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Folksongs of the Misings and the Making of their Ethnic Identity: An Analysis of their Mnemocultural Practices

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Abstract:

The 'Misings', erstwhile called as the 'Miris' are one of the aboriginal ethnic tribes of the Northeast India, who can boast of possessing a rich repertoire of oral narratives, which have been transmitted down from generation to generation through their collective racial memory since time immemorial. However, among the diverse genres of such narratives the folksongs, especially the Ā:bāngs, of the tribe can be considered as both representation and perpetuation of their unique cultural worldview and ethnic identity that have been conditioned since the past and nurtured till the present. Like other archetypal parallels, their folksongs too record both individual as well as collective bitter-sweet past experiences through racial reminiscence and collective social responsibility, which function as a dynamic force for perpetuation of their vibrant cultural legacy. Right from the etiological narratives pertaining to the cosmogonic and origin myths of the race and the prophetic shamanistic rhapsodies to the fun and frolic of common men and women, all their folksongs endeavour to capture the joys and sorrows, loss and bereavement, aspirations and disappointments, triumphs and tribulations the community shares alike through the kaleidoscope of their mnemocultural praxis. This paper, however, tries to undertake an analytical research on the possible thematic and philosophical implications embodied in the Ā:bāngs of the Misings adopting a hermeneutical approach.

Keywords: *Collective racial memory, representation and perpetuation, cultural worldview, ethnic identity, mnemocultural praxis*

1. Introduction

The 'Misings', erstwhile called as the 'Miris', inhabiting in the North and South banks of the Mihgty Brahmaputra, i.e., in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Golaghat and Jorhat districts of Assam, and a sizable number of the entire populace still dwelling in East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, without any inkling of doubt, are one of the aboriginal ethnic tribes of the Northeast India, who can boast of possessing a huge cornucopia of oral narratives, which have been transmitted down from generation to generation through their collective racial memory since time immemorial. However, among the diverse genres of such narratives the folksongs of the tribe can be considered as both representation and perpetuation of their unique cultural worldview and ethnic identity that have been conditioned since the past and nurtured till the present. Like other archetypal parallels, their folksongs too record both individual as well as collective bitter-sweet past experiences through racial reminiscence and collective social responsibility, which function as a dynamic force for perpetuation of their rich vibrant cultural legacy. Right from the etiological narratives pertaining to the Cosmogonic and origin myths of the race as recounted through prophetic shamanistic rhapsodies to the fun and frolic of common men and women, all their folksongs endeavour to capture the joys and sorrows, loss and bereavement, aspirations and disappointments, triumphs and tribulations the community shares alike through the kaleidoscope of their mnemocultural praxis.

2. Discussion

There is no denying that the vibrant and panoramic cultural legacy of the Misings which is shaped by myriad 'lived experiences' of the community spanning a long space and time, is sustained through mnemocultural tradition of which their folksongs can be considered the most active means. They bear the characteristics of 'cultural primitivism' and the folk epistemology inclining toward phenomenological pursuit in striving to discover the kernel truth and meaning of life. However, we need to analyze the forms and contents, the texts and contexts of the various sub-genres of the folksongs of the tribe adopting a hermeneutic approach in order to understand the possible allegorical, symbolic, philosophical and ideological implications encompassed by them, which will help us acquaint with the collective worldview of the tribe in question.

- The Genres and the Sub-Genres: The folksongs of the tribe can be classified into the following sub-genres on the basis of their form and content:

- A) Formal or Ceremonial songs: The songs belonging to this category are divided into the following sub-genres:
1. Ā:bāng or Mibu Ā:bang (Shamanistic Hymns);
 2. Midā: (Midāng) Ni:tom (Nuptial Songs);
 3. BÍ:ríg/Bírdug Ni:tom (Seasonal songs).
- B) Conversational Songs (Lupo Ni:tom), which are sub-divided as the following:
1. Sélloi ni:tom (reminiscence of migration of the community)
- C) Kābān (Lamentations), sub-divided into the following:
1. Ballads/Narratives (chronological);
 2. Descriptive Songs, sub-divided again into –
 - i) Do:bo Kābān (pathetic lamentation of personal remorse, loss and bereavement);
 - ii) Mé:bo/Sí:sāng Kābān (pathetically passionate yearning for unrequited love);
 - iii) Yābān (heart-rending lamentation on the death of near and dear ones).
- D) Work Songs, sub-divided into –
1. Ko: Ni:nām/ BÍ:ni Ni:nām (Lullaby);
 2. Lottā So:mān (revelry in the courtyard).
- E) Songs dealing with miscellaneous subjects; sub-divided into –
2. Oi Ni:tom (youthful and jovial);
 3. Léréli (ecological proximity and concern);
 4. Momān/Mosed Ni:tom (light-veined yet deeply philosophical at times).

