

“The Legends of Pensam” as a Cultural Archive of Indigenous Adis of Arunachal Pradesh

Hari Narayan Deka

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Charaibahi College, Research Scholar, Centre for North-East Studies, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya (University)
Email: [dekahn2022\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:dekahn2022[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *This paper examines “The Legends of Pensam” (2006) as a cultural archive of Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on its preservation of oral traditions, indigenous cosmology, social customs, ecological ethics, and subaltern histories. Drawing upon Cultural Memory Studies and Subaltern theory, the paper argues that Mamang Dai transforms fiction into a repository of collective memory. Through its episodic structure and the philosophical concept of “Pensam,” the novel records a society negotiating continuity and change. It thus functions not only as a literary text but as an archival space safeguarding indigenous identity within Indian literature.*

Keywords: Cultural Archive, Oral Tradition, Subalternity, Indigenous Cosmology, Northeast India, Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

“The Legends of Pensam” (2006) is not merely a novel but an act of cultural preservation that records the collective memory, oral traditions, myths, and lived experiences of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. Emerging from a region historically marginalized in mainstream Indian literary discourse, the text foregrounds indigenous epistemologies and transforms fiction into a repository of cultural knowledge, granting permanence to voices traditionally sustained through oral storytelling.

The term “Pensam,” meaning “the in-between” in the Adi language, suggests a liminal space between myth and reality, past and present, and the human and supernatural. This liminality reflects the Adi worldview, where boundaries remain fluid and existence is shaped by both visible and invisible forces. The novel’s episodic and cyclical narrative structure mirrors oral storytelling patterns, resisting Western realist conventions and preserving indigenous modes of narration.

Using frameworks from Cultural Memory Studies (Assmann) and Subaltern Studies (Guha; Spivak), this paper argues that Dai’s novel functions as a literary archive - preserving endangered traditions, validating subaltern histories, and inscribing Arunachal Pradesh into Indian literary consciousness.

2. Theoretical Framework

Cultural Memory and Subalternity

Jan Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” emphasizes how societies preserve identity through narratives, rituals, and symbolic forms. In communities where written documentation is limited, oral narratives become central to collective remembrance. Dai’s novel embodies this principle by transforming spoken memory into literary text.

Similarly, Subaltern Studies critiques the exclusion of marginalized communities from dominant historiography (Guha). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” becomes particularly relevant in the

context of Northeast India, whose histories have often remained peripheral to national narratives. “The Legends of Pensam” responds by allowing indigenous voices to speak from within their own epistemological frameworks rather than through external mediation.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Preservation of Oral Tradition

One of the most significant archival functions of the novel lies in its engagement with oral storytelling. In Adi society, knowledge is transmitted through performance, communal narration, and ritual recitation. As the text reminds us, “We are a people of stories. Our lives are in the telling.” Myths of origin, migration legends, and moral tales form the backbone of social identity, for in these narratives “the dead live again,” ensuring continuity between past and present. Dai captures this dynamic oral culture within a written narrative, preserving stories that might otherwise fade amid modernization; indeed, the warning that “If we forget the stories, we forget ourselves” underscores the urgency of such preservation.

The presence of storytellers and rhapsodists further emphasizes the communal nature of memory. In the world of the novel, “Memory is the only thing that remains when everything else has changed,” suggesting that oral transmission safeguards identity amid historical transformation. History here is not linear or individualistic but cyclical and collective; myth and everyday life coexist without rigid separation. Even the landscape participates in remembrance, as the narrative evokes a world where “The land remembers. The river remembers.” By documenting these traditions, Dai transforms oral memory into a literary archive, safeguarding intangible heritage against cultural erosion.

Indigenous Cosmology and Ecological Consciousness

The novel archives indigenous cosmology by presenting nature as sacred and animated. As the narrative affirms, “Everything is alive,” dissolving the rigid separation between animate and inanimate existence. Mountains, rivers, forests, and animals are not passive landscapes but living presences;

indeed, “The land remembers. The river remembers,” suggesting that geography itself holds memory and spirit. The boundary between human and supernatural realms remains permeable, for “The spirits of our ancestors walk the hills,” affirming a worldview of deep interconnectedness between ancestry, ecology, and everyday life.

Rituals, reverence for ancestors, and belief in unseen forces sustain moral and communal order. Human beings do not claim mastery over nature; rather, the humble assertion that “We belong to the land” redefines identity as ecological belonging. Time, too, follows organic rhythms, as “Life moves in circles, like the seasons,” reflecting a cyclical cosmology aligned with natural order. This ecological ethic - rooted in harmony rather than exploitation - implicitly challenges modern utilitarian perspectives. By embedding spiritual consciousness within narrative form, the novel preserves and archives a distinctive indigenous philosophy of life grounded in reverence, reciprocity, and continuity.

