the chapter deals with their notion of the spiritual principles (God and lesser spirits), religious

practices, the concept of *Genna* / “Mane” or prohibition/taboo and their conception of afterlife.

The religious tradition of the Maos¹ was called in Mao language ‘opfoo ope Chiina’. The Maos reflected on the origin of the world and came to the conclusion that this universe was created by the One, whom they called ‘Oramai’ who is the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer. He took control of the course of nature and human life as he has infinite power and is greatly wiser than human beings. Oramai was considered to be the source of everything; he would protect mankind from danger and bring good luck to human beings. Displeasing Oramai called for His wrath; individual punishments like sicknesses and social/community punishments like epidemics, hailstorms, bad harvest, lost cattle etc, would be awaiting anyone who offended Oramai. Continuous propitiation of Oramai was an important aspect of a Mao’s life. Propitiation was done through the offering of sacrifices, and when Oramai was appeased He gave the appeaser good health, abundant crops, favourable weather, victory over foes and long life.

Oramai was the giver of all that humans could look up to and if one was good to the other, Oramai would bless him/her.

Also for the Maos, propitiatory sacrifices just as moral actions and good human conduct were important. It was something very basic to human nature to adhere normally to the various aspects of a 'good life' including being moral. That was to come effortlessly from a person and the Mao's community structure and cultural landscape made it truly possible for most of them to look forward to living a moral life. Immoral life was abnormal and strange for the Mao, but the moral life was the ordinary life. It was lived not only because reward was awaiting for it after life, but because it was the common human life. It may be also said that immoral life was a surprise factor among the traditional Maos.² It was so human and natural to be moral that immorality was thought to be unthinkable. Propitiation of *Oramai* through moral action was taken for granted; it was taken to be understood, because it was the normal way of living. A moral life was the very being of the traditional Mao. As I have mentioned earlier, the Mao conception of *Oramai* was not that of a personal God, who is immanently with humans and is involved in their affairs like the personal God of the Bhakti movement among the Hindus or the Christian God. The basis of religion for the Mao was not the emotion of 'love' but that of 'awe'.

Further, the Maos believed that good and bad actions would be accordingly rewarded hereafter. There is a strong belief that justice would be meted out both here and now and hereafter. Who meted out justice? Tradition is silent on this issue. Was it something like the principle of Karma in Indian philosophy or Oramai? I would like to argue here that they did think that it was Oramai who meted out justice in the next life. For instance, when there were disputes among two Maos regarding, say, land, this matter was to be brought to the elders' council. Judgement in such cases usually went in favour of the one who was apparently seen on the right side; it might have been even due to his persuasive skills or because of the network of friends and witnesses he created, though usually justice was administered impartially. In any case, the losing party, if he still thought that he was denied justice would say that 'Oramai knows', meaning, though he was not given justice by human medium, Oramai would grant him justice at His own time and will. They also said that Oramai justice would not be like chilly, which had immediate effect, but Oramai's action would be gradual. It might affect the present generation of the wrong doer or even his future generations, and certainly *him* in the next life. The Maos believed that Oramai's punishments would pursue an ancestry even to its

seventh generation. From the analysis of such conversational language of daily life, we may safely conclude that according to the traditional Maos, *Oramai* was the guarantee of moral justice in the next life.

When there was a natural calamity that threatened the harvest, for example, the Maos believed that it was due to some wrong done by someone in the community or the community as a whole. This wrong was considered more to be a 'moral wrong' than a religious-ritualistic wrong. However, propitiating the deity in order to avoid the impending calamity was done not through 'repentance' but through a propitiatory sacrifice. But forgiveness for a moral wrong was never considered as attained through a religious sacrifice but through asking forgiveness from the one who was affected by your wrong doing or through recovering the wrong doing by a right action.

Hence, for the Maos, it was the human being himself/herself that decided ultimately what fate he/she wanted. Hence, propitiation of *Oramai* was not the direct issue of moral action, but what type of life one wanted hereafter. However, while living in the world, propitiation of *Oramai* was important for making life happy. Material comforts and happiness was an

important aspect of the Mao's conception of good life. Hence, this important aspect of good life would be denied to anyone if he/she did not propitiate Oramai. Hence, the emphasis on direct propitiation through ritualistic action was significant in traditional Mao religion.

According to traditional Mao beliefs, Oramai created human beings in a special way by giving them more knowledge and ideas, so that they could take care of all the other living beings in this universe. Though the Maos acknowledge the existence of the Supreme Deity and the spirits, they never entertained image or idol worship. This fact can be gathered from the wood carvings of the Maos, among which one can notice no carvings on the deities. The traditional Maos may be considered polytheistic in the same way as the Hindus. Just like the Hindus, they believe that there is one supreme God Oramai; at the same time they believe like the Hindus that there are lesser gods or spirits (who are in Hinduism known as *devas*). In Mao religion there are two types of lesser gods – the ones that cause evils and misfortunes called orakashi (comparable to *asuras/rakshasas* in Hinduism) and the ones that cause good fortunes called orakayi (comparable to the *devas* of Hinduism).

In brief, the traditional Maos were a very religious people; they acknowledged their God in every thing they did. They believed that if they did not live according to the wish of their God, they might become crippled in life, that their generations might become perverted, that their cattle and crops perish, that they might fall sick and die premature and poor. These beliefs among the traditional Maos kept their social fabric intact and individual lives morally exemplary.

Thus helping the helpless like widows and orphans was a service rendered to Oramai. A person who lived a good life in the community with his/her fellow beings is known as a person who knows Oramai or 'orachithobo kopfo'. Strangely, the notion of the orachithobo kopfo is that of a humble patient person, who forgives wrongs done to him/her or never takes revenge. Hence, parallel to the robust idea of a very normal, materialistic-spiritualistic ideal of good life, there also ran a very pious religious ideal of good life. However, one should remember that this ideal was limited within the community. That is, an activity like head hunting was still permissible and possible for the orachithobo kopfo. Such a person's life, it was said, could be known from his/her conduct; he/she did not pay back in the same

coin when members of the community ill-treated them or spoke ill of them.

One can illustrate the role of the lesser spirits in Mao religion with the help of legends and stories.

Once there was a rich man with a lot of paddy fields and cattle. He had only one son who fell sick and died young. The father was heartbroken and wanted to know the actual circumstances of his son's death; in fact he wanted to avenge his only son's premature death. He went about asking people regarding the person who could tell about the actual circumstances of his only son's death. Finally he was directed to meet a soothsayer, Machiili Khenia by name, who had special powers to tell who was responsible for his only son's death. Machiili Khenia told the rich man that Orakashi, named Khepfucharah, was responsible for his son's death. Machiili Khenia was not an ordinary man. He could lead people to the place where Orakashi lived. He could also instruct people about how to take revenge on Orakashi. He asked the rich man to sharpen his spear like a blade so that as soon as it touches the piphrii grass it would cut like a blade. He also instructed the rich man to collect thatch grass, so that he could spread it on the way after killing Khepfucharah for his disturbing the momentum of Khepfucharah's men and carry it in his khobo (bag). Machiili Khenia then led the rich man to the place where Khepfucharah lived and showed him his son's body hanging upside-down in Khepfucharah's house and him sitting nearby drinking wine. Angered by this sight, the rich man took out his spear and struck Khepfuchara and killed him. Just as Khepfuchara's men began to chase him, the rich man spread the thatch grass on their way in order to slow down their pace. However, as he was reaching the village gate, his thatch grass ran out of supply and he was struck on the buttock by Khepfuchara's men with their spear. The rich man still ran, reached his house, banged the door closed and told the story of his success to his wife. He also asked to serve him rice beer and food, after having which

he vomited blood and fell dead on account injury sustained from the attack of his enemies.

As per this story, though *orakashi* and *orakayi* have extra-human powers, they can also be overpowered by human beings who follow the right stratagem. Though *Orakashi* and *orakayi* are like superhuman beings or demigods the highest place in Mao religion is occupied by *Oramei*. To continue, *orakashi* and *orakayi* are regarded as present everywhere, moving around with the people in the society though they are invisible most of the time. People believed that *orakashi* brought nightmares, suffocation, pain and terror in their lives. The *orakashi* and *orakayi* were thought to be moving with the cloud and wind, and they were believed to be present on mountains, rivers, jungles and in lowland areas. These deities were not worshipped though some sacrifices were offered to them by giving them domestic animals, clothes, food, cut metals, and coins. This was done just to mollify them, instead of worshipping them because they were to be feared. They believed that *orakayi* appeared white in colour and *orakashi* black.