3. Possible Multi-Dimensional Implications Embodied by the Folksongs

If we want to understand the mnemocultural practices of the Misings in their attempt to sustain and perpetuate their unique socio-cultural tradition, it becomes imperative for us to explore the multi-dimensional connotations embodied by the various sub-genres of the vast domain of the tribe's folksongs.

3.1. Formal or Ceremonial Songs

Among this group, Mibu A:bangs and Mibu Ni:toms or the shamanistic hymns or songs are the most important so far as the seriousness of their purport and profundity of the philosophy they expound in one hand, and the mnemocultural means they adopt, on the other. Apart from this, the A:bangs can be ramified into various categories, such as, Cosmogonic or Origin myths, Mythical narratives, Historical ballads, Migration narratives, Folk epics, Genealogical history, Ritualistic hymns, Fertility myths and so forth. The songs of creation and history of mankind sung by the Mibus are termed as the A:bangs. (Padun, 112) "The A:bangs may be compared with Puranas of the Sanskrit literature and the sagas of the Teutons. They are written in an archaic esoteric language which is unintelligible to the uninitiated layman. They exist in the memory of a special class of Miris and even among them, only the most experienced and learned remember them correctly and understand and can explain their exact significance. This class is gradually dying out and if the a:bangs are not recorded early, soon a time might come when they will be lost to the world." (Roychoudhury 46) The Mibus (shamans) in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Misings can be considered as the father-figure or the tradition-bearer of the entire community acting as priest, philosopher and guide. "The term 'Miboo' had probably been derived from the word 'mi'- man and 'abu'- father meaning a 'father-figure' amongst Mishings. These Miboos had developed certain spiritual power of looking into the dark future and could communicate with the souls of their departed forefathers living at 'Sine-mobo' (Land of dead or spirit)." (Pegu, N. 107) The Mibu as the guardian of the socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe has got five basic functions to play which may be categorized as under:

1. To sing the holy song of creation/origin (Cosmogony, Gods and Goddesses and Mankind);
2. To recount the strenuous migration story of the community;
3. To sing the fertility hymns;
4. To recount the genealogical line of a particular family;
5. To diagnose and drive out the evils affecting a family.

The Mibu, thus, strives to perpetuate the rich cultural tradition of the Mising by playing pivotal and multifarious roles in the socio-cultural and religious life of the tribe. Some examples of hymns and songs pertaining to the above categories are cited below to gauge the veracity of this observation.

3.1.1. Holy Songs of Creation/Origin (Cosmogony, Gods and Goddesses and Mankind)

The Cosmogonic myth, 'Ké:yum' as recounted by the Mibu closely resembles that of the notion explicated in the Chaos theory. It has to undergo six consecutive stages of chaos, uncertainty and emptiness from the nebulous state of 'Ké:yum' till 'Se:di-Mé:lo', the animate state of beings consequently to culminate in the creation of 'Pédong Nā:né', the mother of the Tanis (mankind). The line of creation from the cosmogony to gods, goddesses, deities, spirits and other paranormals and mankind need to be shown before we proceed to analyze the various hymns and songs associated with their origin.

3.1.2. Hymns Pertaining to Cosmogony

"Mi kamangai, mimang kamangai,
Do:nyi kamangai, Po:lo kamangai,

Longé kamangai, yummé kamangai,
Emmé kamangai, ésaré kamangai,
Se:di ba:bu bottébí édém ru:lento.” (Pegu, N. 141)
(There was neither any man, nor any matter,
Neither any sun, nor any moon,
Neither any day, nor night,
Neither any soil, nor water,
Neither fire, nor air,
Till Father Se:di created them all.) (trans. mine)

That was primeval stage of creation called ‘Ké:yum’, which too was subjected to continuous metamorphosis as shown below:

Keyum (yumkāng+kero) = Stage of emptiness, incorporeal and infinite like the primeval ‘Chaos’. From this primeval chaos of ‘Ké:yum’ the Mising Cosmogonic myth starts.

