

CHAPTER II

ECOLOGY, MYTH AND HISTORY

Culture could not have emerged, fully formed, from nowhere, but must have developed under the influence of a set of conditions that were social as well as ecological in character.

Tim Ingold

The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.

Raymond Williams

We have already seen in the previous chapter that there is massive scholarly curiosity regarding the discourse on human-environment relations. The issue of "social construction of nature or the environment" has shown a renewed interest by scholars of various disciplines. Social scientists have shifted their attention from the theory of ecological determinism to a new focus on questions pertaining to indigenous (local) ideas of human-nature relations. To talk about the notions related to the social construction of nature' P. Descola suggests that "there exist very general patterns in the way people construct representations of their social and physical environment."¹ M. L. Foster contends that "the artefacts of culture, constituting the web that holds its institutions together, are symbols, which are defined as the socially objectified loci of meaning" in accordance with the concept of culture as a mechanism in human-environment interaction'.² And thus the 'social objectivation' of nature is defined as a process through which each culture 'endows with a particular salience features of its environment...'³ To understand this process, as he asserts, 'one must also take into account such dimensions as local theories of the working

¹ Descola, Philipp, & Pallason. G, 1996, *Introduction*, in Descolla. P and G Pallason(eds) 'Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspective,' Routledge, London, p.86.

² Foster, M.L, 1994, *Symbolism: The Foundation of Culture* in Tim Ingold(ed) 'Companion of Encyclopaedia of Anthropology' Routledge, London, p. 366.

³ Descola. Philipp, 1996, op cit., p. 85.

of the cosmos, sociologies and ontologies of non-human beings, spatial representations of social and non-social domains, ritual prescription and proscriptions governing the treatment of, and the relation with, different categories of beings.’⁴ She further remarks that ‘a common features of all conceptualisation of non-human is that they are always predicated by reference to the human domain... the social objectivation of non-humans thus cannot be disjoined from objectivation of human., both process are directly informed by the configurations of ideas and practice from which every society draws its concepts of self and otherness.’⁵

On the other hand, the Phenomenological approach hold the view that people create culture through practices that enables them to live and make sense out of the world in relation with others situated in similar situation and sharing these practices and life ways. Thus, Tim Ingold puts it, ‘it is more realistic to say that people live culturally rather than that they live in cultures.’⁶ Thus the concept/perspective of landscape as analytical unit became crucial in addressing the issue of people’s construction of meaning. As a matter of fact, as P.J. Stewart and A. Strathern have explored that ‘ethnographers have realised from their experiences how perception of and values attached to landscape encode values and fix memories to places that become sites of historical identity...such perceptions shift, either gradually or dramatically over time so that landscape becomes a form of codification of history itself.’⁷ She further emphasised that ‘the word landscape was introduced into English as a technical term of painters...it can well be applied to the creative and imaginative ways in which people place themselves within their environment...we see history as involved continuously in the making and remaking of ideas about place,

⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵ Ibid., pp.85-86.

⁶ Tim Ingold, 1994, *Introduction to Culture* in Tim Ingold(ed), ‘Companion of Encyclopaedia of Anthropology’, Routledge, London, p. 330.

⁷ Stewart, P.J & Strathern. A, 2003, *Introduction* in P.J. Stewart and A Strathern(ed) ‘Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspective’, Pluto Press, London, p. 1.

realigning or differentiating place in relation to notions of community.⁸ Moreover, folktales, myths, oral histories, ballads, ritual incantations and ordinary stories of daily life all invoke in real or imagined detail the spatial positioning's of a community of people.'⁹ They further argued landscape refers to the perceived settings that frame people's sense of place and common...landscape is thus a contextual horizon of perception, providing both a foreground and a background in which people feel themselves to be living in their world.'¹⁰ As noted by Davide Torri, 'landscape appears as a primary source...to which people are deeply linked through cosmogony, mythology, kinship, memory and history. This sense of affection and intimacy is not severed by migration and relocation and the link to a specific area appears to be a major identity marker...because of this we should not be surprised by its role in any discourse about identities.'¹¹

Mising Ideas of Species (Non-Human):-

The traditional Mising beliefs are distinct with the prevalence of ancestor worship, nature deities to avert deaths, epidemics, natural disasters, crop failures, misfortunes, mishaps etc., and propitiations of both guardian spirits and malevolent spirits with a preponderance of sacrifices and wine libations is another significant feature of their day-to-day religious practices. Their worldview has also been amply expressed in ritual song, communal festivals, and in other religious activities or expressions. Hence, apparently Mising cultural practises are inextricably interwoven and expressed in their "indigenous" and "local system' of beliefs and practices.

The contemporary 'tradition-steeped' community like Mising's belief system is extremely diverse in character and difficult to categorise within a definable, bounded

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ Torri, Davide, 2020, *Landscape, Ritual and Identity among the Hyolo of Nepal*, Routledge, London, p. 45.

religious order/category. In other words, the essence of contemporary Mising beliefs and practises lies in the interaction of two belief systems—the first being influenced by dominant or organised religion like Hinduism, and the other being traditional. This very situation has presented certain problems of explanation. As we have seen, the Mising belief systems in various gradations and degrees are influenced by forms of Hinduism, i.e., monothssitic Hinduism and other religious orders, conversing with animist or shamanistic practices. Nevertheless, the Mising Cosmology or worldview retains an overall paramount position amidst the transitional phases that led to the self-realization of a distinct identity. Mising, as a distinct ethnic group, maintains its identity through elaborate ritual and symbolic structures, many of which demonstrate the survival of archaic and early modes of belief system.

However, before delivering into this, there is need to consider some concepts relate to people’s beliefs and worldview. The history of the Mising religious beliefs and practices has been studied within the parameters of “acculturation”. However, in order to address the above noted situation of the ‘tradition-steeped’ ethnic group like the Mising, use of folklore and religious studies becomes handy. In short, the varieties of contemporary Mising beliefs and its historical circumstances have amply shown the characteristics of “folk cultural elements of religion”. While conceptualization of heterogeneous and hybrid forms of beliefs system has been studied/analysed within the domain of folk religion. Folk religion as a concept provides a theoretical framework to describe popular religious practices of people in various world cultures in which a syncretistic manner blend the elements of different religious tradition.¹² While the most compelling and path-breaking description related to the debate and application of folk religion as a conceptual tool has been long ago addressed by Don Yadar in his monumental work “Towards the Definition

¹²Draper, S & Baker, J O, *Angelic Belief as American Folk Religion*, Sociological Forum, vol.26, No3 (September 2011) pp.623-643, Wiley. p.625, Accessed date: 13-05-2019.

of Folk Religion." (1994). Drawing upon the German tradition of religious scholarship, he claims "folk religion is the cultural dimension of religion or the religious dimension of culture.' He asserts that under this concept, the passive phenomena of folk religion (witchcraft and magic, for example) as well as the active or creative phenomena (religious folk music, folk costume, folk art, and even folk theology), the reinterpretation or expression of the official religion at the folk level can be included.¹³ Describing institutional religion (which can influence religious beliefs and practices) as 'is itself conflicted and not monolithic' Leonard Norman Primiano further assert that "no one, no special religious elites or member of an institutional hierarchy, neither the pope in Rome nor the Dalai Lama of Tibet...lives an officially religious life in a pure unadulterated form",¹⁴

However, using folk religion as a conceptual tool remains a contested issue within the domain of religion and folklore studies. As such, there is the term and concept of "vernacular religion' increasingly applied by "scholars working at the interstices of folklore/ethnology and religious studies."¹⁵ As Primiano argues, vernacular religion is not just an alternate term for an older concept, i.e., folk religion, not just the 'dichotomous or dialectical partner of "institutional" religious forms'; vernacular religion, as he maintains, "represents a theoretical definition of another term."¹⁶ He gave emphasis on the "religious individual' dimension of beliefs and worldviews and defined "vernacular religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it'.¹⁷ In short, he

¹³ Yodar, D, (January, 1974), *Towards the Definition of Religion*, Western Folklore, Vol. 33. 1, Symposium on Folk Religion pp.2-15, p. 14.