Orakayis are the benevolent spirits. According to the Maos, the day was for the human beings or *Omai* and the night was for the lesser gods. They believed that when humans saw *orakashi*

and orakayi during the day, they suffered pain and even the loss of hair. Similarly, when Omai was seen by the orakashi and orakayi in the night, they also suffered.

It is said that once in the olden days the human beings could see orakashi and orakayi. This ability was taken away from the humans and given to the dogs.³

The Maos also believe that the spirits of their ancestors are deeply involved with them in their earthly life.⁴ It cannot be deciphered from the oral tradition whether the ancestral spirits themselves are orakashi and orakayi. However, this does not really matter since there are good and bad ancestral spirits also. Some humans who die unnatural deaths due to accidents etc., are believed to become unfulfilled haunting spirits.

An important aspect of any religion is the organization of ritualistic actions, namely public sacrifices, prayers etc. When the Maos make propitiatory offerings to God in order to be blessed by Him, they choose the best cow, cock or eggs. These animals or eggs chosen for sacrifice should not be defective in any way. For example, chicken to be offered at sacrifice should not have cracked toes or broken combs or mixed colours. Mostly a fully white coloured cock is used. In the same way a cow to be

offered at sacrifices should not be defective with broken horns, injured tail or ears. They also should not be handicapped in any way and should not have patches/spots. In fact, completely black cows were used for sacrifices. Since it was difficult to find such particular kind of cows for sacrifices, they used to go in search for them in different villages and areas of the community. After the sacrifice, the cow is killed and its meat is distributed among the villagers, whereas the sacrificial chicken is mostly released free after the sacrifice. However, sometimes it is also killed and sacrificed. Sacrificial eggs are carefully kept near the village gate or other safe places. Just anyone could not perform the rituals and sacrifices; instead sacrifices were performed by the priest *Khehrepfoona* or the village elders or by the appointed elder from the clan. The Maos believed that through the sacrifice, the state of the sick person's health could be known. For instance, if the sacrificial chicken that is taken beyond the village gate and let off moves back towards the village of the sick person, then it is learned that the sick person may not recover from the illness and he may die, because, as it is said, God did not accept the offering/sacrifice. But if the chicken, on the other hand, moves away into the jungles or move away from

the village, it is believed that He is happy with the sick person's offering.

During the sacrifices spontaneous prayers were uttered. These prayers were not fixed unlike the ritualistic Vedic mantras. They were tailor-made for the occasion. However, in all sacrifices the following words were common: "Oh! *Oramai*, take this offering which we make; protect us (the community) from all misfortunes (like accidental fires, hailstorms, etc.)" This prayer reveals the motive and character of the propitiatory offering. The prayers were mainly supplications for good harvest, freedom from sickness and victory over enemies.

There are special prayers also for special occasions. For instance, when the village approach road is about to be cleaned (for the Maos believed that the ancestors came to their village from Makhel through this very approach road), they uttered the following prayer:

"Oratho!

(Oh! God we pray you!)

Omai ko kho

(We pray for men. Let there be more of us.)

Oto ko kho

(We pray for wealth. That is, increase our wealth.)

Otu morii ko kho

(We pray for cattle. That is, increase our cattle.)

Okhe, Mani kokhru ko vua

(Even if a tiger or a boar comes)

A lozho leno akhre-a the

(Let them die at our hands.)

Nito kokhro komu pfii ko vu-a

(Even if a whore comes)

A lozho leno chili mosii-a hrii.

(Let her be reformed in our land.)”

Prayers were also offered with food and drink to the ancestral spirits. One example of such prayer is:

“Opailo shia

(Thirty for Grandmother!)

Opelo shia

(Thirty for Grandfather!)

Phroma phromuwotia

(Even if this be misreckoned)

Okhreyia ongomodo-a kozhuto

(Have it in amity.)”

The Maos did not have any particular place of worship. There was neither temple nor church nor mosque. They believed that one could pray anywhere. However the village gate was of utmost importance, because most of the offerings were made at the gate. Similarly the hearth of each home was considered sacred and place fitting for prayer and offering. They worshipped Oramai and offered sacrifices in their houses, at the village gate, on the roadside and in the field.

The Maos considered violating the customary law as a direct offence against God. Such transgressors are even liable to face excommunication from the community. Moreover, such transgressors will have no advocates, as their best friends also would try to avoid them because they would rather take care of their own image and reputation than stand with their friends. In the Mao community, there is always a collective as well as individual commitment/responsibility to uphold/strengthen the integrity of the community. Going against the will of the elders in the community is also an offence because the Maos considered the elders as the messengers of Oramai and they were thought to be next to Oramai. The elders command great respect in the society.

Though the religion is the same for all the Maos, it may be noted the norms and rites differed from village to village and from clan to clan according to their needs and demands. With the change of times and the coming of Christianity in the Mao area, majority of the people have embraced Christianity, and the Mao religion was shaken and reduced to a minority religion practiced only by about five per cent, mainly elders, of the Mao population. The Mao religion, it should be mentioned here, has been not a static religion as its practices, rituals and ceremonies kept changing in response to needs and circumstances. Hence it was a dynamic religion and not static religion. The demise of the elders is also one of the main reasons to the deteriorating condition of the Mao religion. The elders are the backbone of the community and they show and teach how to perform rituals and sacrifices. With their death there is a break in tradition and even the system of the community also collapsed, because the knowledge which they had could not be comprehensively passed on to the next generation. The village elders are considered as the 'seen God'.

In the Mao community there were prophets and fortune tellers. People with this power could forecast events. They were thought to be in communion with a special deity who informed

them about the things to happen in the days to come. They could talk to this deity in a strange language which could not be understood by the others. They moved around in the community and climbed on a big stone or to an elevated place and looked up to the sky and communicated with the deity who told everything that was going to happen. Thereafter they informed their people about the impending occurrences. Their prophecies in the olden days such as the following have come true in the modern times:

- Money would be available in plenty like 'Makhipa', a kind of flowering plant, in near future. This prophecy, it is said, has come true with the with the arrival of paper currency.
- A kind of wiring of Oramai would come through which people could talk to one another. This prophecy is said to be fulfilled with the coming of the telephone.
- There will be no separation of day and night with the coming down of the stars on the trees and on accounting of their continuous shining. This prophecy is said refer to the invention of electricity which we have today.
- A day will come, when people would start selling soil and stones. This is said to be happening today with the selling

of gravel and mud for filling up valleys and making roads etc. In the olden time such a practice was thought unthinkable.

People laughed at them for all these predictions and talked in secret that they were going mad, because all these predictions were thought to be impossible to happen at the time of their prediction. However, today, looking back, the modern Maos feel that these incredible predictions of their prophetic ancestors have come true.

Fortune tellers also exist in the community and they were more in number than the prophets. In almost every village there were one or two fortune tellers. People went to them and consulted about their future and their family. When they were to buy paddy fields or forest also they consulted the fortune tellers. In return as the price for consultation they were paid paddy. The fortune tellers used paddy or twigs in performing the rite which helped them to predict the future. They watched the movements of the paddy and the twigs which placed on their palm. From the movement of these objects placed on their palm they could foresee the fate of the person who really wanted to know about his/her future.

The concept of mane or taboo played an important role in the life of the traditional Mao. When mane was declared, the normal functioning of the community was suspended for the purpose of conducting rituals, worship of Oramai and purifying oneself and the whole community. Mane plays an important role in the social and religious life of the Mao people. When the king, 'Movu', declared a day of mane, it prohibited the normal working of the community. They were even forbidden to touch or eat food so as to remain pure during the time of the mane. During mane days trade was not allowed between the villages, which meant that they were not supposed to take out or bring anything to the village from the outside. They were also restricted from going to their friends' village or entertain their friends in their own village. Mane once proclaimed by the king was a strong order which no one could ignore or violate. If he/she did, the whole community would invite a common curse on him/her. This brought a great social pressure on the Mao to remain bound to the order of mane. Hence, everyone in the community was well aware of the rules of mane. The parents and elders informed the younger generation clearly about the mane and the consequences of violating the rules of mane. This prompted the Maos in observing the mane in a faithful way. The Mao community

comprising of sixteen villages observed the mane as a single community. The mane is proclaimed by the king (Movu) of Pudunamai village, who decides on such matters. He would go to the peak of a small mount called Theni kasha bu and shout the mane from there. His shouts could be heard by his villagers and the neighbouring villagers. But to the far away villages, proclamation had to be passed on because it was not audible to them. The message would spread quickly from those who heard to those who could not hear. Sometimes the manes that were proclaimed by the Movu could not be received till some days by the far off villagers. But as soon as they received the news, they would begin observing the mane. The mount Theni Kasha Bu is considered a sacred place and is restricted to other people, and for women it is strictly prohibited. All the mane were proclaimed on the 'Theni Kasha Bu', except the war mane, which is proclaimed on a stone slab that is kept in front of the Movu's house.