- ↓
1. **Kāsi (Kāmāng)** = Kāsi= feminine + Kāmāng= masculine, synonymous with Presence and Absence, Positive and Negative celestial energy.
 - ↓
 2. **Siāng (Siān)** = Grey-coloured cloudy layer identical with thin layer of mist.
 - ↓
 3. **Ānbo (Ā:bo)** = A layer of cloud or mist thicker than the Siang.
 - ↓
 4. **Bomug (Āmug)** = A gradually thickening cover just after thin misty cloudy layer.
 - ↓
 5. **Mukseng** = A very thick covering.
 - ↓
 6. **Se:di (Mé:lo)** = A thick solid form like the thickening of mud, the animate stage, creator and the beginning of creation of beings other than human beings. Se:di= feminine; Mé:lo= masculine.

At this stage, with the cosmic process of creation in continuum, all the gods, goddesses, deities, spirits, supernatural beings and other paranormals, both benevolent as well as malevolent were created by the Supreme progenitor, which can be shown as under:

(Se:di)→Dí:líng→Lí:tung→Tu:yé→Yépé→Pédong Nā:né (the progenitor of mankind)

The metamorphosis of the supernatural beings stops after the emergence of Pédong Nā:ne only to initiate by her a chain of creations of various gods and goddesses, spirits and deities, both benevolent and malevolent and to culminate in creating human beings with divergent communities and clans. “Pédong is the spiritual mother of the crores of things and living beings. From the point of creativity Pédong is closest to the material world. The many gods and goddesses, planets and stars, thousands of living beings are all born from the womb of Pédong. Tani or Do:ni which means the race of mankind, is the youngest child of Pédong. This is the reason why the Misings take pride in considering themselves as the child of the divinely powerful Pédong.” (Padun 127-28)

There are a good number of benevolent and malevolent gods that had emerged as part of Pédong Nā:né’s creation process, which can be shown as under:

Pédong



Do:po→ Polung-Sobo (Spirit of Destruction)

Do:bo→ Boki-Bogo (God of Spiritual Knowledge)

Do:bí→ Bísi-Yādā (God of Weapons or Engines)

Do:ban→ Banji-Banmang (Blood-Thirsty Destructive God)

Do:bi→ Birí Bîāg

Do:mi→ Miti.Mitāng

Do:me→ Me:dāng-Boté

Do:dāng→ Dā:di-Somi

Do:di→ Do:mu-Boté

Do:nom→ Nomgu-Nomnāng

Do:nggi→ Ngi:te-Poro

Do:ro→ Robo-Ni:bo

Do:léng→ Lé:mug-Boté

Do:lāng→ Lā:dāng-Boté

Do:ni-Boté→ Nibo (Robo or Tāro)

Ni:ji-Ni:pong

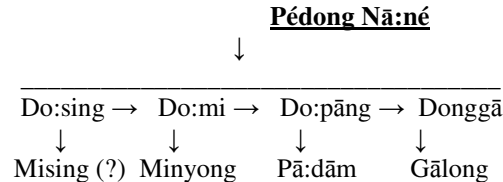
Ni:nur-Lo:māng

Do:si→ Sili-Sidong (God of Water)

Do:díng→ Dí:mu-Tā:yā

Apart from the above list, myriad other gods and goddesses frequently referred to in the A:bangs are – Do:nyí/Jíté/Bo:mong (Great Sun Goddess), Po:lo/Lo:né Bā:bo (Great Moon God), Do:ying Boté (Creator), Gu:min Boté (God of Races), So:yin Boté (Community God), Konki Ko:māng (Head of Life), Dā:di Boté (Saviour), Gāmro (Keeper), Ki:né Nā:né/Ki:né De:né (Head of Netherworld), Tu:sin Ro:dong (God of Forest), Bi:ri Boté (Spirit of Flood or Erosion), Di:mu/Ji:mu Tā:yā (God of Hilltop), Do:pí Píduk (God of Frogs), Do:ni Ni:nur (Head Blacksmith), Yi:dum Boté (God of Wind), Pédong Nā:né (Goddess of Rain), Kārsin Kārtāk/Kārdog Dugong (God of Farming), Déndé So:bo (God of Food grain), Siné Mo:bo/ Urom Po:sun (Soul of Ancestral God), Sirki Nā:né (Goddess of Spiritual Knowledge), Niyā Péré (Human God), Ko:je Yānggo (Goddess of Wealth), Sé:di Mé:lo (Creator of the universe) and so forth. (Kuli-II 78-79)

