

Myths and Legends from Netherworld in Mamang Dai's Novel *The Legends of Pensam*

Biju M.A.

Human appetite for narratives is universal and has never abated. Narratives are ubiquitous and pervasive in nature. They are as old as the human imagination. We find the presence of narrative in fiction, film, myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs as they are varied forms and modes of narratives through which human beings try to make sense of this world. In other words through them, the human mind engages in the creation of different possible worlds which seek the whence and whither of existence in different places and time. Though they differ from each other substantially in their content and the mode of presentation across different cultures, they represent the fundamental human quest, the quest for meaning, deliverance, perfection etc. Joseph Campbell in his *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* asserts the need for myths. He writes, "Man, apparently, cannot maintain himself in the universe without belief in some arrangement of the general inheritance of myth. In fact, the fullness of his life would even seem to stand in direct ratio to the depth and range not of his rational thought but of his local mythology" (4). Based on the claims of Roland Barthes, David Herman argues that "Stories are cognitive as well as textual in nature, structures of mind as well as constellations of verbal, cinematic, pictorial, or other signs produced and interpreted within particular communicative settings"(8). Myths and legends are essentially stories inherited and elaborated over centuries from generations to generations. They, being part of a particular community, are essential cognitive frames through which that community explains and understands many mysteries of life.

Arunachal Pradesh: The Land of Legends and Myths

The Legends of Pensam by Mamang Dai is essentially a recounting of the myths, legends, beliefs, customs and rituals of the *Adi* tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, the land of the dawn lit mountains, to which the author belongs. It is estimated that there are twenty six tribes with a large number of sub clans that live in Arunachal Pradesh. The Tibeto-Burman speaking hill-tribes with their distinct dialects live in harmony with each other in the state. In the 'hidden land', the people have been leading a life of endurance and perseverance even in the extreme wheater conditions. This coexistence of mutual bonding is deeply ingrained in their culture. Mamang Dai writes in her article *Oral Narratives and Myth* that "The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived off the forest without any threat to the ecosystem. The tenets of traditional practice are deep rooted in environment ethics, supporting a close and harmonious relationship

with nature” (Glimpses from the North- East 2). All these have a long history mired in the collective memory and recalling them becomes difficult. She also suggests how to approach tribal myths:

How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the ‘word’ as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community (Glimpses from the North-East 2).

Myth-making

This recounting in the fictional form is a kind of myth-making, indicating our primitive urge for narratives in the face of demythologising tendencies in the advent of rapid changes in our outlook and approach to life brought about by the fascinating developments in science and technology. Human science and technology are far advanced and our achievements in every sphere are great leaps in our capacities and skills. Amidst all these developments, all achievements and pleasures, human beings search for myths. It is often highlighted that ours is a posthuman world where human capacities and capabilities are enhanced with the technological innovations. In other words we have to define human beings as technical beings. But then monstrosities of the modern age along with the advantages often lead man into kind of vacuum, a kind of meaninglessness. This fundamentally makes him return to and revisit his roots, roots of orace, clan and tribe. In this regressive adventure, myths and legends become the threshold of wonderful wisdom and knowledge that lead humanity forward and through which the ordinary and banal activities become quite meaningful.

Mamang Dai’s Pensam of Stories

Set in a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh, *The Legends of Pensam* presents before us a narrator who makes a rigorous regressive journey into the myths, legends, beliefs, customs of her tribe, *Adi*, along with her friend Mona who is a foreigner and a proprietor of the magazine, ‘*The Diary of the World*’. They listen to oral renderings of all these myths and legends from the village elders in Duyang, Yelen, Sirum, Pigo, and Gurdum in the Siang Valley. The narrator even recollects some of them from her accreted memory. All these stories of *Adi* belong to *Pensam*. In the language of *Adis*, the word *Pensam* literally means ‘in-between’. Mamang Dai explains what *Pensam* stands for

in the novel. “It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song” (Vii). GSP Rao in his review of the novel writes that “In the narration, Pensam is literally the middle-ground between myth and reality governing the lives of *Adis*, and also the transitionary phase between the traditional and modern ways of their life”.

It’s quite intuitive for the members of the *Adis* to identify them as they are part of *Pensam*. The mode of rendering and the person who renders these myths and legends are significant for the *Adi*. Among the *Adis*, the custodian of the ‘word’ is the *miri* (priest). Mamang Dai writes their significance in her essay in the book *Understanding Tribal Religions*. She says: “And the role and importance of the *Miri* is inextricably linked with the myths and stories of the tribe as he chants and invokes and restores all the images from the beginning of time that offers a body of tradition that shapes our imagination and characterises our attitudes towards certain fact and phenomenon” (88). Thus we find the *miri*, the great shaman of *Adi*, the priest, exorcist and the preserver of the tribal myths and legends, who narrates the creation myth of *Adis* in the novel.

In the beginning, there was only *Keyum*. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. *Keyum* is the remote past, way beyond the reach our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous Zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being (56).