There were nineteen manes which were common to all the Mao villages. Out of which, some are monthly occurrences and the rest are seasonal. The monthly occurrences are five in winter and four in summer. The name of the manes for both winter and

summer are all the same but only one is more in winter. The other fourteen seasonal manes are the same to all the Mao villages. Besides all these nineteen manes, there are certain manes which are observed when a person sees any event. Manes are to be strictly observed, for violation was thought to bring evil effects and invited curse from the villagers and the supernatural forces. On all the mane days, agricultural works were prohibited and prohibition was also imposed on many aspects like food, trade, talking to strangers and so on. The manes that are proclaimed every month, **the monthly manes**, are the following:

1. Ora mane: This mane is proclaimed to worship God and acknowledge that He is the most powerful one. A person will be appointed to offer the offering to God with an egg near the village gate called 'Koro'. He will get up early in the morning and get himself ready with a red shawl or 'Sangho', dao or 'okhro', the sacrificial egg or 'hudzii' and two branches of a shrub called 'shipri kholo' and moved towards the gate without talking to anyone. On this day, the king would fast till evening; he would not take solid food but only drink rice beer, called 'Hayi Zhichu'. The king should abstain from sex and the other villagers are restricted from cultivation and other

taboo activities, like trade etc. They believe that a person or the community who observes the mane well are protected by the supreme God from sickness.

2. **Umi Kayi Mane**: This mane is observed so that the community may be saved from incidental fire. On this day everyone prays to God and implores him not to give incidental fire. The villagers carried water from the nearby well and sprinkled it around their house, so fire may not catch easily. They are warned that whoever violates the mane may run the risk of their house being burned down. The whole village abstained from cultivation and the king fasted till evening by drinking rice beer; he also kept himself chaste.
3. **Tokho Mane**: This mane is proclaimed on the ninth of the month. This mane is observed to request God to give enough food and pray to God that their harvested food grains may last up to the new harvest. It is their belief that if they violated this mane they would become poor and hungry. So they prayed for good crops and plentiful food grains. On this mane day the king went on fast and drank only rice beer till evening, and the other villagers abstained from work.

4. **Pfureshi Mane**: This mane is to be proclaimed on the 14th of the month. The king and villagers prayed to God to control their appetite and not to cause greediness. When the community did not observe the mane properly, they were tempted to steal, become very greedy, speak lies and quarrel with their neighbors. So the whole community asked God to keep them away from all these problems as they kept this mane.
5. **Phehre Mane**: This mane is proclaimed to find out through bamboo divination (chire mopfii-pfii) what is in store for the community during the current year. Through this divination, they examined the life span of men and animals, the climate, water, fire conditions, the community's prospect with the warring enemy groups, hunting of wild animals and their safety in traveling. The mane is not about predictions of personal tragedies or fortunes. The predictions are rather communitarian in nature. For instance, they would not find out if Mr. X would die in the current year but they would rather find out whether there would be many or few deaths in the year. Would there be calamitous or epidemic deaths etc.? On this mane day all the males in the community would get up

early morning and set off to a particular spring to purify themselves by washing their bodies with the clean spring water. Before they wash their bodies, the following were pronounced: “Oratho, omu ome kashi aphi aba mosiikayi, koso kono sokayi, thopfuni azho khrii tikotu-o, to shashra-a odzii akhriile.” (Oh God, I worship you! Let not bad and ominous dreams haunt me. Let me not stumble and fumble on the way. Let me be free from sickness. Let not evils invade me on my way. Let this wash, take away all my evils and sins). On this mane agricultural work is prohibited and they keep themselves chaste.

The seasonal manes are listed below:

1. Osiipukakha Mane: (A day of rest after the sowing of Millet)
2. Khryhre Kashi Mane: (A day of prayer for protection against pest)
3. Uji Kathe Mane: (A day of prayer to make the barren soil fertile)
4. Probvoo ramane: (A day of prayer for healthy growth of vegetation)

5. *Chiithoo pirii Mane*: (A day of prayer to God not to send hailstorm)
6. *Osiira Koso Mane*: (A day of prayer for proper growth of millet)
7. *Uchi Kozii Mane*: (A day of prayer to God not to cause darkness)
8. *Dziikho Mane*: (A day of prayer to God for adequate rain)
9. *Thopre Mane*: (A day of inauguration for rice plantation)
10. *Doshoo pirii Mane*: (A day of prayer not to send hailstorms and destructive wind)
11. *Omo Chakri mane*: (A day of prayer for good crops)
12. *Okheyishi Mane*: (A day of prayer not to cause destruction by pest)
13. *Uchi Kayi Kokho Mane*: (A day of prayer for good weather)
14. *Molu Kosii Mane*: (A day of prayer against earthquake)

In addition to the above explained *Manes*, there are always extra *Manes* that different individuals or particular villages may

take upon themselves. The Maos feel the need for these Manes in their personal and community lives due to the uncertainties of life. For example, when a cow or a cat gives birth, the owners family will observe a Mane. Similarly, when there was a death in the village, the whole village observed one day of Mane to show love and respect to the deceased person or when a woman climbed up on the roof of a house, they observed a Mane to ward off misfortunes on account of their belief that this would bring bad luck to the village. The Manes are the best examples of the Maos' strong religious sense. They believed that the Manes propitiated the gods. All the Manes proclaimed by the King for the community expressed their reverence towards God who was considered the supreme controller of all the events that happened. The Manes were not only proclaimed but were kept by everyone in the community without exception. Fear of God was a strong factor in the perfect observance of the Manes. Everyone single person abstained from work on the Mane day and the King fasted till evening on rice beer alone, abstaining himself from sexual gratification. These were marks of observation of the Mane.

From the above discussion on the Manes and an earlier mention of fortune telling, it is clear that the Maos were

practitioners of some special divination methods, the prominent among them being 'chire mopfii-pfii'. This was a practice during the Pehre Mane to predict what was in store for the immediate future, the current year for the community. Incidentally, females could not do chire mopfii-pfii nor could they come to the place where it was done. It was done by two young men, say about sixteen years of age, while being watched by other men, young and old. Besides these two young men, other important players in the divination process were elders who were adept in reading the process. Though any Mao man could in principle attend the divination process, they had to abstain from visiting the girls' dormitories and from meeting them. Also a father who had his daughter to be married off in the current year could not attend the divination process. There was a particular place where chire mopfii-pfii was done and the place had to be near a bamboo grove. The two young diviners are selected by the village elders and they and the onlookers have to reach the divination spot before sunrise. The diviners then choose two young bamboo trees from the grove and cut them and split them. The diviners then stand back to back holding together the ends of two pieces of the split bamboos, one in each hand. One of the elders, adept in reading from the movement of the bamboos the future prospects

of the community, can now check what was in store for the current year. Through this method they used to check several aspects of the community for the current year according to the following order: (i) whether there are going to be many human deaths in the year (*omaisa*), (ii) whether the cattle would prosper (*otu morii*), (iii) whether the year was favourable for cultivation (*ocha omo*), (iv) whether there would be incidental fire (*omisa*), (v) what would be the status of rainfall (*odziisa*), (vi) whether the year was favourable for traveling (*azhi ahe koso*), (vii) whether there would be success in head-hunting (*oso oru*), and (viii) whether the year was favourable for hunting of wild animals (*sohu*). If the year is predicted to be promising many human deaths in the community, the village chief would proclaim special *Mane* for the village and would offer to God a sacrifice for warding off possible deaths. If incidental fire is predicted, the chief would proclaim another *Mane* and on that day everyone in the village is to go and draw water from a well and sprinkle it around their houses, believing that by doing this their houses won't catch fire. These practices are still prevalent in Mao areas which are not Christianized. No *Mane* or official ritual is taken up to ward off other unfavourable predictions. However, if the

predictions are not favourable, the people are warned about being careful.

As discussed earlier,⁵ according to the Mao religion, death is not the end of life; they believe that there is life after death. All dead people's spirits go into the land of the dead called 'Kathe Lozho' and continue their life there. It is said that the Kathe Lozho is a far away place detached from us by long distances. Dead spirits face many obstacles and hardships while they travel to Kathe Lozho. There are several myths among the Maos which highlight their belief in the after life. I quote the following myth as an example.