However, after the proliferation of a great number of benevolent and malevolent gods and goddesses, spirits and deities, it was the turn of Pédong Nā:né to propagate the various clans of the Tanis (Human beings), which may be illustrated through the following figure:



3.1.3. Re-telling the Migration Story of the Community

Pésiné péttāngé a:mayā
 Si:angé béroké a:mayā
 Uni muminé okumémé nāmé
 Édíé tārúé tu:len lā:doi

 Sillen dagyé yo:yo toledyé
 Lamté bélam uniyé logo.

(This song is supposed to have sung while crossing the rapid torrents of Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh migrating towards the plains of Assam.)

Another song pertaining to migration is very much informative:

Léllérko léguā légo pātung
 Réiyénā réngām sidé di:dumso

 Sirki Nā:né Síkkāmé bā:bā
 Ā:yénā e:nā do:jigpé jígnām.

(Oh, our forefathers let us show the right path to reach our destination so that we can get rid of sorrows and worries of life. Oh, mother Sirki and father Síkkam, show us the ways to a place for better living.) (Kuli, J.J. 33)

The genealogical family-tree of a particular family also is explained by the 'Mibu' by tracing the clan line after Pédong Nā:né after offering a devotional invocation to gods and goddesses.

The 'Mibu' also diagnoses the causes of suffering and drive out the evils affecting a family by invoking divine aids:
 Ki:bo āné gumíne, boki āné gumíne
 Gumín do:nyié lo:yi dolāngkā
 Pi:dé lādbongé té:lo dolāngkā. (Kuli, J.J. 25)

(Oh, forefathers, show me the right path of my destination so that I can find out the causes of sorrows and worries of the people.)

Midā: (Midāng) Ni:tom (Nuptial Songs):

The Midā:Midāng Ni:toms (Nuptial Songs) are neither pathetic nor melancholic, but nonetheless are deeply infused with a sense of ease and proximity that the Misings enjoy with Nature. For example:

Té...téré rété
 Téré rété rété rété
 Ādi télé di:té télé ké ké rāndāngā
 Bānji sonyiko yāgetāgāi ké ké rāndāngā
 Bānji ko:bāng pāgeyoulā ké ké rāndāngā
 Mā:mo kāmpom yāmsā:nāpé ké ké rāndāngā.

(I/we have located a 'bānji' (*Chikrasia tabularis*) tree and separately cleaned its surrounding for a special purpose. The purpose is to build a ladder to welcome my/our beautiful sister-in-law as bride to the stilted house.)

However, in yet another form of nuptial song called 'yaban' a simmering sense of pathos and loneliness can be seen expressed by a bride (daughter) on the eve of her marriage:

Ouwé ouwā dumtiyé dumlābé lābmāné kodé:nā
 Ouwé ouwā yumdāngé āyirdo gímāné kodé:nā
 Ouwéngā kossu kolokké jéidé popidé.....é: si...

(O, mother, o, mother, a sense of unbearable loneliness will engulf the places where I used to comb my hair and where I used to stroll around (after I depart towards my husband's (would-be) house.)

(i) Bí:ríg/Bírdug Ni:tom (Seasonal songs):

The group song sung during the Āli Ā:ye Lígāng festival is completely saturated with deep ecological attachment enjoyed by the community characterized by mirth and merriment in anticipation of a bumper crop ahead:

Lo-lo-le-lo-le-lole
 Dābo lo le lole lole
 Sisuk sukbo sukbo bodiā
 Régām gāmbo gāmbo bodiā.
 Yo ru:se pā:mo sutokā
 Omum buluā ru:se pā:mo sutokā.
 Yo kektong bereng sutokā
 Omum buluā kektong bereng sutokā.
 Yo dumlābém lāmbo sutokā
 Lo:ti dumlābém lāmbo sutokā.
 Yo défre pongkír lā:jé
 Gídāng défré pongkír lā:jé.