¹⁴ Leonard, P, 1995, *Vernacular Religion and the search for method in religious folk life*, Western Folklore 54(1), p.39 Stable [URL:https://www.jstore.org/stable/1499910](https://www.jstore.org/stable/1499910) Accessed: 06-06-2019 18:13 UTC

¹⁵ Bowman, M, 2014, *Vernacular Religion, Contemporary Spirituality and Emergent Identities in Approaching Religion*, Vol. 4. No.1, p. 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷ Leonard, P, 1995, op cit., p. 44.

treats religion not as an abstract system but as multiple forms, related to the processes and practices of religious beliefs: their verbal, behavioural, and material expressions.

On the other hand, insights from folkloristic or usefulness of folklore genre is considered to be crucial in the understanding of vernacular religion. Hence, genre analysis seems to be another important component of this approach to addressing religion as an individual or a community experience in their day-to-day social reality. Folklorists have acknowledged the very significance of genre as they define it, not merely as a literary form but as a medium that expresses a particular worldview. It is found that both oral and written genres represent certain outlooks and orientations to social reality. One important social function of genre as a "culturally patterned speaking practice" is to cope with the "transmission and traditionalisation of inter-subjective experiences of the life world."¹⁸ Thus, the genre of belief is found to be a strong orientation towards daily life. As such, *the myths, personal experience narratives, and other verbal expressions of belief or material culture related to or arising from beliefs shed valuable light on religion in everyday life, as it is lived.*¹⁹ In the context of the tradition of folklore and ethnology, the emphasis is given 'on what people in a variety of cultural, religious, and geographical landscapes do, think, and say in relation to what they believe about the way the world is constituted.'²⁰

On the other hand, pre-literate communities are highly rich in oral tradition—which is also the backbone of their cultural heritage. Oral narrative has its own function in a historical tradition, and thus the study of oral traditions has become essential in exploring the world view in general and making sense of a society's cultural past in particular. It has

¹⁸ Bowman, Marion, & Valk, Ulo, 2012, *Introduction : Vernacular Religion, Generic Expressions and the Dynamics of Belief* in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday life: Expressions of belief*, (ed.) Marion Bowman and Ulo Valk, 2012, p.164.

¹⁹ Primiano, L, 1995, op cit., p. 41.

²⁰ Bowman, Marion & Valk, Ulo 2012, op cit., p. 164.

been found across every human society, even highly literate ones that oral traditions have made the past relevant to the present and have provided a strong cultural continuity through shared myths, legends, folk tales, etc. Oral tradition plays a crucial role in sustaining a community's cultural and social values by integrating them into its day-to-day lifestyle. Hence, it speaks of social reality or of a society's historical roots.

Furthermore, in a traditional society individual who were eloquent and had a strong command of the language were highly respected, and they were often the story tellers. As a matter of fact, storytelling was a social mechanism through which people had of communicating knowledge and beliefs from one generation to the next. J M Vansina one of the leading exponent of oral tradition holds that 'oral traditions consist of all verbal testimonies which are reported statement concerning the past. This definition implies that nothing but oral traditions –that is to say, statements either spoken or sung –enter into consideration.'²¹

However, absence of a clear mark of time and space in oral tradition has actually thrown up a lot of debate and theorizations. Indeed, there is great deal of methodological problems to consider oral tradition as historical source. However, Vansina further hold the view "oral traditions have a part to play in the reconstruction of the past.... It is a part similar to that played by written sources because both are messages from the past to the present, and messages are key elements in historical reconstruction.... where there is no writing or almost none, oral traditions must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction'. On the other hand, according to Romail Thapar 'past events have to be related in a chorological order but the time sequence can be part of a much larger concept of time. Events concerning the more remote periods often take the form of a myth. Myth is in a sense a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the

²¹ Vansina, J.M, 2006(reprint) *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* Routledge, p. 19.

purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past.... myth record what a people like to think about their past ...".²² As a matter of fact, the functionality of oral tradition is beyond doubt. In a historical tradition the main function of oral tradition is to express the world view, to pass on the social experience of their people to future generations.

In view of the above consideration/context, we now turn our attention towards the understanding of how the Mising Cosmology or worldview is related directly to their physical realm or to the environment. The Mising oral tradition as a historical source consisted of various kinds of narratives, songs, rhymes, proverbs, and other popular creative expressions, which are considered to be highly rich in terms of both quantity and quality.²³ Indeed, there was a considerable boom in folklore collection during the late 1950's and early 1960's.²⁴ In 1992, Tarun Chandra Pamegam's collections of folktales were for the first time translated into English under the title 'Folksongs of the Misings', which was published by the department of folklore research at Gauhati University. Hence, for the first time, Mising folklore came under the scrutiny and preview of professional folklorists. Birendra Nath Dutta, the book's editor, exemplifies some aspects of Mising folklore in which the element of "diffusion of themes" has found its place due to its migratory status. However, he seemed to acknowledge the dynamic and specificity of Mising folklore, as is the case with every community, when he commented, "But what is significant about Mising culture and, for that matter, of which folklore, is not the erstwhile hill affiliation but the remarkable manner of adaptation of the hill modes and mores in the

²² Thapar, Romila (1987), *Origin Myths and Early Indian Historical Tradition*, Oreint longman, p. 25.

²³ Datta Birendra & Taid, Taburam, 1992, *Folksongs of the Misings*, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, p. 1.

²⁴ Taid Taburam, 2013, *Mising Folk Tales*, Sahitya Akademy, New Delhi, p. xv.

wider cultural setting of the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley." ²⁵ Therefore, Mising cosmology and social practices appears to have contains both the hill and plain mode of idiom. However, the attempt here is not to provide a complete analysis of Mising Oral Tradition but to highlight the historically significant aspect of certain traditions amongst the Mising. Thus the attempt is not ascertaining the historical authenticity of the traditions but rather to probe the reason for its wide expression.

There is a large number or body of myths which are well documented or well-known to all Mising. They all contain some cosmological information, and they demonstrate the intrinsic entanglement of humans and non-human entities. Moreover, Mising perception of non-human entities is integral to their ideas of cosmology or world view, and to their views of themselves and of others. One of the instructive points about the myths for the Mising themselves is that they provide information about species identity. The Mising shared a strikingly similar cosmology with the Tani group of communities of central Arunachal Pradesh. Their shared cosmology is reflected in their subsistence system, language, kinship, governance, ritual practice and their landscape.²⁶

Mising Cosmology:

The origin myth/myth of creation:-

Schematically, one may draw Mising cosmology as having many entities. The Mising psyche, along with the Tani community, does not perceive history merely in terms of the "factual, chronological events of the past' but goes back to the very beginning of the universe and the origin of the Mising being itself. The Mising are a clan-ridden

²⁵ Dutta. B, 1992, *The Misings and their folklore* in 'Folksongs of the Misings (ed) by B. Dutta and Taburam Taid the dept. of folklore research, Gauhati University, p. 1.

