

## Oral Literature: Etched in Print

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**[Abstract:** Literary works of Mamang Dai record in unmistakable words the oral tradition of ethnic communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Their myths and folklore are about the intrinsic tribal culture of their land. In Dai's lyrical renderings they attain new poignancy- written words attain the lyrical overtones of the spoken speech. This paper intends to study folktales retold by Dai with a focus on the transition from oral to written]

**Key Words:** Oral literature, folktales, Adis, Mishmis

‘The rhapsodist chants stories of ghosts and demons and human knowledge. Something is being transmitted. How can we be sure it is the same feeling between transmitter and recipient?’

Mamang Dai ( ‘Language’)

Derived from the Latin *littera* meaning ‘letter’ , the term literature conveys the concept of written words. Jack Goody has observed that the term ‘oral literature’ is problematic because it apparently merges two opposite meanings – the spoken and the written [1]. Sometimes defined as ‘verbal art’ or ‘expressive literature’ [2] oral literature articulates the intrinsic cultural heritage of people that remain unexplored in written literary canon. Covering wide areas - folktales, oral epics, myths, legends, proverbs and songs – oral literature remains a repository of cultural study. Transition of oral forms into written literature has been, therefore, a remarkable process mapping the two opposite realms.

Folktales of ethnic communities of Arunachal Pradesh previously known as NEFA are the stories for children that have passed from generation to generation through oral articulation. Mamang Dai who belongs to the community of Adis hails from Arunachal Pradesh and has received prestigious Padma Shri award in 2011 for her contributions in the field of literature and education. People of this region -which is an abode of twenty five tribal groups subdivided into several clans and subgroups- have their own distinctive tradition and culture. Tani group comprises of Adi, Galo, Nyishi, Apa-Tani, Tagin and Mishmi and they come from a common forefather called Abo Tani [ 3]. Since they do not have any written script their culture is preserved in oral tradition . In an essay Dai has recorded that ‘In a society where there were no written codes and edicts the stories provided illumination and perspective that became the basis of a code of values that translated into customary practice. This is the substance of faith, and the stories are linked to ritual and vice versa, and so this body of oral literature also constitutes the tenets of our religious beliefs. The stories explain observed

behaviour and natural phenomena and imbue them with sense and order, and remind the community that it is important to keep our obligations, the reasons for which are contained in the stories.’[3].

In Dai’s retelling of three folktales the magical world becomes vibrant attaining a new perspective. ‘Once upon a Moon time’, ‘Sky Queen’ and ‘Hambreelmai’s Maid’ narrate the myth of creation and interrelationship of nature and human beings. The stories not only recreate this realm of magic and rituals but also link the present with the past.

Mamang Dai’s book ‘The Sky Queen’[4] is about a myth much celebrated in Adi history. It is a retelling of the creation myth of the Adis about the origin of Kojum-Koja civilization. People went for hunting fish before the start of any festival. On the occasion of ‘Pi-me’ all the people of Kojam-Koja went for fishing and they saw a huge fish-like creature caught in one of the nets. The fish, Biri Angur Potung, was the son of Biri Borte who was the strong and mighty monarch of Sili-Sidong, the Water Kingdom. Biri Angur Potung was eaten up by the young Kojam Koja. The bat, Koru Ponsung Babu, was a witness to this killing and revealed the murder to the Queen of the water kingdom. Consequently Biri Borte’s armies unleashed their fury on the land of Kojum-Koja and it sank into the sea. But Nyanyi Myete, the lady of the Kojum family came from the sky to the human family of Doni-Dongor. She was the celestial aunt whose ga-le became the green trees, her green bordered skirt became the plants. The beautiful natural world was the manifestation of this graceful lady. It was she who preserved the memory of the land of Kojum-Koja buried in the great flood; it was because of her everyone remembered songs, dances and festivals of those people. In her book ‘Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land’ Dai also narrated the story and pointed out ‘Thus mythological belief is projected through natural surroundings through the interpretation of human imagination.’ Myth becomes a living reality when we come to know that Adis celebrate Nyanyi Myete in Unying Aran festival in Arunachal Pradesh.

