



The Shamanic Tradition and Creation Myths in Mamang Dai's Illustrated Folklore

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Abstract

The indigenous people of Arunachal have an enormous task to maintain the core of their cosmology in the transition from a preliterate, oral culture to a modern, literate society. The memory is a single repository of history and identity in a society without a written script, in which all the ancestor did is eat the divine written word out of hunger, the "myth of the lost script" has been inscribed in the memories of the people. For the Adi, this memory has been traditionally maintained by the miri, who is the bearer of metaknowledge, who chants the Abang (tales of origin), which serves as the basis for cultural life. The colonial past, the status of statehood and the insistent globalization have, however, led to a crisis of memory, as the old rhapsodists perish, and the young are increasingly disaffiliated from their origins. In this crucial "Pensam", the "in between" state of cultural transition, Mamang Dai's illustrated folklore, *The Sky Queen* (2005) and *Once Upon a Moontime* (2005), becomes an important reclamation of literature and culture. In these pieces Dai documents the shaman's oral chants in a written text, using creation myths to reestablish the cosmological cornerstone of tribal identity. As she does this, she highlights the significance of nature not only as a physical setting but also as a spiritual teacher who teaches human morality in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: The colonial, indigenous, insistent globalization, rhapsodists perish, cosmological cornerstone

The cosmological perspective of indigenous identity of the Adis should be understood first by discussing their mythological origin of creation. These myths are not just children's tales, but the ontological basis for the tribe, forming an account of how the universe, the elements, the laws of virtue and tariff came into being. *Once Upon a Moontime* tells the basic stories to set the physical and moral landscape of the tribe.

The story "How the world was made" delves into the primordial state of the universe. The story sets the backdrop that "Before the earth was made, everything was water". In this aqueous vacuum, were "two brothers in the sky", who thought that there should be people on earth.



These two brothers, in order to make the land habitable, quoted the winds from the four quarters of the universe. The East wind blew dust, the South wind brought dust, the North wind brought dust and the West wind blew the dust around and together as they were blown until it had hardened into solid earth from the water that was in the beginning. The mountains, the river Lohit and the various terrains of Arunachal Pradesh emerged from this fusion of elements. This is a creation myth and it is at the heart of the tribe, establishing the position of the people in a particular evolutionary panorama created by the stars and the elements. It follows the broader Adi notion that the earth (Sedi) and the sky (Melo) were a couple that slept together, from which the landscape that includes mountains, hills, valleys and everything else on the earth was created.

In addition, Dai investigates the origins of celestial objects and the creation of natural justice in the story "The Sun and the Moon. It is a myth that says "At the start of time there was no moon, but there were two suns which provided light and warmth to the world. This duality of suns however upset the ecological balance of the earth. The younger sun, unrestrained, resolved to "pour" down "all" his "heat", giving rise to great suffering for all the living creatures on earth. The younger sun rebelled against this disruption of cosmic balance and the sky and elder sun took action to punish the younger sun. He was hurled into a "pool of mud" where he became "as white as a sheet and as cold as a rock". Even today, the traces of the mud are seen on the moon's surface on his face. Thus, the "younger sun-turned moon" does not dare to come out, if the elder sun rules the sky.

This myth is a very deep cosmological and ethical role. It emphasizes upon the concept of natural justice and moderation. The myth is a story of the younger sun's punishment for his destructive overindulgence, and thus of Nature as a stern moral judge. Like Wordsworth claimed that nature instructs more of evil than all the sages, Dai's folklore shows how nature is a spiritual teacher, setting limits on acceptable behavior and demonstrating the harsh consequences of destructive actions. In the tribal identity, this myth reinforces a worldview in which the balance in the cosmos is to be respected and any force, whether cosmic or human, that disrupts it will be met with cosmic punishment. The animistic religion of Donyipolo (Sun-Moon) is the same as this cosmology and the people revere them as the physical form of a supreme deity or spirit of the world, whose light shines equally on all and determines the fate of the people.