²⁶ Hilaly, Sarah, 2015, *Trajectory of Region Formation in the Eastern Himalayas* in Indian Historical Review, Sage Publications, ICHR, p. 300.

community. Each and every individual has a clan identity to be a member of the community. Hence, the origin myth is an essential component of the Mising's identity construction. Their genealogical tree helps one in tracing their social history. It provides the various facets of their society. Mising oral traditions, as already stated, consist of legends, myths, folk tales, and *Mibu A:bangs*(the priest lore), can be used as a source material to construct how the Mising perceive themselves, how they define their identity in relation to the environment, among other questions. As such the Adi-Mising *A:bangs* plays important role in exploring the cultural past in general and worldview in particular. The *A:bangs* are understood as the rhapsodic chants and hymns. As noted by J.J. Kuli, 'it is a verse of hymn of praise and worship to God or Goddess. It reflects the true philosophical concept of the community. It narrates not only the pray songs of the supernatural but also the different modes and ways of life on the Mising people...the *a:bangs* are very rich in emotional appeal, philosophical import, figure of speech and elegance of words...are the earliest known verbal songs of the community. Hence, these songs can be called as historical songs or poetical histories of the community...these songs reflect the poetical genius of the people in traditional ways. The *a:bang*...give description of natural phenomenon or songs of creation of nature.'²⁷ B.S Guha in his booklet *Moshup A:bang* has divided this *a:bang* into three parts. As such 'the first part narrates the creation of the world and struggle between the originator of human race (Doni) and his enemies (robo and others); the account of the development of agriculture is narrated in the second part of the *a:bang* and, in the third part narrates how the Moshap came into existence and stresses its importance in the social structure of the Adis.'²⁸ According to Tai Niyori, 'on the ceremonial occasions the Nybio signs the religious lore, such as *abangs* and his

²⁷ Kuli, J.J. 1998, *Folk literature of the Misings: An introduction*, in J.J Kuli (ed) 'The Mising: their History and culture,' Guwahati, p.171

²⁸ Niyori, Tai, 1993, *History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi p.252

followers...girls and boys follow his tunes and dance. In the *ponung* during during the solung festival the *limir-libom*, *binyat abang* and *taktor abang* are recited.²⁹ Recently Nahendra Padun has compiled a book entitled as ‘*Abotani Upakhyan*’, by translating and editing the original *Ekop-Taktor A:bang*. *Ekop-Taktor A:bang* narrates the legends of *Abutani*-the forgather of the Tanis. Likewise, in the *Binyot A:bang* there is story of the origin of agriculture activities among the Adis.³⁰

The Adi-Mising cosmogony shares a common myth of creation. This origin theory appears to speak about the local system of relations with non-human entities, the objectivation of human and non-human. The *Mibu A:bang* or the Priest lore among the Adi-Mising, is considered the earliest known verbal songs of the community that were transmitted amongst the Mibu. We can know from *Mibu a:bangs*³¹ and other folktales about creation myths and genealogical legends. The *Mibu A:bang* amongst the Adi and Mising placed *Keyum* in the first line of the creation myths. *Keyum* is defined as the beginning of the beginning, or infiniteness, nothingness, or vacuum.³² Besides, *keyum* is also defined as *keyum ken-mange Yayanko*, and *Kero kenmange Yayanko*, meaning—*Keyum* is unknown and unknowable, while *Kero* is invisible and unknowable.³³ It is important to note here that most of the Tani tribes have a cognate word for *Keyum* with the same meaning, i.e., a state of "formlessness". For example, in the case of Apatanis, the word *kolyung-kolo* stands for ‘a state of undifferentiated ambiguity from which individual forms emerge, a process of materialisation...’.³⁴ One Mising *Mibu A:bang* contains a

²⁹ Ibid.,p. 254

³⁰ Padun, Nahendra, 2021, *Abotani Upakhyan*, CUMTA, Nagaon p.11.

³¹*Mibu Aa:bang* is generally termed as a priest’s chant or priestly lore. According to Tabu Ram Taid *A:abang* meant rhapsodic chants and hymns.

³² Padun, Nahendra, 2005, *Mising Ni:Tom(Mising Folk songs: Mibu A:bang*, Mising Agom kebang, Dhemaji, p. 5.

³³ Pegu, Nomal, 2011, *The Mishing of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Dibrugarh, Assam, p. 142.

³⁴ Blackburn. S, 2008, *Himalayan Tribal Tales: Oral Tradition and culture in the Apatani Valley* , BRILL, LEIDEN, p. 214.

reference to the process of creation or ‘a state of undifferentiated ambiguity’ in the following lines:³⁵

“Ji/Mi, kamang-ai, Mimang Kamang-ai,

P:yange kamang-ai,

Achch kamang-ai, Aa-mong kamang-ai

U:mme Kamang-ai, Esare Kamang-ai

Sedi-Ba-bu Bottabri-Rulento

Do:nyi-Po:lo, Aamong Mo:diyem

Abutaniyem..... ..”

A free English translation rendering of the above piece would be like:

‘At the beginning, there were no human beings, nor were there any air, light or any system or patterns. It was the creator Se:di who created the Sun, the Moon, the earth and all living beings, including our ancestor Abutani.’

After *Keyum* as their A:bang maintains there emerge in a descending order the following creations/entities namely-

‘Keyum-Yumkang-Kasi-Siang-Abo-Bomuk-Mukseng –Sedi or Sedi-Melo-Diling-Litung-Tuye-Yeppe-Pedong or Pedong-Nane.’³⁶

According to S.P Panyang's version of the Mising creation myths, all animate and inanimate objects in this world were created by the "supreme beings" known as *Se-di-*

³⁵ Pangging. Kalinath, 2016, *Noi Pareeya Sanskritir Itu-Hitu*, Longging Communication, Gogamukh, Assam, p. 26.

³⁶ Nath, Jugendra, 2000, *Cultural Heritage of Tribal Societies, Vol-1(The Adis)*. Delhi, p. 33.

Ba:bu and *Me-lo-Na:ne*, who are often referred to as *Se-di-Me-lo*." ³⁷ It is further narrated that 'out of the conjugal efforts of *Se-di* with mother *Me-lo*, *ditem* (earth), *adiditem* (hills) *neinengan* (trees with different leaves), *Peyi-Pettang* (Birds with different feathers) *rukji-merang*(ants and insects) were created and gave them their respective voices (*biekke gombugem buklen motto*)'.³⁸

In yet another version of the origin myth, it is further narrated that *Se-di-Me-lo* was followed by the entities *Dilink>Li-tunk>Tu-ye>Yepe* and *Pedong*. From *Pedong* emerged *Domi*, and from *Domi* emerged *Mi-Mimang*. From *Mi* emerged *Tani*(man)³⁹ and from *Mimang* emerged earth, water, air stones and vegetation.⁴⁰

Moreover, the Mising cosmogony further maintains that *Donyi* and *Polo* sprang from *Se-di* and *Me-lo*, along with *Doying-babu*. The Misings revere 'Donyi' as 'Ane-Donyi' (a female cosmic principle) and 'Polo' as 'Abo-Polo'(a male cosmic principle). The Mising considered themselves the progenies of *Do:nyi* (sSun) and *Polo* (Moon). They believe these deities are omnipotent, omnipresent, and benevolent to mankind.

However, the most dynamic or central to the Mising creation mythology is well illustrated in the following portion of the *Mibu A:bang* . . .

Umlaye rumna

Donke lebiga rumna

Gorbu:berne rumna . . .

. . . sedike bomonge

³⁷ Panyang, S.P, 1935, (reprint) 2001, *Miri Jatir Buranji*, Dibrugarh, p. 13.

³⁸ Pegu Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 141.

³⁹ The word *Tani* in *Adi* and *Mising* signify a man i.e. the first man on earth. It should be noted that a number of tribes in *Arunachal Pradesh* claimed to be the descendent of *Abo*(father)-*Tani*(man) i.e. *Abotani*. The most explicit statement of this issue is addressed by *J. Nath* who focuses his study on this so-called *Tani* group of people. These include the *Adis*, the *Mising*, the *Tagins*, the *Nishi*, and the *Apatanis*. He observed that these *tani* groups of people had experienced common cultural ties (agricultural way of life) during their sojourn in the *Yarlung valley* of *Tibet*.

⁴⁰ *Taid*, *Taburam*, 2013, op cit., p. 18.