Once there lived two orphan children, brother and sister. They were so young that they did not know how to plough or work in their paddy fields. Knowing this, their deceased parents used to come and work in the field by night. The orphans were surprised to find their field ploughed and ready for cultivation. They wondered who did this kind act for them by night, and in their eagerness to find out their nocturnal helpers, they hid by the bush near the field in the night. Then they realized that it was their parents who did the work for them by night, wearing sapu kopu (a type of dress they wore in those days). Seeing this, the boy said to his sister: "You jump into mom's sapu kopu and I would do the same to dad's." While the boy succeeded, the girl fell half way, and hence the boy went to the Kathe Lozho with his parents and stayed there many days. Here he insisted with his parents that he wanted to go and spent the night in the dormitory (khru chizii) in the Kathe Lozho. The parents first refused to allow him but relented on insistence. In the khru chizii he found that his friends turned into flies (Thomai) and bees (Olei), and they hanged on the walls and

roof. On return, the boy narrated these strange sights to his parents, who then told him that it was because they knew about that that they forbade him to visit the *khruichizii*. Later when the men of the *Kathe Lozho* went for hunting, the boy joined them. While at hunting, the dead people shouted that a big wild boar was near the boy. As he looked around, the boy saw that it was only a rat and stamped it dead. At this, the dead people marveled at the strength of the living. After spending many days with his parents in the *Kathe Lozho*, the boy was advised by his parents to go back home to look after his sister. As he got ready to go home, the boy's parents prepared rice, meat and wine for him, instructing him to eat them before he crossed the gate (*Koro*) of the *Kathe Lozho*. However, the boy wanted to share his parents' food with his sister, but as he opened the Tiffin box after passing the *koro*, he found that rice was turned into yellow mud (*nishu*), meat into decayed wood (*osiisiira*) and wine into muddy water (*vodzii*). From this human beings came to know that their dead ancestors use such type of food.

However, for the Maos the strongest proof for life after death is the practice of necromancy in their village life. As mentioned in the previous chapter, necromancy is the ability to communicate with the dead person's spirit. The practitioner of necromancy is actually not the active agent of the process. Instead, it is the dead spirit that wants to communicate to the living person according to the Mao notion of necromancy. The living person, with whom the spirit wants to communicate, falls unconscious and he/she gets into a state similar to a delirium. In this state of unconsciousness, the person speaks out regarding his/her communication with the spirit. The spirit is the active agent. However, in practice, there are few people to whom

necromancy happens repeatedly and not to others. Hence, these people are spoken of as ‘capable of practicing necromancy’ by the Maos. Through the person in the necromancy state, the spirit may request to speak to a son, a daughter or any person of his/her choice. Then the person asked for is called and through the one in the state of necromancy, he/she communicates with the dead ancestor. The onlookers may also request the person in the state necromancy to contact someone he/she wants to communicate with in *Kathe Lozho*. The practitioner may then relent and find out whether the spirit is available in the *Kathe Lozho* to communicate with. If yes, the communication would begin and if no, the practitioner may say where the spirit had gone.

Necromancy is common among the Indian population in general. Among the mainland Indians, a person in the state of necromancy is said to be ‘possessed by the spirit of the dead person.’ Interestingly, the practitioner speaks in the same voice as the dead person. This is what made the Maos think of necromancy as the strongest proof for life after death. Of course, advanced psychology today has found psychological/psychiatric reasons behind the practice of necromancy. They speak of dual or

split personalities, treating it as a psychiatric disorder that can be treated and cured.

The Maos believed that persons who lived good and righteous lives would reach the Kathe Lozho without much problem and bad people would find the going tough as they would be obstructed by several difficulties on their way to their destination. A type of moral egalitarianism also may be noticed in the Mao conception of life after death. It is only on the way to the land of the dead that the dead spirits would be disturbed on account of their immorality. Once they reach their destinations, they would be all the same. There won't be any difference between the more moral person or the less moral person. For example, the Maos have a belief that if a child is born to a woman out of wedlock and if she is not able to pinpoint the father of the child, she has to go outside the village and give birth to the illegitimate child. Once the child is born, either the mother will have to live with the child outside the village without any hope of returning to the village or she would have to kill her child. She has to kill her own baby by pricking its foot with chibishu (the raspberry thorn); if it does not die, she has to kill it by throttling; if it still does not die, she has to stamp it dead. If

she kills the child, the baby's spirit would wait for the mother until she is dead. Once she is dead, if she is not buried before sunset, the baby spirit would torment her on her way to Kathe Lozho. If, on the other hand, she is buried before sunset, she would pass smoothly to the Kathe Lozho. It is believed that the baby spirit can come out only after sunset. Once the spirit reaches the Kathe Lozho, there is no more torments or sorrow.

Whatever is considered as aspects of 'good life' by the Maos are regarded as such in the ultimate reckoning of after-life. For instance, hunting of enemy heads, etc., may be frowned at by more conservative societies. But for the Maos, since these are aspects of good life, they are treated as such in the ultimate reckoning too. Whereas punishments (obstacles in the progress towards the Kathe Lozho) are sure to be meted out to the immoral person for actions like cheating, dishonesty, immoral murder, adultery etc.

The role of God in meting out final moral judgements on the dead spirit is not visibly clear in the Mao myths. What is clear, however, is that an exterior principle is not necessary to take care of the universal moral law; it rather takes care of itself, as the scientists speak of the law of universal gravitation or the

principle of relativity. The law of Karma was considered in a similar fashion by some of the schools of Indian philosophy like the early Samkhyas.

In conclusion, one cannot but be surprised by the effectiveness of the traditional Maos' simple religious and moral beliefs in reigning in on individual and collective behaviour. While the social pressure to live the type of good life conceived by the community in common was so much that the individual never felt it a burden to live the 'good life'/the moral life/the religious life. In fact straying from these norms was considered the difficult and the abnormal life.

Notes and References

¹ The Mao religion is an oral tradition and it is not based on any scripture unlike the classical religions. The term 'animism' was introduced by the 19th century British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who described the origin of religion and primitive beliefs in terms of animism. In *Primitive Culture* (1871) Tylor defined animism as the general belief in spiritual beings and considered it 'a minimum definition of religion.' According to Tylor, primitive peoples, defined as those without written traditions, believed that spirits or souls are the cause of life in human beings; they picture souls as phantoms, resembling vapors or shadows, which can transmigrate from person to person, from the dead to the living, and from and into plants, animals and lifeless objects. The Mao religion has several common characteristics with Tylor's notion of 'animism.' However, his use of the term as primitive in a disparaging manner cautions me from using the same here. In my view, the Maos had a living spiritual tradition which was an authentic engagement with the spiritual realities and sufficient to make their life meaningful and moral. Hence, rather than using the terms 'animism' and 'primitive', I intend to

use the expression 'traditional religion' as may be differentiated from the classical religions.

- ² I shall deal with the Mao concept of morality and virtues in the next chapter. Their concept of good human actions should not be generalized with that of today's notions of morality and human action.
- ³ For the Maos, the dog is considered to be one of the best companions of humans. The element of fear is reduced with the presence of a dog.
- ⁴ About the spirits of the ancestors, I reserve a broader treatment in a later section of this chapter on 'After Life.'
- ⁵ Towards the end of the chapter 4, 'Vision of Omei', I have already dealt with Mao conception of afterlife in relation to their notion of the human being and his/her place on earth. Here, I probe into their notion of afterlife in itself.