Social Customs and Community Life

Dai reconstructs village life through depictions of marriage alliances, kinship systems, migration histories, and communal decision-making. In a society where “Marriage binds not just two people but two families,” clan solidarity extends beyond individual unions into collective responsibility. Custom governs behaviour and social order, affirmed in the recurring belief that “It is our custom. It has always been so.” Migration narratives recall ancestral resilience and shared endurance, while kinship structures define moral duties within a tightly knit world where “In our village nothing remains hidden for long.” Even moments of ritual and crisis reveal collective participation, as “The village gathered as one,” highlighting participatory community life.

The section *Daughters of the Village* foregrounds gendered experiences, portraying women as custodians of cultural continuity. Within this framework of shared identity - where “We are a people of stories. Our lives are in the telling” - women emerge as transmitters of memory, tradition, and emotional inheritance. Their resilience and emotional depth complicate simplistic representations of tribal society, revealing the intimate ethical bonds that sustain communal harmony. Through these portrayals, the novel archives not only structural practices but also the affective and moral foundations of indigenous community life.

Encounter with Modernity

The novel records Arunachal Pradesh at a transitional historical moment. The arrival of administrators, missionaries, and educational institutions signals entry into the bureaucratic structures of the Indian nation-state. This shift is subtly captured in the observation, “They teach us new words in school,” a line that symbolizes not merely literacy but the introduction of new epistemologies and systems of authority. The recognition that “The world is changing, and we are changing with it” reflects a collective awareness of historical transformation. Yet this change is double-edged: while modernity brings opportunity, it also generates unease, for “The old ways are fading.”

Characters such as Hoxo embody the tension of living in-between, suspended in a liminal space where “We stand

between two worlds.” The younger generation leaves ancestral landscapes - “The young leave for the towns” - seeking education and aspiration, even as memory anchors them to tradition. The narrative thus registers anxiety about cultural erosion alongside the inevitability of progress, captured in the quiet uncertainty that “No one knows what tomorrow will bring.” By documenting this encounter, Dai preserves not only inherited customs but also the lived experience of transition itself, archiving the emotional, cultural, and historical complexities of modernity.

Language and Narrative Form as Archive

The structure of the novel itself is archival. Episodic, cyclical, and non-linear, it consciously mirrors oral storytelling rhythms, often introduced through performative gestures such as “Listen, and I will tell you a story” or the conversational cadence of “This is how the story goes.” Time unfolds in layers rather than strict chronology; memory repeatedly intrudes upon the present, affirming that “Memory is the only thing that remains when everything else has changed.” Myth and lived experience flow into one another, sustaining a narrative world where remembrance is both personal and communal, for “We are a people of stories. Our lives are in the telling.”

Dai’s English prose retains indigenous cadence and imagery, reflecting oral tonalities even within written form. The suggestion that “There are some things that cannot be written” gestures toward the tension between script and speech, underscoring the novel’s effort to translate oral consciousness without flattening its nuance. By resisting dominant realist frameworks and linear historiography, she asserts a distinct Northeast aesthetic grounded in memory, performance, and cyclical temporality. The novel thus archives not only cultural content but also the very narrative technique through which indigenous knowledge survives.

Subaltern Representation

Historically excluded from mainstream Indian literary narratives, Northeast communities have often been rendered peripheral or exotic - “small people in a vast land,” whose voices rarely enter official discourse. The poignant admission that “Our history is not written in books” encapsulates this archival absence and historiographical erasure. Dai challenges such marginalization by centering indigenous perspectives and validating oral traditions as legitimate knowledge systems, even when “No one listens to our stories.” By foregrounding narrative voice, she transforms silence into articulation and invisibility into presence.

The novel resists reductive stereotypes through quiet yet firm assertions of autonomy - “We have our own ways.” Even the subtle image of “The government men came with their papers” dramatizes the encounter between bureaucratic authority and lived indigenous reality, exposing tensions between written state power and oral community memory. Writing thus becomes a political act: Dai inscribes Arunachal Pradesh into Indian literary history, expanding both its geographical imagination and epistemological boundaries. Through this act of narrative reclamation, subaltern experience is not merely represented but re-centred as intellectual, spiritual, and historical agency.

4. Conclusion

“The Legends of Pensam” functions as a cultural archive by preserving oral traditions, indigenous cosmology, social customs, ecological ethics, and historical transformation. Through myth and memory, Mamang Dai transforms literature into a space of preservation and resistance. The novel stands as a living repository of Arunachal’s collective identity - bridging past and present, tradition and change, visibility and marginality within the broader framework of Indian literature.

References

- [1] Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- [2] Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- [3] Guha, Ranajit. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.” *Subaltern Studies I*, Oxford UP, 1982.
- [4] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988.