Unsang dosime

Sedi a:bangko

Ingkang yekai . . . Free Translation: We salute you, O originator of creation. You have taken the whole responsibility of giving birth on your shoulder and in your womb, and you are like the mother of all families—we salute you. This young miri/Mibu (priest) with inspiration from you is trying to sing what Mother History has bestowed while Mother *Pedong* undertook the creation, and the things created flourished.⁴¹

Thus, the above-mentioned creation myth clearly refers to the Mising world view, with some entities such as *sedimelo*, *pedang nane*, *Doyni* (mother Sun), and *Abo Po:lo* (father Moon) occupying special positions. It is important to note here that Adi-Mising A-bang as chanted by different *Mibus* are not always unanimous in describing the process of creation myth. Nevertheless, we can observe some internal consistency in the creation myth. As such, the A: bang appears to have agreed on three phases of creation, as noted in the above viz.⁴² 1.) The 'existence' prior to *Se-di-Melo*, 2.) The actual process of creation, as their beliefs hold, began with *Sedi-Melo* and continued until *Pedong*, and 3). *Pedong* being the originator of earth and all terrestrial objects, living and non-living.

Padong Nane is regarded as the Mising's primordial mother, while *Sedi-melo* represents the original male and female principles.⁴³ The literal meaning of '*Pedong*' is rain. There are other tales that speak about the entity *Pedong* as primeval *na-ne* or mother of Mising as well as of other human beings. As a result, as mentioned in the following, the Mising folksongs run:⁴⁴

Ngokke demume janggal pedonge demume

Janggal dobo aliya,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. iv.

⁴² Taid, Taburam, 2013, op cit., p. 139.

⁴³ Ibid., p. iv.

⁴⁴ Datta, Birendra & Taid, Taburam, 1992, op cit., pp. 9-15.

Janggal aliye deboma-janggaloi. Free Translation: There has been no rain in our locality .

..

Therefore the Mising chanted the rain invoking songs:

Adie dilutele di:bokoya

. . . *Donyike aua dirkombe lulu*

Po:loke aua dirkome lulu

. . . *Melo do:nyie leyope*

Miksi leyiope . . . diri bikakui.

Across the hills, O clouds come close together . . . O Mother Sun (*Do:nyie*) and Father Moon(*Po:lo*), you too render your help . . . let there be rain. We need water, we need the rainy season . . . We are the children of the Moon; we are the children of the Sun.

Besides, the entity *Pedong Nane* is again an integral part of their genealogical tradition. The Mising clan traces their genealogy to *Pedang Nane*, as noted in the above description. It is also obvious that these traditions stand for the origin of the Mising clan through a perceived human being, as in the case of *Abutani*. As a matter of fact, at the centre of Tani oral tradition stands *Abutani*, who appear almost in every kind of tales-trickster tale, migration legends, healing chants, origin myth and in the stories related to agricultural practice etc. and for this very reason *Abutani* is called the ‘first human and culture hero among the Tanis’.⁴⁵ It is already stated that eastern Himalayan tribes traced its roots from the mythic *Abutani*. The tradition of *Abutani*- literally means Abo(father); Tani(man)- the father man as mythical hero or common ancestor is common to *Nyishi* of Papupare or a *Galo* of Along and it is thus familiar to a Mising of Majuli, or an *Apatani* of Ziro or an *Adi* of East Siang. The Myths of *Abotani* occupies a significant place in their oral tradition. Basically the myths of *Abutani* represent the theme of *Abotani* as a primeval

⁴⁵ Blackburn Stuart, 2008, *Himalayan Tribal Tales*, Brill, London, p. 63.

man. Indeed, the theme of *Abotani* as primeval man assumes the primary precondition for the differentiation of man (tani) from other non-human entities. The myths explicitly provide a ‘point of commencement’ of the birth or of their perception on the origin of human being. Thus, the myths inextricably linking these communities to common antecedents or common cultural-linguistic region. Furthermore, the myths presuppose the principles to the development of unilineal descent group system claiming descended from a common ancestor amongst the *Tani* Group of communities. Most importantly, it is held the view that unilineal descent group develop under the condition of competition in a unilocal societies that lacked a centralized political system.⁴⁶ Now in the context of the entire *Tani* group it can be stated with confirmation that the perception of *Abo-Tani* as ancestor helped their cultural ties that provides social security in the form of non-conflicting sets and of allies in the absence of central political entities.

Besides, the theme of ‘differentiation or the division of unity into separate unit’ is repeatedly occurred in the tales i.e. the tales of Abutani and Abutaro, and Tani and Taro. In other words these stories show how the Mising draw the concepts of self and otherness. In these stories the social milieu or landscapes is clearly manifested. As the Mising are the descendants of Abutani or the father Tani, they called themselves as ‘Tani- meaning Man’. Most of the cases Abutani and Abutaro were defined as brothers. Here, the story of this ‘sly, double crossing brother’ runs as follows-

‘Abutani gave birth to Nibo and his brother Abutaro to Robo. Robo was jealous and thought ill of Nibo. So Robo was driven to the jungle by Nibo using his superior

⁴⁶ Carol R, Melvin Ember, Burton Pasternak, *On the Development of Unilineal Descent*, Journal of Anthropological Research Vol 30 Accesses date – 10-1-2014, p. 72

intelligence. Since then offspring of Robo-the spirits *Epom (Aiman-Ui)* loom around the hills and plains to avenge the offspring of Nibo.⁴⁷

In another story, as recorded by Taburam Taid in his book 'Mising Tales', explains 'Tani as the progenitor of the Misings and Taro that of non-Misings. The story runs as follow-

Tani and Taro were two brothers. Tani was the elder one and Taro was the younger brother. Tani was beat of bully and used to beat up his younger brother very often, so there was no love left between the two of them. One day, when Tani was sleeping in a boat, Taro covered the boat with wooden planks and floated it down the river. On waking up at some locations downstream, Tani tried to get out of the boat, but failed to do so. Finally, a woodpecker came to his rescue. Tani guessed it was all Taor's doing... beat up Taro very severely and reduced him to the state of pauper by denying him his share of the property the two brothers owned jointly. After separation, they went their way in opposite direction –Taro towards the west, where he was received by gods, and Tani towards the east. When Tani looked back at his brother, the gods in heaven transferred the ownership of his entire property to Taro, thus turning the latter into a prosperous man and the former into a needy one. Non-Mising a descendant of Taro are therefore, prosperous, but Misings being descendants of Tani, are a needy people'.⁴⁸

Hence, the relational nature of this worldview in these stories can be inferred by the (fictive) kinship between the people and other entities. Indeed, this socio-mythical pattern in worldview is quite common amongst the Himalayan communities, as observed by David Torri, who observes "an overextension of the kinship boundaries which often incorporates elements of the landscape and other non-human persons."⁴⁹ Thus, it appears that the origin of Mising clans lies fundamentally in their perceptions of creation stories rather than any other myths. Hence, all the clans of this community trace their descent from a common ancestor to develop a patrilineal descent group system. Moreover, the very

⁴⁷ Pegu Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 144.

⁴⁸ Taid, Taburam, 2013, op cit., pp. 132- 133.

⁴⁹ Torri, Davide, 2020, op cit., p. 56.

meaning of clan, which the Mising used as *Opin*, is the people who are born from a common root or origin⁵⁰ is close to the idea of genealogy or consanguinity. Hence, the Mising creation myth appears to relate the mythical system in accordance with the kinship system.

Second, the Mising narrative of *Donyi* and *Polo* expresses the identity and status aspirations of the people as an ethnic group. The myth associated with *Donyi-Polo* is consistently referred to, to enhance the sense of cultural identity. Nomal Pegu seems to be right when he says that to this day, as the custodian of law and truth, the blessing of '*Doyni* and *Polo* is invoked at the beginning of all auspicious functions at different levels, such as individual, family, and community. It is the most coveted tradition while the oath is taken, pointing his fingers to the Sun and Moon. Therefore, the Mising believed that nothing could be hidden from the luminous eyes of Doyni and Polo, and that anyone who tried would surely perish.⁵¹ The Mising recite the following while taking oath: *Donyi aneno, Polo abuno, ngo lumurko ludug milo, siloke sadakne donyino, siyum sadakne Polono, Takam kebang Kabeg Tatbeg dope sange angge daklangka*' (which is translated as - o mother sun, father moon spare me not if I am telling a lie)⁵²

The Donyi-Polo cult indeed expresses the Mising morality through the exemplars of prescription and proscription and correct behaviour. In a society like that of the Mising, which can be characterised as loosely organised with cognatic kinship and the absence of formal rather central political institutions within a historical period where the 'egalitarian ethos truly is lived experienced', and thus the Doyni-Polo cult stands for a relationship of obligation and responsibility, In short, the Mising origin myth speaks of their concept of a supreme being as the creator of the universe, whereas some other entities such as *Sedi-*

⁵⁰ Padun, Nahendra, 1970, *Mising Opinor Utpoti aru Bisar* in 'Mising Sanskritir Alekhya', (ed.) Bhrigumuni Kagyung, Guwahati-16, p. 283.