Chapter 6

Virtues and the Good Life

Extolling certain virtues and denouncing certain vices is an integral part of the moral fabric of all cultures. Virtues are those qualities in which it is desirable for a person to excel and vices are those qualities which it is desirable for a person to refrain from. Aristotle, for instance, conceived of virtue as those qualities the possession of which enabled an individual to achieve happiness that led to good life and the lack of which frustrated the person's movement towards this ultimate good. However, in Aristotle's writings on virtues and the good life, there is emphasis on a very important point, that there are various correct ways of living for different people and cultures. The truth of this statement comes through when one looks at the lists of virtues in different philosophical writings on morality and religion, and those virtues cherished by different cultures. The differences sometimes are very vast. I quote from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*:

At least some of the items in a Homeric list of the *aretai* would clearly not be counted by most of us nowadays as virtues at all, physical strength being the most obvious example... the New Testament not only praises virtues of which Aristotle knows nothing – faith, hope and love – and says nothing about virtues such as *phronesis* which are crucial for Aristotle, but it praises at least one quality as a virtue which Aristotle seems to count as one of the vices relative to magnanimity, namely humility.¹

Why I say this is because the list of virtues given by the Maos may not be in agreement with several other lists of virtues. To view the Maos' list of virtues in perspective, one should redefine the concept of virtue according to the Mao worldview itself. The word 'virtue' may be translated into Mao language as "Akhukri hrii kohrii". This expression may be more appropriately translated as 'excellence of living.' The virtuous person, for the Maos, was the one who sought excellence in whatever did. As I have shown in the second chapter, the Mao list of virtues includes not only the moral virtues but also certain qualities that we may now consider to be very mundane, like sensuality, bravery, physical strength, athleticism etc. This is similar to Homer's list of the *aretai*, where 'physical strength' is extolled. This is the reason why, just as MacIntyre suggests, to translate Homer's use of *arête* as 'excellence, I have proposed to look upon "Akhukri hrii kohrii" as certain excellence in living rather than 'virtue'. The term 'virtue' invites a limited moral

connotation, whereas 'excellence' is certainly wider. Of course, when Aristotle speaks of 'virtue' he places great emphasis on the qualities of the 'mind' with a clear-cut division of virtues into 'moral' and 'intellectual'. We need to see in the course of this chapter whether any such classification can be unearthed from the Mao oral tradition.

The Mao list of the 'excellences' includes generosity, friendship, faithfulness, wisdom, obedience, honesty, communion, bravery, sportsmanship/athleticism, music, wealth, good health, hard work and aesthetic enjoyment. These are the virtues, which lead humans to happiness and a good life. Virtues and good life are interconnected because in the absence of virtues, a good life is not possible in the Mao community.

A virtuous individual lives a meaningful life and is in sight of a good life. A good life may not be said to be fully achieved at any point in a person's life. It is rather a 'process of becoming' according to the Maos. If 'good life' was merely a mental state of attitudes, then it would have been possible to say that one has achieved the good life. But for the Maos the good life is not only *attitudinal*; it also depends on several external as well as internal factors. Some of these factors are outside the individual's control

and in as much as they are not internal and uncontrollable, they may change and destabilize the tranquility of one's present good life. That is why I say that good life for the Maos is a process of becoming.

In any list, usually there is an order of priority, a rating of that which is superior in relation to something inferior. In the Mao list, they give the pride of place to the virtue of *generosity* or "oto kotopfoo". A generous person earned recognition in the community through his/her hard work and performance of the feast of merit. A monolith is erected to mark the performance of the feast of merit so that people may know his/her achievements generations after generations. In a Mao community a selfish person is not liked by others and as a result he is likely to be lonely and unhappy, because he does not have any friends. But a generous person, who is kindhearted and shared his joy with others, is loved and admired by his fellow friends in the community and enjoyed the co-operation from his fellow beings. In publicly performed generosity like the feasts of merit, the generous person revived her/his relationship with enemies by inviting them to his/her celebration of the feast of merit. A generous person living a virtuous life always performed good

actions and kept himself away from all kinds of evil thoughts and deeds that would harm others. “Being virtuous not only brings the virtuous person pleasure but also contributes to the happiness of others.”²

The performance of the feast of merit is taken as the most important form of generosity in the Mao community. The rich and the poor are equally welcome and are treated equally in these feasts. The performers are highly respected and as an honour they are entitled to wear a special kind of shawl called “*Zhoso sa*” after performing the feast of merit. It was strictly forbidden for a person to wear the *zhoso sa* without giving a feast of merit. They decorated their houses with the skulls of the animals killed during the feast of merit so that the others could count the number of the skulls to know how rich he/she was. This can be recognized as the highest sacrifice of a person to God and to his people in the community. “A man’s virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone’s attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit.”³ A generous person always sees the needs of the other people. Maos

thus worked hard and tried to excel in generosity, since it brought honor, respect and status in life. 'Feast of merit' was a great social leveler; it was magnanimous tool for the equal distribution of wealth and a symbol of unselfish bigheartedness.

Shimray writes:

When one was fortunate to become rich, he was never selfish to keep the fruits of his blessings to himself, or to his own children but he sought to share his fortune with the entire population by performing the 'feast of merit' when many cattle heads were cut down and rice beer flowed like water in order to feed the entire population. Because of this system of public sharing of the income and property of the rich men, disparity in riches was well taken care of.⁴

Anybody could be generous in his/her own capacity; it was not necessary that only a rich man could be generous. Even a widow could come up with her litter generous act. A generous person is more likely to act justly than someone who is stingy.

Bravery is another important virtue for the Maos. In the order of priorities, it should come second. Bravery was not just a virtue for individual excellence; it was a quality necessary for the very survival of the community. A brave man was the hero of the community as he was someone on whom the others in the community could rely upon. In the Mao community, a brave and courageous man was considered as the 'village gate', the sentry, since the Maos were a warlike people engaged in head-hunting. It

was a heroic society similar to the Homeric or Greek societies, where action and not just intentions was all that counted. We fail to understand such a conception of virtue because it is far removed from us since our morality is more a morality of intentions than actions. Here I would like to quote rather expansively from MacIntyre's *After Virtue*:

This concept of virtue or excellence is more alien to us than we are apt at first to recognize. It is not difficult for us to recognize the central place that strength will have in such a conception of human excellence or the way in which courage will be one of the central virtues, perhaps the central virtue. What is alien to our conception of virtue is the intimate connection in heroic society between the concept of courage and its allied virtues on the one hand the concepts of friendship, fate and death on the other.

Courage is important, not simply as a quality of individuals, but as the quality necessary to sustain a household and community. *Kudos*, glory, belongs to the individual who excels in battle or in contest as a mark of recognition by his household and his community. Other qualities linked to courage also merit public recognition because of the part they play in sustaining the public order.

To be courageous is to be someone on whom reliance can be placed. Hence courage is an important ingredient in friendship. The bonds of friendship in heroic societies are modeled on those of kinship... who my friends are and who my enemies, is as clearly defined as who my kinsmen are. The other ingredient of friendship is fidelity. My friend's courage assures me of his power to aid me and my household; my friend's fidelity assures me of his will. My household's fidelity is the basic guarantee of its unity. So in women, who constitute the crucial relationships within the household, fidelity is the key virtue.⁵

In line with the above quote, in the Mao society a brave man was highly appreciated and honored in the society for he brought in glory to the community the head of the enemy. It was a manifestation of excellence in battle. Before going to battle “authorities declare that no young man could find a wife for himself until he had taken a head and thereby won the right of the warriors kilt”.⁶ The whole village rejoiced when a warrior brought an enemy head to the village. It was considered a good omen, an auspicious sign, and they believed that it would ensure good crops and a successful harvest for the whole village. The heroes who won the heads were accorded with an emotional reception with folk songs, excitement and festivities when they stepped into the village. A courageous person would think that even if he perished in battle, he would be honored as the great and the noble.

A person was called courageous also when he killed a dangerous wild animal like a lion or tiger, because such courage was not found in everybody and this single act saved the community from a possible danger. “A courageous and compassionate person is more likely to come to someone else’s rescue.”⁷ A coward, rather than helping a person in danger, would

run away from the scene. Courage is not simply fearlessness or bravery in times of danger; it also means bravery in times of peace. Sustained courage meant courage to endure and courage to face the worst.

Courage to accept the loss of dear ones, the courage to accept the loss of property through natural calamities, courage to endure strong physical labour, courage to court a maiden – all these were also parts of their concept of the virtue of bravery. It is important to remember that courage is not a virtue when applied in wrong circumstances. For example, courage exhibited in hunting the head of a kin is misplaced and is considered as a wrong committed against the community. If by mistake a person killed a kin and his head was taken, such a person was convicted with murder and he would face punishment of being expelled from the village of his ancestors for seven years and he also had to kill and distribute to his kinsmen certain number of cows. Hence, courage had to be exhibited to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, in the right way, in the right place and under the right circumstances.

According to the Maos sportsmanship and athleticism were also excellences that everyone aimed at. They played certain

games like wrestling, long jump, shot-put and hunting wild animals, besides several other minor games. To take part in the competition of long jump, shot put and wrestling, every individual maintained their health by taking good and nourishing food, practicing and observing certain *gennas*. Since the winners were praised and appreciated by the whole village, the winners and their family members were very happy with their performance. There were no cups or prizes given to the winners. Their reward was the fame they earned as victory in sports made them household names. For the Maos, these games were entertainments to evaluate a person's strength. The winners were chosen subsequently to guard the village and to lead the group in head hunting. The games were played during the festivals of "Saleni" and "Chithooni". Saleni festival is celebrated for five days right after the rice plantation is over and that is in the month of July in Mao "Salekhro", and Chithooni festival is celebrated for six days as the post harvest cum new seeds sowing festival in the month of January, (Chithoonikhro in Mao). On the last day of both the festivals, the men folk and women folk climbed the hill with a lot of fanfare, ceremonies and rituals called "Pfuliki" and on reaching the spot the men folk would compete in the long jump and the winner in the competition is

felicitated with words of appreciation and praise for his physical agility and prowess exhibited in the competition. But wrestling and shot-put are played in the village itself.