The creation myth of the *Adis* is similar to other cosmogonical myths of ex nihilo nature. Apart from that it has no allusion to *Brahma* or *Prajapati* who is associated with the origin of universe in Hindu mythology. In other words the creation myths of the *Adi* tribe do not have any relation to other Indian Vedic mythology. The same shaman in the novel says that all here in the world are with a purpose, to fulfil their destiny. He also says that “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” (57). Oshong Ering, an expert in

the tribal mythology of Arunachal Pradesh, explicates the concept of *Donyi-polo* in the book *Understanding Tribal Religions*. He says, “To them, *DONYI-POLO* is the Truth. Truth is purity free from all coercion. It is the light that enlighten human mind. It rules Supreme in guiding ideal life. It is undestructible and indivisible. It is absolute by itself. *DONYI- POLO*, therefore, stands as an ever-shining beauty that attracts the *Adis* throughout their life” (36)

The *Adis* have primitive beliefs, customs and rituals. Their belief in spirits, malevolent and benevolent and the rites and rituals to propitiate them are significant. The spirits may appear in different forms and their appearances evoke awe and fear among the members of the tribe and they believe something bad like murder, or death may occur if they are angered. Such is the story of *Birbik*, the water serpent. It was Lutor, Hoxo’s father who said that he had a strange apparition. He couldn’t ascertain whether it was a fish or snake. They understood that something unnatural was bound to happen and shortly Hoxo’s father was killed in a hunting accident. The narrator tells everyone knows the story of *Birbik*, the water serpent, as it is fixed in their collective memory. ‘It had happened on a night of heavy rain when a fisherman was alone with his nets by the river. He heard a rushing sound as the waters parted and then suddenly he looked up at the tree he was sheltering under, he saw a serpent coiled up in the branches looking down at him with ancient eyes. What shocked him most was the fact that the serpent had head with horns” (9-10). After being bed ridden for a few months, he died of the sickness. They were unsure of the different manifestation of the spirit as they couldn’t explain about the fish they found in the Lutor’s pocket while he was brought dead. The sudden death of Kalen in a hunting accident is also attributed to the spirits.

Making the spirit angry is inauspicious as they may bring misfortune to the community. The story of sad plight of bed ridden Kepi is also attributed to the malevolent spirits. It was attributed to the actions of Kepi’s father. He was unable to read the signs of the presence of a spirit in the form of a python from the strange behaviour of the elephant he hired to pull the logs. Frustrated after his continuous attempts to make the elephant work, he makes a search among the logs. He was brave enough to find out the coiled python among the logs and kill it. When his son became ill, he recalled his encounter with serpent in the hour his misfortune. They had to perform the serpent ritual, chanting and negotiating with the spirits, calling them to heal the sick child but the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall. “They are the most dangerous ones, the ones who go away and never return” (24)

Another instance of belief in the spirit world is found in the story of Pinyar, the widow. Though she was widowed when her husband abandoned her, she lived alone. Once while she was in the field, her house caught fire. It was *Adi*’s custom that when a

house catches fire its owner is banished to observe certain taboo. During that period no one can eat with her as they are afraid of provoking the tiger spirit, for it is the tiger spirit that causes fire. Leading such difficult life, she believes in all types spirit and it is she who tells “there is a bad spirit lurking in the *si-ye* that makes men go mad” (29). It is the same belief that makes her think that her son, Kamur is haunted by the spirits since he had killed his son and daughter in a sudden fit of unknown urge. She wanted to bring all powerful priests from across the river to drive away the spirits that affect her son. “They understood that it was a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits and men-infact, at one time men and spirits had been brothers. They knew that what was real could well be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment” (31) Though the people lead a life close to the nature, their belief in the spirits’ envy and jealousy makes them fearful of the nature. Even they are afraid of their annual journey to the snow-mountains to harvest a precious root, the deadly aconitum that is collected for the preparation of poison arrow. “There were rivers hungry for lives, they knew, and mountains waiting to tear the breath out of their lungs. The piercing wind whistled and jeered around them, trying to steal their senses. The cooked rice they carried turned to hard grain. ... They had to convince the jealous spirits circling them to permit them safe return” (59)

When affected by the bad spirits, it becomes mandatory for them to call the shaman to do necessary rituals to save the people from the spirits. Asserting the relevance of shamans in primitive society, Joseph Campbell says that “In primal societies, the Shaman provides a living conduit between the local and the transcendent. ... Of course what this individual has encountered by going deep into the unconscious is the unconscious of their whole society. These people are bound in a small horizon and share a limited system of psychological problems. And so the shaman becomes a teacher and protector of the mythic tradition but is isolated and feared; it’s very dangerous position to be in” (Pathways to Bliss Xviii). Shamans chant the song and perform the rites. It is the *miri*, the shaman who is the protector of the word and myths and rituals of the *Adis*. They preserve the legends and varied histories of the tribe. It is they who come to rescue the people from the reign of malevolent spirits. The *miri* can communicate with the spirits. The villagers invite the shamans and perform the prescribed rituals to ward off the impending danger. Every primitive myth is associated with rituals. This novel provides such instances where the shamans perform rituals. Serpent rituals, rituals before a journey, ritual when something unexpected and inexplicable happens, and the priests are called to perform the necessary ceremonies. The *Adis* belief in the *miri*, the priest is very deep. The elders in the novel suggest “*It is better to call the spirits. It is necessary to let the miri speak to them so that the territory of men is safe from their jealous rage*” (60) Joseph Campbell rightly says

that ‘Ritual is simply myth enacted: by participating in a rite, you are participating directly in the myth (Pathways to Bliss Xix).