⁵¹ Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p.143.

⁵² Ibid., p.144.

Melo, Donyi-Polo occupy a paramount position in their world view. These non-human entities are revered as benevolent and hence need no appeasement except invocation on every auspicious occasion. This thus speaks of their interaction with visible objects, and hence their sociality is directly engaged in a relationship which protects the cultural continuity and stabilises the community by providing both a religious and social code of conduct.

The *Ui* or The ‘Fear-inspiring’ entities

Another significant and predominate aspect of Mising's interaction with non-human entities or "other supernatural beings" is their belief in numerous *Uyu* or *Ui*. The belief in numerous *ui* being referred to as both benevolent and malevolent indeed appears to speak of a landscape inhabited by ‘fear-inspiring’ entities or fearsome entities. David Tori asserts that:

‘Environment as the field of actions of multiple agencies, where negotiating, cooperation and conflict take place. He adds, ‘despite being variously described non-human entities have a close relation with particular localities or tend to manifest themselves in connection with specific features of the landscape, but they also entertain a peculiar relation with it, which could equate to presiding.’⁵³

The Mising have a strong belief that "all activities in human life, good or bad, are controlled by the *Ui*. It is believed that the forest, river, water, streams, ponds, and other physical surroundings of human habitations are infested by these *Ui*'s. Various species of *Uis* which are bound to a specific place are believed to be the source of all kinds of human miseries. Malevolent spirits are believed to unleash illness, misfortune, ‘natural catastrophes’, infertility, etc. Among the most commonly encountered *Ui*, which are known by their inhabitation, such as *Yumrang* (Forest) *Ui*, i.e., those that live in the forest, *Taleng Ui*, that live above the earth, *Asi-Ui*, that live in Water etc. Each *Ui* manifests themselves to cause a specific misery, and the Mising used the Mibu to detect the evil

⁵³ Torri, David, 2020, op cit., p. 57.

presence of *Uis* in their daily lives. Thus, the Mising perform a system of ritual ceremonies by offering sacrifices to appease these *Uis* ‘who are always ready to blight the crops and bring illness to a man and his family.’ As such, the Mising performed the occasional offering known as *Taleng Ui* and *Rokpu-done* etc. to protect the farm and for the welfare of the family. Hence, it can be said that traditional Mising religious practice is not based on a moral code but rather on a system of ritual ceremonies to appease the *Ui* in which both humans and non-humans appear to be entangled in everyday activities. Thus, the Mising belief system manifested in their ritual ideology and practices which were rooted in their interaction with the environment and with their cosmos, or worldview.

Besides the Mising beliefs there are the malevolent and benevolent entities or deities. According to this beliefs *Doyni-Po:lo:*, *Se:di Me:lo Karsing-Kartang* are regarded to be benevolent deities and hence no need to appease directly. While malevolent deities such as *Mugling-Mirem*, *Rokpu-done*, *Urom possum*, *Sine-Mo:bo* etc. are required to worship or appease directly.⁵⁴ On the other hand, there many stories which narrates the theme of these differentiation of people (*tani*) from other malevolent entities. As such the tales of *Nibo* and *Robo* among the Adi-Mising deserves a special mention here.

The *Mibu* or the Shamans: The shamanic explanation of constitutive relation between human and non-human entities

The prevalence of predominant beliefs in numerous invisible *Ui*, the concept of both tangible and intangible (as in the case of *Donyi-Polo* and *Kayum*) conditions of landscape phenomena, the role of *Mibu* or the shamans or the priest in their world views and beliefs, are often attempted to be described within the parameters of animism or sometimes shamanism. On the other hand, David Toriss furnishes some valuable conceptual tools and a wealth of evidence to demonstrate how ‘over a wide area extending

⁵⁴ Pegu Indreswar, 2019, *The Mishings of North East India*, Dibrugarh, p.187.

from the western Himalayan ranges to the eastern parts, possession seems to constitute a privileged way for local communities to access the sphere of the non-human.⁵⁵ During the nineteenth century, writing of attitude to these ‘possession-related practices’ in the region, Laurance A. Waddle observed that:⁵⁶

‘In every nook, path, big tree, rock, spring, waterfall, and lake, there lurks a devil; hence there are few persons who will venture out alone after dark. The sky, the ground, the house, the field, the country, has each their special demons, and sickness is always due to the malign demoniacal influence.’

Thus Davide Torii has argued that ‘almost every cultural group in the whole Himalayan region has a niche carved out for possession-related practices... the main interlocutors of the people but the ambiguous hosts of the local deities, the lords of the soil, the owners of the waters, and the restless spirits of the dead. Through possession and medium ship, their presence was made visible in daily life; through oracles, they were making their voice heard; through exorcists and shamans, they were dealt with, appeased or banished.’⁵⁷

It is noteworthy that the existence or perception of the practices of Shamanism across the globe varies in different cultural, regional, and historical contexts. In short, shamanism is defined as "a religious belief system in which the shaman is the specialist in knowledge. The shaman knows the spirit world and human soul through "ecstasy," the power of an altered state of consciousness, or trance, which is used to make a connection

⁵⁵ Torri, David, 2020, op cit., p. 107.

⁵⁶ Waddle L.A, 1894, *Lamaism in Sikkim*, in *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, edited by Sir Herbert Hope Risely, 241-392. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

⁵⁷ Torii, Davide, 2020, op cit., p. 108.

to the world of the spirits in order to bring about benefits for the community.”⁵⁸ However, controversies and debates are centred on the use of the terms ‘shamans’ and ‘Shamanism’ among the scholars of different discipline. Citing L. K. Pharo’s (2011) recent comprehensive definition that “ the shamans is a religious specialist who, in the context of a ritual, has the ability to travel to a non-human(supernatural) world, to have direct communication with supernatural beings(deities, spirit etc.) there, and then to return to the human world... ‘shamanism’ presupposes that the ‘soul’ or some kind of substance residing in the body of a human being can leave the body in order to travel to these supernatural regions during various types unconsciousness (dream, sleep, or illness), Davide Torii come to the understanding of three key-notions: 1.) The presence of a ritual specialist able to mediate, or to establish contact, with non-human entities. 2.) The belief in a life force (soul, vital breath, energies etc.) that can be detached from the body; 3.) The existence of visible and invisible, and yet entangled, geographies mutually accessible to specific actors.’⁵⁹

The practice of Shamanism among the Mising can be understood by looking into their beliefs or concept of *Yalo*. Authors such as Tabu Ram Taid and Durgeswar Doley have maintained that the concept of *Yalo*, which also means shadow in Mising is comparable with that of a soul. Mising's concept of ***Yalo***, on the other hand, appears to speak of the various ontological understandings rather than the philosophical import of the soul or theological speculation. However, according to N.C. Pegu, "the concept of the Mishings ‘*aji-yalo*’ is indestructible and immortal, comparable to the ‘*Atma*’ of Vedandic philosophy. And *Yalo* is capable of roaming about, temporarily leaving the body under the care of *Eji* during serious illness, deep sleep or when terribly freighted. It is under such

⁵⁸M. Namba Walter, & E.J.N Fridman, 2004, *Shamanism: an encyclopaedia of world beliefs, practices and culture*, ABC CLIO, OXFORD, p. xi.