These games, especially wrestling, are very important for the men folk in the community, because they are played only by the healthy and strong persons. The family members would encourage and supply good food to their sons who would participate in the wrestling competition. "The wrestler grips the wrist of one hand with the other in the small of the back of his opponent, whom he endeavors to upset; tripping is allowed".⁸ The wrestlers grip one another and they try their best to put down one another on the floor, and whosoever does this is declared the winner.

Hunting of wild animals is also another kind of game for the Maos. They are fond of hunting and they used hunting dogs to bark and chase out the animals from the thick jungles; the hounds would first sense the presence of the animal and give signals to their masters. The skull of the animal killed is a symbol of the winner's pride and glory and it is preserved for posterity.

A third type of 'excellence' that the Maos praised was music. Proficiency in singing was considered a virtue. These

songs were very important because they communicated heroic tales and a heritage of memories. Songs are of different kinds: (i) *lochulo* (folksong), (ii) *odohlo* (welcome song), (iii) *lorelu* (love song), and (iv) *orulo* (war song). All such types of songs passed down from the olden times till today. Musical ability is not judged merely by the quality of the singer's voice or of his/her melody. It was more importantly judged by the person's ability to sing it in order without missing the link, by his/her ability to remember every word, to convey the right sentiment of the song and so on. The singers thus learned as many songs as they can by heart and presented them when an occasion demanded. For this they gained praise and appreciation from the community.

Many fascinating songs have been composed about the Mao tradition and the exceptional personalities in the community who are remembered through such songs.

Thus the folksongs especially are like documents for the Maos, since they did not maintain a written record. It is learned from the songs that a script was once developed by the Maos. But it was written on the hide of an animal and since there was no way of preserving it properly, it was destroyed by rodents. In the olden times there was no formal schooling among the Maos;

learning, however, took place because of the deep respect the young had for the elders, who were rich in knowledge. They taught the young about the traditions of the community and their songs and myths orally. Since the Maos could set apart days for learning songs on account of their busy agricultural life, the elders used to sing and teach the younger ones the songs while they went to the field and returned. They refreshed themselves with songs after their day's hard work.

In the Mao community wisdom 'Chisii' was one of the principal virtues. In ordinary understanding, wisdom involves possession of knowledge and is intimately connected to our proper function as humans in the society. The good life is lived according to the wisdom that dictates the mind of an individual. A person with a right knowledge could seldom be a problem to the community. Possession of wisdom is a matter of degree; the measure of wisdom found in persons varies from individual to individual. Among the Maos, the elderly people are respected and honored because they were thought to possess more wisdom than the young ones. The community is shaped and groomed with the wise counsel and rich knowledge of the elders. The young people never ignore the advice of the knowledgeable persons in the

village. As the elders are considered to be next to God, the whole community respects them and it is their belief that God has given them the wisdom and knowledge to keep their people in peace and harmony.

In choosing their leaders, the Maos take into consideration (i) the wisdom of the person in question, (ii) his physical power, and (iii) his economic status. Among these three, wisdom is the most important of all. They have their own system of political organization and the king, 'Movuo', is the head of all the affairs in the community. But there are village elders who always stand by him and support him with their valuable wisdom and advice. Partisan views and partiality in judgement are nowhere to be found in their community, and the decision given by the elders is binding and final. There are always cases like land demarcation, theft, quarrel etc., and these problems are brought to the notice of the village elders, (Kotsiimai) to be settled, and the elders who by dint of their wisdom and knowledge study the matter which is referred to them from both the parties and then solve the case.

The city is wise through the good counsel and knowledge of its guardians. Its wisdom must come from that knowledge which is concern, not with the interests of any particular person or group, but with the welfare of the city as a whole and in its relations with other cities. This is the only kind of knowledge that can be called wisdom, and it is to be

found only in one class, and the smallest class of all, namely, the guardians.⁹

A man of wisdom could protect the lives of the people at times of difficulties arising in the clan as well as in the village. According to Plato, wisdom is not merely one virtue among others, but it is the most important virtue among all. So also, though in heroic societies like that of the Maos, generosity and bravery were considered the superior virtues, they did not downplay the role that the virtue of wisdom plays in the day-to-day life of the community. A victory or a downfall in battle often was caused by the wisdom or the lack of it of the elders. In headhunting, the enemy might take the heads and defeat a warring group, but the defeated group can recoup with the wise counsel of some elders and learn from their defeat. The wisdom of the strategist is as important in battle as the bravery and skill of the warrior. Even in hunting, dangerous occasions may arise and without intelligent moves, one may fall prey to the animals instead of hunting them.

The Maos had the Platonic/Socratic notion of wisdom and its resultant action. A person, who had the right conception of good life, they believed, tried to do good for the people and for him/herself. The wiser and the more knowledgeable they are, the

lesser is their chance of erring in actions, because they are guided by wise counsel themselves. Of course, this is not true of the material aspects of 'good life'. For example, a wise person may not be a rich person, though for the Maos wealth is also an accessory of good life.

Another 'excellence' the Maos sought to have was the ability to enjoy pleasures of the body and beauty. A person who had amorousness was known as 'chokhru kosopfoo'. However, this kind of excellence was only for men. Chokhru kosopfoo literally means someone with sexual prowess. The Chokhru kosopfoo's glamorous personality is admired by the womenfolk in the community. He is their hero and he is loved and admired by them. Whenever he goes around and visits the girls' dormitory they become his devotees and make advances towards him. They are fascinated by his sweet words and his facial features.

The chokhru kosopfoo is admired from various angles, like skill in headhunting, number of enemy heads taken, achievements in sports and his physical charm. Young girls imagine that if they are able to fall in love with such personalities, they would be happy in future and live a good life.¹⁰

The *chokhru kosopfoo* is distinguished from others by the manner of his dressing. He wears a wristlet or '*bacho kakha*' and '*loto*', which is worn at the waist. The *bacho kakha* is worn as a sign of he who has managed to caress the breast of a girl with her consent and definitely not by force. Wearing the *loto*, a kind of belt made of threads clubbed together, signified that one had a physical relationship with girls with their obvious consent.

The attraction that the young Mao women had for the *chokhru kosopfoo* can be compared to the charm that Krisna Bhagvan enjoyed among the womenfolk of Dwaraka. He is said to have won the hearts of womenfolk who were charmed by him. Tradition is rich with accounts of their devotion to Him. Krisna's *kama-lila* (romantic play) was proverbial.

When Krsna touched the different parts of their bodies, the gopés felt surcharged with spiritual energy. They could not adjust their loosened clothes, although they tried to keep them properly. Their hair and garments became scattered, and their ornaments loosened as they forgot themselves in company with Krsna.¹¹

Similarly, the Indian classic, *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana, is a systematic treatise on the methods of winning a woman's heart and the various amorous techniques and positions of love-making. Just as Krisna Bhagavan charmed the womenfolk by just being the way he was and Vatsyayana's lover charmed his fiancé

with his techniques, the *chokhru kosopfoo* was both charming to the Mao young women and did win their hearts through his romantic methods. Just as the womenfolk of Dwaraka were lost in thoughts of Krisna Bhagavan, the Mao girls were lost in thoughts of the *chokhru kosopfoo*. Just as the Krisna Bhagavan's lovers offered themselves to him ("They took Sri Krsna's hand and placed it on their raised breast")¹², the Mao girls took the *chokhru kosopfoo*'s hand and placed it on their breasts to be fondled by him. Krishna's *gopis* felt secure in his presence and thought of no husband other than him and "their smiling cheeks shone with beauty, and they began to sing the glories of Krsna with transcendental pleasure."¹³ The Mao girls felt proud when they saw the *chokhru kosopfoo* came to ceremonial occasions wearing the '*loto*' and the *bacho kakha*. They composed and sang songs in admiration for the *chokhru kosopfoo*, thus eulogizing his fantastic physique and other qualities.

Let me end this discussion with the note that the *chokhru kosopfoo*'s adventures came to an end with his tying the knot with one of his many fiancés. Once marriage has taken place according to customary practices, the *chokhru kosopfoo* had to be faithful to his partner and she to him.