‘Once Upon a Moontime’ [5] is a retelling of four stories- ‘How the world was made’, ‘The story of the river’, ‘Why the Dove Weeps’, ‘The sun and the moon’. The first two stories are about creation the other stories are about the sun. In his study of myths of north east frontier Verrier Elwin has observed that there are several stories about the creation of the world- ‘A Taraon Mishmi tale describes how there was a lot of mud below the waters and a god erected it in a pillar, up which a swarm of white ants climbed with their mouths filled with their earth. This idea of animals bringing earth from the bottom of the primal ocean to make the world is common in central India.’ [6]. The second story of Dai’s book ‘Once Upon a Moontime’ [5] is a reflection of this myth. ‘The story of the river’ tells us how the god Techimdum came up from the blue waters and little ants carried earth up above the water. They also brought seeds of all the flowers and trees from the underneath. The story tells us about the Land of the Sun or Ring Lembun, about the Lohit river – how it flowed down to the plains of Assam. In the first story, two brothers- ‘matchless and unique’- Lopong Rimbuche and his brother, Chom Dande threw the lotus of the sky and the water was covered with flowers. They also called the winds from four quarters and they blew dust of different colours. The brothers patted the dust and consequently hills and the valleys were formed. The next story ‘Why the Dove Weeps’ recounts the story of the sun and the dove explaining in a unique way why dove makes the sound- ‘ku ..kuku..ku.. ku’. When a son was born to Donyi, the sun, she asked the Dove to help her. Dove sang a lullaby and took the baby in an eppon. But when the

sun took the baby from it the eppon fell down to earth and the dove could not take it back to the sun; therefore she remained on earth and weeps for the baby till now. The eppon got transformed into a creeper called rippum which is still used by the Adis to carry a baby after it is born. The story thus reflects 'the observed behaviour' and 'natural phenomena' that Dai has pointed out. 'The sun and the moon' is about the creation of moon; in the beginning there were Epanja who was the father of the sun and the mother was Lanbbai. When the younger sun poured his heat upon the earth and burnt everything, Anya, the great god of Mishmis sent a messenger to meet the elder sun. The elder sun seized the younger brother and threw him into a pool of mud. The younger sun grew pale and only appears when the elder sun goes to rest. Thus the story explains the creation of the moon.

In her paper on Dai's folktales Sudipta Phukan has pointed out that Nature is the prime focus in folktales of Arunachal Pradesh and folktales collected by Dai are charged with 'spirit of the place' showing the close association of nature and human beings.[7] 'Hambreelmai's Loom' [8] is a retelling of Mishmi folktale that reflect how nature has been a source of art of weaving in this part of the country. Verrier Elwin has observed that in the central area of NEFA there are Mishmis of Lohit who are divided into three main groups- the Idus (Chulikattas), the Taraons (Digarus) and the Kamans (Mijus). The weaving of the Mishmis is finest and the Taraon and the Kaman women are distinguished by their attractive hand woven cloth [6]. The folktale retold by Mamang Dai recreates this weaving myth.

'Hambreelmai's Loom' is a Mishmi folktale which has been translated into Mishmi language and the book remains the first ever to be published in that language. In Mishmi language 'Hambreel' is a species of little fish with patterns, which still swim in the river there. Sheipung the porcupine was fast asleep by a river. He was on the banks of the big, beautiful Kamblang river that flowed through the Mishmi hills. He woke up with the sound of a loom and saw a girl who was weaving beautiful cloth. She was the first weaver and her name was Hambreelmai. Taught by Goddess Matai to weave she was copying the patterns of the sky, leaves of bamboo and fern, bright flowers into her cloth. She also copied the patterns of waves and ripples in the water into her cloth. The cloth was so beautiful that the green bamboo was bending over it to see the pattern. Even the birds and the fish appreciated the cloth. Sheipung wanted to possess the cloth but the maid was so busy she did not pay attention to his words. When Sheipung pushed the boulder that blocked the entrance to the cave it also pushed Hambreelmai and her loom into the river. When Sheipung was about to go back he saw beautiful, shining butterflies flying all around him, dancing above his head with zigzag patterns and bright colours of Hambreelmai's cloth on their wings. Her beautiful designs had turned into butterflies.

In her essay 'Folklore and Myth' Mamang Dai has recorded two elements regarding the oral literature in her region '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. This is why if you ask someone to tell you a story they would say there was nothing to tell. There are no reference books, few recorded volumes in print, and to find out anything you need patience and persistence.' [3] By retelling these folktales Dai has endeavoured to give a tangible identity to these stories. Goody has observed that the folktales like the story of Cinderella have the qualities to cross 'socio-political' and 'linguistic boundaries' [1]; Dai's retelling of the stories has made it possible for them to be circulated widely as they are imbued with the essence of fairytale.

To Dai stories become ‘the storehouse of many meanings’ and are perceived as ‘beliefs determining a way of life’. They have not come to the region suddenly but have ‘seeped in over the centuries like a gift of understanding generated by life itself’ [9]. Tillotma Misra has pointed out that ‘When Mamang Dai records the ancient legends of the Adis preserved in the collective memory of the people, she uses the English language with the lyrical softness of an Adi rhapsodist chanting his songs amidst the hidden mountains. Her rich and vibrant language may not be her mother tongue, but she made it her own in the most convincing manner.’ [10] With no reference books and few recorded history Dai’s retelling of folktales had preserved the memory of her land in a unique way.

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