⁵⁹ Torii, Davide, 2020, op cit., p. 108.

situation a Mising *erang* or individual family perform the rite of calling a soul or *yalo* back which is generally called *yalo gognum* (denoting 'to call back the *yalo*'). Under the influence of vaishnavite Hinduism, Mising villages in a region like Majuli, this popular rite of calling the soul back is also called as *guru bamud*, and *yalo la:sang*. This beliefs among the Mising is indeed directly related to day-to-day realities.

Further it is believed that when a person dies, his *Yalo* goes to a place called *Sine-Mobo* (land of the dead), situated beyond a lake known as "*Koje-Patang*" (Lake). It is also believed that when a person is seriously ill and is sinking gradually, the *Yalo* begins to move away from that person.⁶⁰ At such a point, a Mising family arranges a ritual requesting the *Mibu* to intervene and perform a rite known as *Mibu-Dagnam* or 'the performance of the *Mibu*'. Hence, it appears that the *Mibu-dagnam* or the performance of the *Mibu* is often conducted for healing purposes and for different parameters of illness, mishaps, natural catastrophes, fertility, etc., which are considered as 'pre-natural causes'.

In the Mising Folklore, there are many shamanic myths or narratives that tell us about the possibility of negotiating between humans and non-humans through the medium of a shaman. It tells us about the notions of illness and healing practices, and the link with music as a pre-condition to the ritual.' Historically, the *Mibu* or the shaman can be termed as a single social entity with vested authoritative power that the Mising inherited as a part of their socio-religious life. The *Mibu* was the man by whom all the Mising wanted to escape from miseries like illness, to call back the soul or *yalo*, and to trace the lost or forgotten genealogy of a family (*Erang*).⁶¹ The *Mibu* performs ritual in an endeavour to reunite the departed soul from the body by 'appeasing the spirits', responsible for the cause through his rhapsodic chants (*aabnag*) and pleading with the spirits.

⁶⁰ Nomal Pegu, 2011, op cit., p. 113.

⁶¹ Doley, Pankaj, 2014, *The Clan System of the Mising of Assam*, unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation Submitted in the department of History, Gauhati University, p.45.

Indeed, the Mibu used to play an important role in early Mising beliefs and practices. Hence, the institution of *Mibu* amongst the Mising is interwoven into their cultural life. There are the tales, typical music and dance associated with the shamanic ritual among the Mising known as *Mibu Dagnam*. The tale of the Mili clan, who according to their oral tradition used to live along with the Pegu, narrates how a child belonging to the Mili clan disappeared from the village and became the *Mibu*. The tale narrates as follows:⁶²

‘The Epoms (arboreal spirits) living in the tallest and largest bo tree, not far away from the village, took him away, gave him a bath, and taught him how to chant a-bang (rhapsodic chants and hymns). He was looked after with warm hospitality and made to feel happy all the time. He could see from that place all that was happening in the village and could also hear what the people there were saying. When he saw his friends grieving for him, he too was sad and felt like crying. He now knew the cause of the disease afflicting the people and also their remedies. Because of the special powers he had acquired during his absence, the people say that Mibus came into being amongst the Misings since that time and that even now Epoms, living in forests near Mising Villages, take away boys and mould them into Mibus’

One Mibu told me a very similar story when I asked about his initiation:⁶³

I became a Mibu in my early years when I was 4 years old. One day, I was suddenly struck by something and it took me into the forest. From that moment on, I started to feel different from others. I did not want to be in touch with my friends. They (Epom) often took me at midnight into the forest to teach me the a-bang and other ritual activities. They took me into a different world of beautiful places, and there they gave me the Yoksas (sword), and trained me to identify the medicinal herbs. These good-looking entities often abducted me at midnight from my house when everybody falls asleep. At this point in time, I frequently had visionary problems and frequent loss of consciousness. Initially, my parents did not support the initiation of becoming a Mibu since a personal hygiene routine and obligations need to be strictly

⁶² This version of the origin of Mibu amongst the Mising has been collected and compiled by Taburam Taid in his ‘Mising Folk Tales’, 2013. p. 15.

⁶³ Personal interview with one *Mibu* Mr. Shyamsing Pegu, on 11/10/2019, at Bhitor Bokulguri, Dhakuakhana.

followed and maintained and there are taboos in taking some vegetables such as pumpkins, wild fruits, etc. as food. It was only after the death of my mother, I was able to perform every ritual or Mibu Dagnaam.

Likewise other tales narrates the initiation of a Mibu 'during eight to ten years of age, *Epom*, brings the child to the wood. The child meets there the goddess *Sirki:Na:ne* and the gods coming down from *Regi-Regam* possess him. He is made a real Mibu by washing him with the *Pomsiri*- water of the heavenly river... *Sirki Na:ne* and *Sirdam Babu* are the chief couple of the *Epoms*. They keep a frequent communication with the Mibu.'⁶⁴

Thus above noted accounts highlight the theme of 'shamanic calling'. The main elements seem to be the 'super-natural' training through *Epom*, where they transmit the *A-bang* song and other spiritual knowledge to the selected person. The Mising perceived the *Epoms* as Aboreal spirits whose homes being the banayans and *peepul* trees.⁶⁵ While it is also believed that their houses on the big tree are similar with that of Mising house with raised platform but being hanged downward. It is believed that the *Epom* speak very quickly; people often heard the sound of grinding paddy in wooden mortar (*Ki:par*) and shout loudly beating their drums in the midnight and sometimes before dawn.⁶⁶

A further observation would make it clearer to understand the constituents/elements associated with the practices of shamanism among the Mising:-

First, before the *Mibu-Dagnam*, or the ritual, the Mibu 'undergoes a ritual vesturing': he wears a typical Mibu *Galuk* or a shamanic costume, in order to perform the ritual and in order to engage with the non-human entities. The necklace of beads together with a sword covering his chest is the parts of the costume. A set of eggs, small mounds of rice, spirited liquor (Rice Bear or *Poro Apong*), etc., are arranged for ritual setting. Indeed, the ritual starts with a prayer and *a:bang* is recited at the beginning of the ritual. It is noteworthy that different Mibus recite different *a:bangs* since they have separate mother-

⁶⁴ Pegu Indreswar, 2019, op cit., p.188.

⁶⁵ Taid, Taburam, 2013, op cit., p. 136.

⁶⁶ Pegu Indreswar, 2019, op cit., p.188

deities. However, in most cases, a common prayer is recited while commencing the Mibu-dagnam as the following:

Dogne Leginge rumna,

Dogne lebinge rumna,

Ligu ane rumne nama

Pasum Togune Gumin nomna.

(Hail mother who has given me these limbs and this body. Hail our departed souls')⁶⁷

The *Mibu* recites a *:bang* accompanied by the typical *Mibu* dance while holding the *Yoksa* (a straight sword) in order to communicate with supernatural spirits. It is noteworthy that the ritual starts from the evening till dawn, whereas the dance is performed as a part of the ritual. This dance is performed by a group of both young boys and girls (*Yamgur*) led by the *Mibu* around *Me:ram* or the fireplace, whereas the villagers witness the dance from one corner of the house. The dance indeed gives aesthetic delight and has ritual significance. It is believed that the young boys and girls take part in the dance to help the *Mibu* communicate or to find the cause of distress. The dance and the songs associated with the *Mibu Dagnam* are symbolised as an expression of a collective mind. Hence, the entire ritual act has a very precise set of meanings attached to it.