In this discussion on the traditional virtues (excellences) of the Maos, I would like to make a short remark on the excellences I have so far not touched upon,¹⁴ namely friendship, faithfulness, honesty, obedience, industriousness, communion, wealth and good health. As in all heroic societies, the hand of friendship was a value in itself. A friend was trusted for his/her word and deed among the Maos. The concept of friendship was closely connected to the virtue of faithfulness. The trust of friends followed from the virtue of bravery because 'trust' was considered absolute, a bond that can never be broken even if one's life is in danger. Hence, only a brave person, who would even risk his life to remain trust-worthy and faithful, can be a true friend. Trustworthiness, faithfulness, fidelity – these are words that can almost synonymously be used for a Mao friend. Friendship and fidelity to the friend or clansman made the cycle of headhunting inevitable, as MacIntyre points out:

If someone kills you, my friend or brother, I owe you their death and when I have paid my debt to you their friend or brother owes them my death. The more extended my system of kinsmen and friends, the more liabilities I shall incur of a kind that may end in my death.¹⁵

Faithfulness was most tangibly noticed in keeping one's promises. A vow taken by word of mouth or a promise given orally was taken to be as serious as today's written and

documented pacts between individuals and nations. Keeping these promises was considered a virtuous thing and only a person of excellence could keep them. The virtue of honesty is closely connected to faithfulness, for it did not permit one to change the words of the promise taken and then claim that it was fulfilled.

Looking comprehensively, the virtues of friendship, faithfulness and honesty made for a 'good life.' They enhanced companionship other than sexual love and promoted spirit of communion, which was a strong cementing virtuous element in the Maos' social life. Friendship and the faithfulness among the friends and their honesty to each other and to the community in general made for a spirit of rare communion. The Utilitarian principle of the interests of the maximum number, the majority of the community, prevailed even among the Maos. Not that the individual did not have his/her own life, but in matters of the community their interests did not prevail over that of the community in general. However, an individual fighting for his/her individuality in defiance to the community as found in today's democracy was not a phenomenon among the Maos. That is the difference between their political egalitarianism and modern democracy. In a democracy, as expressed in its political

constitution, the individual is its unit. However, in the traditional Mao society, the village community was the unit. They had inherent systems of solving their own problems and 'individualism' was never thought to be an ideal.

Obedience to elders also promoted cohesion and communion in the society. Obedience was not only to the elders, but also of children to parents, wives to husbands, youths to the dormitory owner, people in general to the village council of elders etc. The concept of revolt or rebellion was completely absent. The customary laws were not a suffocating bondage for the Maos; rather they were looked upon as the power that made life easy for them.

Industriousness was also part of the Mao form of life. As mentioned earlier, everyone worked and contributed to the welfare of the society. They practiced the maxim, 'he who does not work, let him not eat.' Moreover, work was considered not merely from the economic perspective. Rather it was an act of their communion, a bond that bound them together. Work was not also a burden. They enjoyed their work in the field and did not take it up in the modern professionally serious manner. Work was play in the traditional Mao society. Work was virtue as well,

since without it they could not sustain themselves. Wealth was earned through honest work and nothing else.

Wealth and good health were also excellences for the Maos. They believed with Aristotle that 'no man can be happy on the rack' and that a 'sick man cannot completely be happy.' However, wealth and health had to be earned honourably and not through any foul means. Both wealth and health may be called instrumental virtues which were accessory to generosity and bravery and industriousness respectively. A wealthy person could publicly manifest his generosity and a healthy person could outshine weaker ones in battle and industry. Through wealth and health one's contribution to the community is greatly enhanced.

The coming of Christianity to the Mao community has brought certain cultural uncertainties for the Mao community as most of the traditional values are looked down upon by the Christians. Today, with over 95 per cent of the Mao people embracing Christianity, these confusions have become real. The old system is crumbling and the new one does not seem to be replacing the old in any meaningful manner. Traditional centres of power and authority are dethroned, and the new centres of power are yet to be defined properly. The traditional close-knit

and well-defined community, secure in its distinct customs, practices, values and cultural moorings, is being exposed all of a sudden to the onslaught of modernity with its worldview and values. As a consequence, confusion, identity crisis, value disorientation and breakdown in social discipline have resulted. Christianity together with the modern English education that it so painfully brought, should surely address this issue. Christian preachers in the beginning especially, advocated the weaning away of the tribals from all that was part of their cultural heritage, even harmless cultural forms of art like folksongs and dances. On hindsight today, the pangs of agony that this indiscriminate 'weaning away' has brought to a society in transition is left unresponsive to rectification.

Notes and References

- ¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1985) pp.181-182
- ² A. Boss Judith, *Ethics for Life: An Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Introduction* (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998) p.389
- ³ Philippa Foot, *Virtue and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978) p.95
- ⁴ R. R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, p.128
- ⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp.122-123
- ⁶ T. C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* p.121; please refer also pp. 58-61
- ⁷ A. Boss Judith, *Ethics for Life*, p.389
- ⁸ J. H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969) p.103
- ⁹ R. C Cross and A.D Wozzley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1964) p.105

¹⁰ The *chokhru kosopfoo* too attracts the ladies with his admirable traits and the fame that he has. It is a matter of prestige and dignity for him when he can win the hearts of the maximum number of girls and share his bed with them.

¹¹ *Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead* (California: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1970) p.216

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ However, we have touched upon these excellences, namely, friendship, faithfulness, obedience, industriousness, honesty, communion, wealth and good health, in the second chapter on the Mao Concept of Good life.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.124

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The thesis has thrown light on the Mao's conception of good life in general, its relation to their vision of man, their religious beliefs and their particular notion of virtues. The affinity between the Mao's notion of good life and that of certain classical philosophers for instance Aristotle, Kant or the Utilitarians has also been pointed out. In the present chapter, I will be referring to Confucius' notion of the good life for I find his notion of good life coming close to that of the Maos.

In the first place, at the completion of the present investigation, what comes to mind is a feeling of surprise. A community that might be considered 'primitive' about just a hundred years back, has now advanced to certain degree of 'modernity' that should be surely considered as having come too quickly, and if one were to speak in the language of 'success and failure', this metamorphosis of the primordial community to the modern was disproportionately successful. This is however not a peripheral observation, because while at the superficial level the

accessories and amenities of modernity are still lacked by the community, at a deeper level, the 'values' that modernity holds dear have almost in totality penetrated the community, which was but 'primordial' a century back. What is the outcome of this unequal transformation? While the transformation of the 'preliterate' 'prehistorical' community to modernity was successful, the outcome is painful. While there was cohesion, social order and discipline in the old order whatever might have been the precariousness of existence then, there is dissipation, chaos and a fundamental uncertainty regarding the meaningfulness of the activities of life in the new order. Some observers say that this is part of the painful process of transition. However, if the swiftness with which the currents of change came was any sign, the process of transition is taking it too long and its anguish never seems to end. There is no shore yet in sight.

Secondly, when one looks at the virtues extolled by the Mao tradition and the order of virtues it upholds, there is a clear variation from the new order of virtues upheld by Christian morality among the Maos. If Christianity praises virtues like self-sacrifice, abstinence, abnegation, renunciation, humility, love even for the enemy and so on, traditional Mao culture has a

different list of virtues like bravery, friendship, fidelity, honesty, pride, excelling in certain activities and the like. One may ask if the new order is superior to the traditional or vice versa, though a simple answer to this question cannot be expected.