(Let us assemble here today and get lost in ecstasy (because of this jovial company) like the ebullient deer in self-oblivion because of extreme delight. Let us, my friends, make this dancing ground happy and frolicsome one.)

However, some songs belonging to this genre do also reveal the most pungent truth about the transitory human life amidst such frolicsome moments:

Yāmpo yāyāngā ro: ro: yāyāngā
 Rogné néguppé gubāngé yékupé
 Yo: kituné tunāngé yékupé
 Kiboké kituné tunāngé yékupé.

(Since we (human beings) are gradually dying out of pain and suffering day by day like an old brooding hen while laying eggs and an old dog suffering from fungal disease, let us enjoy today to our heart's content.)

3.2. Conversational Songs (Lupo Ni:tom)

Falling into this group, Sélloi ni:tom, sung both by boys and girls in repetitive question-answer mode, records the trials and tribulations experienced during the tribe's migration from their original homeland. This genre of folksongs of the Misings can be regarded as the most dilemmatic and traumatic phase of the tribe's quest for a congenial homeland stored in the collective racial memory:

→ Girls:

Sā:sé sā:sā sélloyā,
 Okolok lenpéiké sélloyā?

→ Boys:

Oiyé oiyā sélloyā
 Sodogíng lentokā sélloyā.

(O, brother, o, brother, which way should we proceed?/ O, my dear sister, o my dear sister, you should proceed towards this way.)

3.3. Kābān (Lamentations, Ballads and Narratives)

In such songs, as the titles suggest, one can notice the spontaneous manifestation of some sense of guilt and remorse, loss and bereavement as well as self-accusation on the part of the narrator or the singer. A few examples of them are cited below:

(i) Do:bo Kābān:

Nā:nébi okolok ā:dāgdolo:nā
 Nā:nébi ālāgém lāgmur tonéya?
 Nā:nébi gāgnāmdém so:lāg gāgnāndém
 Nā:nébi gāgnāmdém gāgmur tonéya?

(Had my mother, perchance, touched or placed her hand upon somewhere/something that might be impure. Had she committed a mistake in pressing hard the thread (used during delivery of a baby by Mising women) while undergoing labour pain on the eve of my birth? Or further, had the time of my birth ominous for which I am suffering so much?)

(ii) Mé:bo or Sí:sāng Kābān:

Komji: lokkébo réiyé lokkébo
 Pitpā lokkébo jéyāngé lokkébo
 Oinom ālígé kālíg sutāgāi
 Oinom āngāmē kā:ngāmsutāgāi
 Oiyā dé:píném pínmbosutāgāi
 Oiyā dé:pongém po:mānbosutāgāi.

(Ever since I was conceived and then since innocent childhood I was captivated by you, and hence was confined deep inside the secret recess of my mind. I used to eat (rice) and drink (Āpong/ beer) by dreaming of having a conjugal life with you. It was you with whom I first started rehearsing my first love.)

'Kābnām' is yet another lamentation song through which a sense of deep irreparable loss is expressed by mourning on someone's demise:

Āiné āinā nokké sí:joné ājoné,
 Āiné āinā yirmāné somānnā du:so: lo, éi si/
 Āiné āinā nokké légā:pé,
 Āiné āinā gālugé rénāmé,
 Āiné āinā du:pāgékā:so:lo, éi si/
 Āiné āinā āmiké légā:pé,
 Āiné āinā kusere:pé ika:né,
 Āiné āinā oinok légā:pé murkongém érrāsin,
 Āinā oino:m értumé lā:to:māsong, éi si...//

(O my dear one, all of your friends are playing and revelling happily, but, alas! where have you gone? The new shirts bought for you have remained unused. Many diseases in case of others were cured by herbal medicines, whereas I could not cure you even after I had spent a lot of money for your treatment.)

3.4. Work Songs

Lullabies known as *Ko: Ni:nām/ Bī:ni Ni:nām* in Misingcan considered as the tribe's sense of attachment and belongingness to Nature and a keen observation on every phenomenon that occurs in her lap:

Kouwowā kāppo:yo pékkowé dé:mā:dā
 Dé:yé:mīl kāblāngkā déi.....
 Ngolukké kouwoumé sé:ko;bí pātoné / kābmo:dun
 Ālī:gém lígbiyéku déi.....