Besides, these *Mibu-dagnam* or shamanistic rituals are often performed as it is already mentioned for illness or when a person is seriously ill and his *yalo*, or soul, is sinking gradually. The root cause of disturbances is identified during the divination ritual. When the person's *yalo* hasn't crossed the *Koje-patang* or the pond of *koje* -the old lady' a

⁶⁷ Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 112.

nightlong ritual was usually advised by the Mibu. As such, in order to deal with these, the Mibu perform the ritual. The entire process is physically linked where the Mibu make direct contact with the non-human entities in an attempt to retrieve the sinking yalo and from other forces. This moment is motionless and soundless. The indigenous words that describe this process of direct contact with non-humans are called ‘*pa:aro-aa:nam*.’⁶⁸ In this phase, the *Mibu* ‘approaches the old lady ‘*koje –mine*’ asking the whereabouts of the *yalo*... The *Mibu*, using all his spiritual power and eloquence at his command, tries to appease her by reciting a-bangs in her praise. Thus pleased, the lady would eventually disclose the whereabouts of the *yalo*... When the *Mibu* succeeds in finding the *yalo*, he returns immediately to the ‘*dong-among* (land of consciousness) while describing the beauties of nature seen along the way. Thus, after awakening from *Ui-among*, or the land of the *Ui*, or the land of unconsciousness, the Mibu sings with his *Yamgur* or companion:-

Pimoke Pinkola, Relle, Relle

Nibire Birkolo, Relle, Relle.(let us go back to the place where the flowering reeds are welcoming us waving along the breeze)⁶⁹

Ana Randa, Kokoya,

Randa Daluwe, kokoya. (Let us go back to the place where woodpeckers are making the familiar sounds in the woods reminding you of your earlier experiences or consciousness.)⁷⁰

It was Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf who first recorded the practice of this ritual journey where he described it as ‘ the most characteristic features of the eschatological beliefs of most of these tribes(in central Arunachal Pradesh) is a very detailed picture of the land of the Dead, including the torturous path by which it is

⁶⁸ Personal Interview with Mrs. Mira Doley, a participant in *Mibu- Dagnaam* on 10/10/2020

⁶⁹ Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p.114.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.114

reached.⁷¹ Hence, these phenomenon can also be observed among the Tanis which in turn gives us an insight into the understanding of the whole questions of shamanistic practices. In this respect, by citing Nicholas Allen and Martim's contentions of this imagined/ritual journey as fundamental to the religion of Tibeto-Burman speakers and as special phenomenon of the indigenous religion of the Himalayas, Stuart Blackburn further explain - 'these ritual journey assume various forms- the flight of an ill person's soul, the retrieval of the fugitive soul by a ritual specialist, the ascent or decent of the specialists soul to contact spirits in order to heal diseases, predicts events and so forth.'⁷²

Thus, the shamanistic practice of the Mising shows that the Mising notions of self are engaged in its existential reality through the perception of a relation of dependence and mutuality with non-human entities, and hence the perception finds its expression in the continued performance of rituals such as *Mibu-dagnaam*, the rite of calling a soul back *or Yalo Gognam/Yalo La:sang, Guru Bamud etc.* and others. Therefore, every individual in Mising society is not bound by their mere bodies. Rather, it can be asserted that their perception of *Yalo, Ui*, and other embodied or constituent knowledge of the environment is distributed throughout the larger societal domain, and hence it can be said that individuals in their society are a part of this larger or local system of relations which defines the parameters of illness, mishaps, etc. To quote Davide Tori, 'this relation essentially revolves around a worldview in which human being and the worlds surrounding them, with all its inhabitants, are closely linked and related to each other. Human beings appear to be part of a sacred geography, which incorporates visible and invisible landscapes, host of other non-human entities populating a multi-dimensional world.'⁷³

⁷¹ As cited by Stuart Blackburn in his book *Himalayan Tribal Tales* (2008) see details in p. 219.

⁷² Blackburn Stuart, 2008, op cit., p. 219.

⁷³ Torii, Davide, 2020, op cit., p. 53.

Furthermore it is interesting to note that the Dony-Polo cult, the Myth of Abutani and the shamanistic practices appear to be common among the Tani group of communities of central Arunachal Pradesh. Stuart Blackburn who extensively work on the Apatani oral traditions argued ‘...these parallels for the stories of Sun-Moon, lost writing, and journey of the soul show that Apatani oral tradition is linked traditions in three regions: central Arunachal Pradesh; the India-Burma Border, upland southeast Asia/Southwest china. Equally...these stories appear to be only in these three regions- with no close parallels in Assam or Tibet-and are largely among the Tibeto-Burman speakers.’⁷⁴

Cultural life, Modes of Production and Ecology

The tradition of *Ali:Aye:Ligang*, *Po: rag*, and the performance of rites such as *Dobur* fall into the category of socio-religious festivals. These festivals and ceremonies can be termed calendar customs. The celebration of *Ali-aye-Ligang* appears to have played the role of a symbol of Mising ethnic identity and in the realisation of collective identity. The Mising also celebrate the three traditional Assamese festivals: *Bohag Bihu*, the spring festival, observed in mid-April, the *Magh Bihu*, observed in mid-January; and the *Kati Bihu*, observed in October at a time when the paddy crops are their formative stage. In his article on the Assamese *Bihu* festival, Maan Baurua explores the ecological basis of Bihu. He makes it apparent in his specific paper to show how the celebration of *Bihu* is embedded in a regional ecological setting’. Intriguingly, Barua does offer an insight into how ‘the agricultural landscape becomes a space that draws in religious activity and links religious practice to ecological concerns’.⁷⁵ Similarly, the Mising celebration of *Ali-aye-ligang* too speaks of specific ecological settings in a historical perspective.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

⁷⁵ Barua, Maan, 2009, *The Ecological Basis of the Bihu Festival of Assam*, Folklore, vol.120, No.2, Taylor and Francis, Ltd. pp. 213-223. Accessed date: 27/11/2018.

The following narrative, as recorded by Taburam Taid, explains the story behind the celebration of *Ali-aye-Ligang* and also the mode of worship to be performed in this context.

"... The first man on earth was named Abutani. He descended from heaven to earth by climbing down the gold and silver ladder. To beget the next generation of men after him, he started a family by marrying Karmi, the daughter of Do-nyi and Polo... As advised by Donyi-Polo, Abutani and Karmi obtained paddy seeds from Mother Remi. They also obtained hoes and other iron implements from the god of iron, Ni-nur. From Kari-tori(the god of warfare), they learnt the use of bows and arrows... After gaining the knowledge required for living as a family, Abotani and Karmi cleared a plot of jungle by slashing and burning the wild vegetation growing there and sowed the paddy seeds. The paddy crop grew and matured in due course, but it was eaten up by animals and birds, nothing being left for harvesting. Abutani returned home dejected after what he saw. He narrated the sad story of the paddy crop in detail to Do-nyi-Polo, who told him all about the course of action he should adopt for the protection of his crops. The next year, Abutani cleared a new plot of land for his paddy crop and tilled the soil. For the protection of the crop from animals and birds, he made a small enclosure in the field to begin ceremonially the sowing of seeds and then performed the ceremony in the following manner: He brought four tall grasses of the reed variety called pi-ro and planted one of them on the northern side of the enclosure, one on the south, one on the east and the fourth one on the west. He then split the leaves of the grass into several parts and joined them above, thus covering the enclosure with a net. Then, he sowed the seeds in the enclosed portion of land and went around the enclosure five times, clapping all the time. After that, he went home and performed the rite of prayer to the creator, the Sun, and the Moon. After completing the ceremony of commencement of the sowing of seeds in this manner, *Abutani* later gathered his people and for the first time, celebrated the occasion by singing and dancing together and holding feasts. This is how the *Ali-aye-ligang* festival originated amongst the Misings."⁷⁶

In fact, the tales show that *Ali-Aye-Lignag* is purely an agrarian festival of the Mising. The terms *Ali* refer to 'underground roots'; *a-ye* refers to fruits (seeds) and *Ligang* refers to the "commencement of sowing (seeds) planting (roots). By looking into the

⁷⁶ Taid, Taburam, 2013, op cit., pp. 18-19.

structure of the festivals and the dance and songs associated with them, it appears to be linked with ritual order. It is celebrated to mark the commencement of the sowing of the seeds in spring as they chant as follows:

Silo akosinna,

Ato gumin to gunggumin,

Sedi-melo, karsing-kartag

Donyi polo, rujimerang

Tatdagkadaglangka;

Silo ngoluali-aye-liga-duneke,

Silo Akosinna, Kojeyangogosamoteka

A: maambinem Kankan moteika” etc

Free translation : Oh, forefathers, *Sedi melo*, *Kasing-kartak*, *Donyi-Polo*, ants and alike, all of you bear witness; today we are sowing seed into the womb of the mother earth; let mother earth be fertile, capable of bearing an abundant crop. Let there be a good harvest. "

