

SOCIO-CULTURAL  
AND  
RELIGIOUS LIFE  
OF  
**MAO NAGA TRIBE**



M. DANIEL

954  
2  
954.165  
DAN  
006183  
ICSSR

A MITTAL PUBLICATION

This book is about the Maos' concept of good life in general, their vision of man, their religious beliefs and their particular notion of virtues. The affinity between the Maos' notion of good life and that of certain classical philosophers like Aristotle, Kant and the Utilitarians has also been compared. The Maos like most other tribal communities live a simple life, close to nature and with strong kinship ties among themselves. There is no visible discrimination based on colour, creed, caste, status, position or power in the traditional Mao community.

The Maos value some of the important virtues like bravery, generosity, faithfulness, honesty, wisdom, hard work, etc., which they link with happiness and good life. According to their moral vision, a virtuous person will be leading a meaningful life. Their elaborate religious belief system, rites and rituals are discussed along with the moral embodiment in their belief system.

Rs. 300



**M. DANIEL** is from Kalinamai village, Senapati District, Manipur. He did his schooling from Model English High School, Mao, Manipur. His Pre-University (Science) was from Raid Laban College, Shillong. He obtained his graduate degree from Manipur University and Post-Graduate, from North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, in 1998 and 2001 respectively. He was awarded Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy for the research work on the concept of the good life in the traditional thought structure of the Mao Naga tribe, by the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 2004. This book is an edited version of his doctoral thesis.

Before joining Department of Studies in Philosophy at University of Mysore in Karnataka state, he taught Philosophy in Raid Laban College, Shillong, Meghalaya.

ISBN 81-8324-151-4

# **SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MAO NAGA TRIBE**

**M. Daniel**



**MITTAL PUBLICATIONS**  
NEW DELHI (INDIA)

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

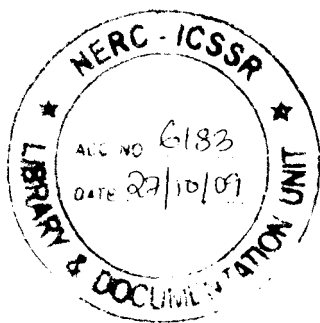
982 135  
DAN

**First Published 2008**

© M. Daniel

All rights reserved

ISBN 81-8324-151-4



006183

Published and printed by Krishan Mittal for Mittal Publications,  
4594/9, Daryaganj, New Delhi - 110002, India.

Phone: 23250398, 25351493 Telefax: 91-11-25351521

E-Mail : mittalp@ndf.vsnl.net.in

website : www.mittalbooks.com

# CONTENTS

---

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
1. Introduction	1
2. The Concept of Good Life —A Philosophical Exploration	9
3. The Concept of Good Life in Traditional Mao Thought	29
4. The Mao's Vision of 'Omei' (Man) and the Good Life	47
5. Mao Religion and its Relation to their Moral Beliefs	69
6. Virtues and the Good Life	91
7. Conclusion	107
<i>Bibliography</i>	115
<i>Index</i>	119

## 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. It 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.<sup>1</sup>

It 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",<sup>2</sup> 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 Kay*". 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 book consists of the following seven chapters. The introduction deals with the argument 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 book, 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 or aesthetic enjoyment 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 absurdness 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. Temsula 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.