Even after the changes the land witnessed with the arrival of migulans, missionaries, schools, and the successive governments after Indian Independence, people believe in the myths and legends that they have inherited from time immemorial. Roads and other transportation facilities improve their standards of living still people are strongly rooted to their traditional beliefs and rituals. Myths and legends recounted and performed through stories, songs, ritual and ceremonies function differently in *Adi* community.

According to Joseph Campbell there are different myths in every community. All myths are validated by decades, centuries of experience and so they provide a model for them to emulate. Myth provides a field where one can locate oneself. Myths direct us from the phenomenal world to the transcendent. According to him, there are four main functions Myths do in a community. “The first function of a living mythology is to reconcile consciousness to the preconditions of its own existences; that is to say, to the nature of life” (Pathways to Bliss 3). There are characters in the novel, who lament on their miserable life in the difficult terrain and extreme climatic conditions. Some of them often question but it is their sacred myths and legends that enable them to find out meaning of their existence. “The second function of mythology is to present an image of the cosmos, an image of the Universe round about, that will maintain and elicit this experience of awe, this function we may call a cosmological function of mythology” (Pathways to Bliss 7). *The Legends of Pensam* presents before us the *Adis*’ conception of the creation of this universe. Curiosity to know the making behind the world is universal and the *Adi*’s creation myth is equipped enough to answer the tribes doubts.

These myths and legends dictate the norms of normal behaviour in the tribe. It also gives guidelines to the members how they should conduct themselves in the society and their relation with other people. This is the third function that Joseph Campbell says. “The third function of a mythology then is to validate and maintain a certain sociological system: a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties and improprieties, on which your particular social unit depends for its existence” (Pathways to Bliss 8). “Finally, the fourth function of mythology is psychological. The myth must carry the individual through the stages of his life, from birth through maturity through senility to death” (Pathways to Bliss 9). We find in the novel different people resorting to the local mythology in different stages of their life. They try to propitiate spirits, conduct rituals and ceremonies in order to lead a happy life. For them these rituals are equal to religious customs. Mamang Dai asserts all these function myths do in the *Adi* tribe.

Life generated it (myths) in us, and the significance of songs and stories is that they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded on memory and the magic of words in the oral tradition. With time, the collection of myths developed into parables and a code of conduct that became the basis for daily customary practice as observed by the tribes. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another, and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group, a certain region and community, but most often the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life that they are not even perceived as stories anymore. (Glimpses from the North- East 5)

Human beings search for order and modern life. All the facilities and technological innovations often make man to search for a certain order, myths and beliefs are often kept away from the busy life. Fundamental science often tries to disprove the claims of myths. Still human beings search for spiritual, metaphysical reasons for their life that may often help them to face different life experiences. To hold on something strong is basic to human nature. They resort to different myths and legends. This is what Mamang Dai means when she writes “Perhaps the quest for faith is the destiny of man; and perhaps by the story teller’s art reviving the ancient myths and reawakening our ties with the spirits of the river and the invisible gods, faith, defined as the living reception of religious belief is the jewel that gives meaning to life” (*Understanding Tribal Religions* 94).

Conclusion

Mamang Dai’s recounting of her tribal narratives in the form of a novel is quite innovative. When the modern society searches for reasons behind every phenomenon, myths and legends call for faith in the readers. It’s the myths, legends, beliefs, and rituals of a community that remain in their collective unconsciousness and bind them together in their life. Writing of a novel is a kind of reviving the old stories and practices in the tribe. She gives her reasons for this in the novel for, “The truth, after all, exists in portions, and the rest is a matter of words changed by each person’s perception” (32). Moreover, she tells that “And we are here today, as we are, as members of a particular tribe with a particular set of beliefs be an act of Faith, because we have chosen to repose belief in the ‘word’ as composed in our myths and legends, from these all streams of thought run together to give us a guide to life’ (*Understanding Tribal Religions* 88). Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* writes that myth is kind of communication. “It is a type of speech. ...It is a mode of signification” (107). Through *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai brilliantly presents the myths and legends, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies of the *Adis* as their particular mode of signification.

Reference

- [1] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday Press, 1972.
- [2] Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. New York: Penguin Books, 1969.
- [3] ..., *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*. California: 2004.
- [4] Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006.
- [5] ..., "The Nature of faith and worship Among the Adis." *Understanding Tribal Religion*. Ed. Mibang, Tamo and Sarith K. Cahaudhury. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004. 87-94.
- [6] Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- [7] National Knowledge Commission. *Glimpses from the North-East*. New Delhi, 2009.
- [8] Oshong, Ering. "Philosophy of Donyi Polo." *Understanding Tribal Religion*. Ed. Mibang, Tamo and Sarith K. Cahaudhury. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004. 39-46.