After this chanting, a dance known as *Pakso-monam* or *Gumrag-Soman* is followed to appease the goddess of fertility known as *Koje-yango* whereas there is the *Ligang Ni: tom* (song that is sung in *Ali-aye-ligang*), which indeed speaks of the collective emotion to ensure the prosperity of the community. Mention may be made that till recently, people observed the ‘Genna’⁷⁷ or *Yotnam* in Mising, usually for 3 to 5 days after

⁷⁷ Genna is a socio-religious complex which is practiced throughout the south-eastern Asia in varying form and under diverse names. The word ‘genna’ is coined by western writers to signify these practices where certain taboos are observed.

the celebration of the festivals, since it is believed that *Koje-yango* had ordered to observe a kind of obligatory holiday and other taboos for the whole community.⁷⁸ According to Nomal Pegu, "No field work is done during this period." The *Yotnam* period is broken off by a function called *Liga-Liglen (Yotlen Kumam)* and calls upon their fore-fathers, *sedi-melo, Donyi -polo* to know that the self-imposed restriction is being lifted. "⁷⁹

Hence, in the Mising belief system, these ritualised activities and the practices are manifested, which are rooted in their ecological setting and worldview, which form the undercurrents of their lifestyle pattern. Here we can link up the celebration of *Ali-aye-ligang* to that of the idea of fertility rites. The *Gumrag Somman*, or *Pakso–Moman*, and the songs and other ritualised activities symbolise the spirits of the collective efforts of the people to increase the fertility of the land. The practice of *genna* or *Yotnam* in Mising after the festival appears to be 'linked to agricultural prudence in a region where a certain amount of restraint from exploitative activity needs to be exercised.'

Similarly, the *Po-rag* festival is also communal in nature. Basically, this is a festival of prayers and a feast celebrated after a good harvest. Here again some basic constituents can be identified in the ritual which followed in *Po:rag* festival. *Murong* or the young dormitories is required to build for the occasion. It appears that the whole ritual activities are centred on the newly constructed *Murong*. According to Nomal Pegu,

'the *Murong* is built in a centrally placed open meadow with its axis lying parallel to the Subansiri or the Brahmaputra river...the thickly thatched roof is supported by 2 rows of wooden posts in both sides with one big central post called 'Mizing Kunta'(gaikunta). The wooden posts are decorated with wood carvings. A crude image of 'Row' fish with a trunk is invariably there. Some people think it to be the image of 'Biri-Bik', the twin goddess of wealth or fertility. However, sun, moon, stars and various other designs

⁷⁸ Regon, Durga, 1998, *Mibu ba Miri Aru Mibu A:bang* in J.J Kuli(ed.) 'The Mising: Their History and Culture, Guwahati, p. 259.

⁷⁹ Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 87.

like birds, circle, and square of assorted kinds are also added and painted yellow, green and white. Ladders provided in both ends of the platform.⁸⁰

During the festival, the *Mibu* again sings the *A: Bangs* throughout the night with a group of young boys and girls. A swine is sacrificed first by thrusting a split bamboo, cut into a sword, through an incision made in the upper part of the abdomen while calling upon their *Guminsoin, Donyi-Polo, Karsing-Kartak, Sine-mobo, and Kojeyang Banji Banmang* to protect their farms from pestilence, protect them from illness, and guide them throughout the year.

Another important ritual known as *Dobur* is organised both by individual families and collectively under different names, as recorded by N.Pegu such as '*Burte Dobur* (organised on the occasion of bloodshed of some grade pitying and moral turpitude of serious nature) and *Arig Dobur* or *Mopun Dobur* (toward off the attack of pest and pestilence from their field when the paddy begins flowering) is performed by individual families.⁸¹ Furthermore, the *Dobur* as a collective ritual is most visible in the performance of *Dolung Dabur* or *Dobur* at the village. Generally, *Dobur* at village level is organised for the well-being of the villagers, whereas some strict principles or *Genna* are carried out with much rigidity. Menstruation and childbirth are considered inauspicious; no member of the village can depart, nor can a stranger enter into it during the ritual. For this purpose, 'sprig of herbs' or generally *khagri* (reed) is posted in the main gateways of the village. The *Dolung dabur* is observed in order to get rid of pre-natural causes such as calamities, disease misfortune etc. of the village. As observe by Indreswar Pegu 'it is...to alleviate

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 148.

any sort of sinful act of bloodshed and to get rid of repetition of such bloodshed in the future.’⁸²

Further, an observation of the ritual gestures would help us to locate the dynamics of Dolung Dabur. The male members of the village beating the *Taleng Ukum* or the raised platform house demanding ‘*ajeng-arig*’ until the family members came out from their house to offer apong, fowl, vegetables, rice, etc. and the family requesting them to pray for their well-being. The *ajeng* such collected eventually led to the partaking of food among the male members of the villagers. In the proximity of the feast site ‘*two idols simulating ‘dragon swallowing an egg are prepared from a kind of fern Ruktek and Tabeng (wild grass with cutting edge) decorated with spilt bamboo and palced in the alter facing the rising sun.*’⁸³ A plethora of ritual is marked in the occasion where she-pig and, ‘fowls are sacrifice by hitting the idols and uttering some prayers like! Oh, divine self! Sedi:melo Donyi polo be pleased with these offerings and bless us with health and happiness.’⁸⁴ Hence it is evident that ritual dimension is a constant features of the daily life of the animist Mising. While the most distinguished components of this ritual is the presence of ‘two idols’ which is believed ‘to be represents ‘earth’ as a source of productivity while the egg represent ‘life’ itself with potential power of manifestation.’⁸⁵

Hence, it can be assume that the myths and the ritual order associated in the celebration of socio-religious festivals such as *Ali-aye-li:gang*, *Po:rag* and *Do:bur*, speaks

⁸² Pegu Indreswar, 2019, *The Mishings of North East India* Donyi Seng Publication, Dhemaji, p. 190.

⁸³ Ibid, p.148.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.149.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.149.

of a cosmology that is grounded on the agricultural mode of productions. It shows that the Mising perceive the natural landscape as animated and inhabited by non-human entities, and thus entangled in a relationship with the ancestors and other non-human entities for fertility of the soil, for the protection of the crops and to ensure a good harvest or fruitful production and thus the prosperity of the community. As such the local goddess, the goddess of the soil, known as *koje-yango* is directly related to the fertility of the plants. Likewise landscape-related deities which they invoke i.e. *Guminsoin*, *Donyi-Polo*, *Karsing-Kartak*, *Sine-mobo*, and *Kojeyang Banji Banmang*(for the protection farms from pestilence) thus seems to occupy a predominant place in their ritual occurrence. Hence they worshipped and appeased these ancestor spirits and entities for the fertility of the soil and thus its offerings are extended for the prosperity of the community, and for good health and wealth.

Thus it can be said that society and religious activities are two essential components in forming an intricate network to connect people with one another in the context of a specific cultural landscape. While in the belief system of the Mising, these ritualised activities and the practices are manifested and are rooted in their ecological setting and worldview, which form the ‘undercurrents of their lifestyle pattern.’ Thus social ritual or ritual activities shape a cultural practice, which creates a sense of collective group identity. To paraphrase David Torii, ‘ethnic identity largely depends from lay or religious, or both, ritual to establish common feelings and create a shared sense of

belonging, solidarity and participation.’⁸⁶ The day-today life of the Mising as seen in the current chapter involves several ritual activities. They celebrate these socio-religious festivals to regulate their social roles and behaviour. Most importantly, as in the case of the celebration of *Ali-aye-Ligang, Po:rag* it appears that these ritualised activities are the ways to express, to reinforce and sustained the Mising ethnicity. Hence the history of the Mising life is embedded in these rituals and traditions.

⁸⁶ Torii, David, 2020, op cit., p. 128.