(O, my dear, don't cry, the nestlings of the dove (who are also as young as you) haven't learnt to fly, and hence, you should cry as soon as they start flying. Who else has made you (our dear son) shall be properly avenged.)

In yet another sub-genre of work song, 'Lottā so:mān', we notice a profuse use of apt metaphors and similes culled from Nature in order to express joys and sorrows of the youthful yearnings and desires reflecting the interplay between human emotions and pathetic fallacy characterizing the elements of Nature:

Mé:mi mé:mila
 Mé:roboi sā:yémīl

Sí:lung ārāng umípe
 Oiyā dorrop sā:dāngné.

(When I start thinking deeply, my heart burns in dejection like a bonfire in the jungle)

3.5. Songs Dealing with Miscellaneous Subjects

Among the various sub-genres belonging to this miscellaneous group of Mising folk songs 'Oi Ni:tom' ('Lereli' being mostly indicative of fun and frolic) is perhaps the most noteworthy insofar as its thematic contexts are concerned in which we observe both the 'ecopoesis' and the pessimistic worldview of the tribe in an unmistakable manner:

- (i) Néiyé néngān ngāndu:bong dāktog ésār sārdu:bong,
 Rongki oiyā rongkipé āsināngé odu:bong.

(As the trees start bearing new leaves and the westerly wind starts blowing, my heart yearns for you so restlessly.)

- (ii) Āsi sikur sikurko, miksi sikur sikurko;
 Āsi sikur pínyépé, miksi sikur pinpémāng.

(The spring of water and tears are completely different from one another, and hence the latter never dries though the former one does.)

- (iii) Sílungolok okā:de ugyumkokki sí:sā:dung,
 Opān āo ātérbí miksi dílā sí:sā:dung.

(The ferns in the jungle are sustained by the shades of the trees, and similarly, I have been sustaining my life amidst sorrows and suffering.)

- (iv) Punpé punpé mé:lā:sin punnātomāng āppunpé,
 Dé:pé: dé:pé: mé:lā:sin dé:lā:tomāng péttāpé.

(Although I tried my best to bloom like flowers and fly like birds, I failed to do so.)

Apart from these 'Oi ni:toms' tinged with pathos and melancholy, 'Momān' or 'Mosed ni:tom' also can be taken as exquisite example of the tribe's love and proximity with the ecology around them. Although characterized by unlimited fun, mirth and merriment, such songs at times can turn to convey thought-provoking philosophical truth dexterously implied through functional metaphors:

Télésin singiko bélésin singiko

Pokkokdé tākkírko dung,
 Tākkírké nérí:do bírāmé tābiko

Bírelā bírkurlā dung;
Tākkírké mo:nāmé kāmāng.

(There are two Simolu (red cotton) trees on either sides and in the middle there lies a Uriam (*biscofia javanica*) tree, and intertwining in its root it there lies a big python, and hence the (Uriam) tree (symbolizing human beings struggling in life) does not find any respite.)

4. Concluding Observations

After evaluating the pros and cons of the above observations we can deduce that the unique, rich, vibrant and panoramic ethnic culture of the Misings have been transmitted down from generation to generation through their folksongs. Retained through their collective racial memory the tribe's folksongs can rightly be considered as tremendously effective means for representation and perpetuation of their unique cultural worldview and ethnic identity. They are the oral histories recording both individual as well as collective bitter-sweet past experiences which function as a dynamic force for perpetuation of their vibrant cultural legacy. They recount the stories of origin, creation, migration, settlement, and above all, a collective social life capturing the joys and sorrows, loss and bereavement, aspirations and disappointments, triumphs and tribulations that the community shares alike through the kaleidoscope of their mnemocultural praxis. During all these socio-cultural and religious activities, the 'Mibu', the father-figure of the community, takes the lead, who seems both at the times of prosperity and adversity to remind his people that,

- "Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. The life of a man is measured by his actions and his actions are good if their origin is pure. From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally, is the invisible force that guides each one of us. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest for faith." (Dai, 57)

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