The relativity of morality in certain fundamental way has been a strong notion of morality since long. Aristotle thought that good life was conceived differently by different people. For some what brought good life was pleasure, for others wealth, honour and for some, it was a certain thing which was 'good in itself'. He noticed that even the same person identified it with different things at different points in life, like when unwell he/she thought it was health, when poor that it was wealth and the like. Nietzsche for one, comprehensively understood the spiritual crisis of the West and its embracing of nihilism. In the face of this fact he advocated a supreme and somewhat primitive affirmation of life, to be powerful like a warrior, to be creative like an artist, to be joyous like the simple, 'primitive' Eskimo and free like the man who lived in the jungle. He abhorred the philosophy of wretchedness and discouragement but advocated a philosophy of 'will to power.' Nietzsche's disgust for the sanctimonious hypocrisy of Western morality and religion is

clear in the following powerful statement: “Moral judgement and condemnation is the favourite form of revenge of the spiritually limited on those who are less so, likewise a form of compensation for their having been neglected by nature, finally an occasion for acquiring spirit and *becoming* refined – malice spiritualizes.”¹ Similarly, Confucius, the great Chinese thinker, was averse to the idea of regulating the state by the use of force or rules because it resulted only in a system of evasion by the people leading to a condition of universal hypocrisy.² He says: “When the world is in order, the guidance is not in the hands of the nobles. When the world is in order, there is no discussion of the state of affairs among the masses.”³ In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche blames Christianity for having killed the natural instincts of the most successful, talented ‘supermen’ (Overmen). He accuses Christianity for having championed uncertainty, distress of conscience and self-destruction in the highest and assured human beings, the best fruits of our race.⁴

Here one cannot but recall MacIntyre’s notion that there is no core conception of ‘virtue’ as such. He comes to such a conclusion after going through the various traditions of

moralties and unearthing their inner contradictions. MacIntyre writes:

Homer, Sphocles, Aristotle, the New Testament and medieval thinkers differ from each other in too many ways. They offer us different and incompatible lists of the virtues; they give a different rank order of importance to different virtues; and they have different and incompatible theories of the virtue. If we were to consider later Western writers on the virtues, the list of differences and incompatibilities would be enlarged still further; and if we extended our enquiry to Japanese, say, or American Indian cultures, the differences would become greater still. It would be all too easy to conclude that there are a number of rival and alternative conceptions of the virtues, but, even within the tradition which I have been delineating, no single core conception.⁵

Tradition cannot be overlooked as obsolete and irrelevant; it is a landscape within which we live and have our meanings. Without basing on the edifice of our cultural settings, we cannot imbibe our values of good and bad or right and wrong. Moving completely out of the tradition, makes us rootless, alienated and bereft of our identity. Similarly, blind holding on to tradition without giving ear to the voices of modernity and change, results in the problem of becoming rigid, stagnant and without progress. A middle path of openness to the old and the new is the safest to tread.

In my defence of Mao's conception of good life, I had emphasized their faith in the balance between the spiritual and the emotional and the moral and the religious. In contrast to conservative (Indian and Western) moralities, the Mao morality celebrates the natural joys of life and does not imprison the human spirit. At the same time, there is a spiritual-religious supporting ethos to bring harmony into social and individual life. A sense of equilibrium ruled their moral thinking. This type of an approach was part also of the moral system upheld by Confucius in China. The doctrine of the golden mean is central to Confucian philosophy. According to him, human nature is basically moral and morality is all about certain harmony or balance. This can be gathered from the following sayings of Confucius:

What is God-given is what we call human nature. To fulfill the law of our human nature is what we call the moral law. The cultivation of the moral law is what we call culture. The moral law is a law from whose operation we cannot for one instant in our existence escape. A law from which we may escape is not the moral law...

When the passions, such as joy, anger, grief, and pleasure, have not awakened, that is our *central* self, or moral being (*chung*). When these passions awaken and each and all attain due measure and degree, that is *harmony*, or the moral order (*ho*)... when our true central self and harmony are realized, the universe then becomes a cosmos and all things attain their full growth and development.⁶

Hence, according to Confucius, just like the Maos, the moral or good life is not an abnormal 'performance' of virtues. It is the normal and the organic life lived in harmony with the community and nature. He also speaks about the harmony of passions and the natural aspects of life, which are to be well integrated into the moral life. This was the Mao belief as well. In his personal life also Confucius was a man of balance. For instance, it is said that he freely enjoyed the consumption of wine but never to the point of being confused of mind.

Confucius abhorred the over-exertion of virtues. In stead, he believed in a balance of the spiritual and the natural. He asserts that the difficulty of the moral life lies in its over-emphasis on one or the other aspect of the good life:

I know now why the moral life is not practiced. The wise mistake moral law for something higher than what it really is; and the foolish do not know enough what moral law really is... The noble natures want to live too high, high above their moral ordinary self; and ignoble natures do not live high enough, i.e., not up to their moral ordinary true self."⁷

The practical and feasible approach of the Maos to their life and circumstances is also found in Confucius. For the Maos, what mattered was 'rationality in the concrete.' According to Confucius, the moral man behaves as befitting his circumstances

whether he found himself rich or poor, in uncivilized countries or in civilized, in danger and difficulty or in safety and comfort. "In one word, the moral man can find himself in no situation in life in which he is not master of himself."⁸ The Mao spirit of adjustability in all circumstances shines through in Confucius' system.

For Confucius, wisdom is 'relevant knowledge' and not the abstract knowledge. Wisdom is helping oneself and others to get the most happiness from life. The Maos also had a practical concept of rationality. For them rationality was found in the practical and in the concrete working out of a problem or product. For the Maos, abstract knowledge had no value; they rather reasoned with their heart. Confucius epistemology also gave prominence to passion and emotion. For him being fond of a thing is better than knowing it and enjoying the thing is better than being fond of it. The Maos gave great importance to appropriate behaviour in community and the young ones were trained in these aspects in the youth dormitories. Similarly, Confucius placed great importance on propriety, formal behaviour and discipline.⁹ Confucius loved the virtue of courage

like the Maos. He says: “A true man (or truly great man) will always be found to have courage...”¹⁰

Just like the Maos, for Confucius the basic unit of humanity is not the individual but the family and the complex of relations that make it. If the social aspect of the human being is taken away, there is neither self nor soul according to Confucius. For him the mission of humans is to achieve ‘harmony and enjoyment for oneself and others’ by taking suitable actions in relation to one’s functions in the community. As in the case of the Maos, for Confucius the community is one’s extended family. Confucius says: “Being a good son and good younger brother provides already the basis for being a true man.”¹¹

Like the Maos, Confucius was fond of music, which symbolized for him the merger of different voices into a harmony like the interface of relationships. He believed that music rose from the heart when it was touched by the external world. “He who understands music comes very near to understanding *li*, and if a man has mastered both *li* and music, we call him virtuous, because virtue is mastery (or fulfillment).”¹² Similarly, the Maos gave great importance to music in their social life.

Respect for elders and authority in general has a high place in both Confucianism and among the Maos. This was the principle of cohesion in the community both for Confucius and the Maos. Confucius says: "It is my ambition that the old people should be able to live in peace, all friends should be loyal and all young people should love their elders."¹³

My final remarks will centre on one of the most prominent aberrations of modernity, individualism, vis-à-vis the Mao spirit of communion and cooperation. According to modernity, individual is the unit not only of action but also of politics, ethics and religion. "The mechanistic philosophy functioned as an ontological version of individualism giving strong philosophical support to an atomistic social ethic... Self-centred laissez-faire economy, leading to a single minded focus on making money regardless of social costs."¹⁴ As we are aware, faint but sure words of protests have been raised against such molecular notion of the human being, who has a social nature writ into the very fabric of his/her being. This protest has even widened with the environmental concern that "we must be a part not only of the human community, but of the whole community; we must acknowledge some sort of oneness not only with our

neighbours, our countrymen and our civilization, but also some respect for the natural as well as the man-made community.”¹⁵

The Maos, though still have a strong spirit of communion, are passing through a stage of ambivalence and anxiety regarding the interface between their sense of communion and the modern spirit of individualism. There seems to be a fundamental indecision regarding whether to choose their form of ‘communism’ or the modern individualism, egalitarianism or the widening of gap between the rich and the poor, fostering of a community or the brilliance of elitism, placing value on the village or the prospering of the individual. It should be warned that the defeat of the Mao community in the face of modern individualism may be the severest blow to their cultural ethos. Modern democratic polity, religion, education and media extol the individual. It remains to be seen whether the Maos can withstand these strong currents of modernity.

Notes and References

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² Richard Wilhelm, *Confucius and Confucianism*, trans. George H. Danton and Annina Periam Danton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) p.152

³ As quoted from Conversations of Confucius in Richard Wilhelm, *Confucius and Confucianism*, trans. George H. Danton and Annina Periam Danton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) p.161

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- ⁴ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954)
- ⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Nature of the Virtues," Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.118
- ⁶ Lin Yutang, ed., & trans., *The Wisdom of Confucius*, (New York: Random House, INC, 1966) pp.104-05
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.106
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112
- ⁹ D.C. Lau and Roger T. Ames, "Confucius," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward Craig, ed., Vol.2 (London: Routledge, 1998) pp.567-568
- ¹⁰ *The Wisdom of Confucius*, p.179
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.18
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.255; *li* means the principle of social order.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.159
- ¹⁴ Sujata Miri, *Ethics and Environment: Theory and the Adi and Khasi Practice* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2001) p.9
- ¹⁵ As quoted in Sujata Miri, *Ethics and Environment: Theory and the Adi and Khasi Practice*, p.9-10 from J.W. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, 1929

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