The Miri (Shaman) as the Custodian of Metaknowledge



Such intricate cosmologies are passed on in a preliterate society such as the Adis by the sole means of the shamanism. The miri or shaman is not just a religious person; he is a person who preserves the history of the tribe, the voice of collective memory and the keeper of metaknowledge. He illustrates the evolution of the environment in which the social, ideological and spiritual aspirations of the community are manifested.

Communal rituals and festivals, including the agricultural festival, Solung, vividly illustrate the role of miris. In the Ponung dance, the chants of the shaman lead young girls around the earth in a ritual dance that makes use of a craft of the Earth. The miri is the leader of the dancers who wear a woman's ga-le, a wrap-around skirt, and a long sword called a yoksa, with an intricate hairstyle, dumling, which is made from precious beads that make the rhythmic music of the dance when they are shaken. While dancing the miri enters a trance, an altered state of consciousness to communicate with the land and the spirit world. He hears a "language of evolution and transformation" based on dreams and visions, not on one's place of origin in the hierarchy.

In his chants, the miri tells the Abang (sacred literature of the Adis) and the stories of ancestors' birth, creation and migration. He sings of the creation of the world, beginning from the state of absolute lack, Keyum. Here, in this annihilated, shadowless space of distant past, light, darkness, color, form, movement, were absent, and, the first spark of thought began to glow in the soul of man. The shaman tells how this idea of imagination turned into a brilliant stream of consciousness of humanity that gave birth to all the stories of the world and all the animals and all the birds. These cosmological stories are recited, and serve as a living link between the local community and the transcendent universe, the miri. He is a teacher, a therapist and a protector of the mythic tradition for the tribe, answering the deepest questions of existence.

Over the years, however, the role of the miri has been gravely endangered by the swift march of modernity and by the changing mode of communication, from oral to written, and by the scientific rationalism. Mamang Dai writes poignantly about the old rhapsodists being "a dying breed, and when they are gone, who will remember?". These youth, more and more caught up in the modern technologies, laptops, mobile phones, and city life, are losing touch with the oral literature and the ancient history being passed down by the older people. Dai's literary project is a continuation of the shaman's practice in the context of this cultural erosion. Dai's illustrated books preserve the myths of Keyum, Sedi and Melo and transform the intangible oral chants into tangible textual memories in order to ensure that the image of the tribe lives on.



The Sky Queen is an allegory, the preservation and destruction of it.

Once Upon a Moontime investigates the materiality of the universe while the Sky Queen is an ecospiritual parable about the connections between civilization, nature, and the effects of ecological hubris. The story of The Sky Queen is about the mythological people of Kojum-Koja and the two principal cosmic powers, Biri Bote the mighty king of the Water Kingdom (who embodies destruction), and Nyanyi Myete the Sky Queen (who embodies preservation and grace).

The narrative begins at the very beginning of time in an age of infinite blue, when Kojum-Koja's abundant civilization arose. The people of Kojum-Koja were very content and enjoyed a variety of carnivals and festivals, they had close contact with the environment by hunting and fishing. But on the day of Pi-me, there was a tragedy. As usual, the people went out and fished, but they were able to catch a very big and very unusual fish-like animal. Little did they know that this was Biri Angur Potung, the most popular son of the queen of the Water Kingdom! The lack of restraint and spiritual foresight of the people of Kojum-Koja caused them to cook and consume Biri Angur Potung. As they were eating the flesh of the water prince, a very bad disease fell upon them all.

This kind of eating was not overlooked. All of this was observed by a bat named Koru Ponsung who was invited to the Pi-me festival. When the queen of the Water Kingdom began to cry for her lost son day and night, the bat gave the queen the news of the Kojum-Koja's sin. The water queen, upon learning of the death of her son, unleashed the full power of her kingdom - devastating. Water army terrorized the country of Kojum-Koja with torrential rain, rainstorm, heavy rainfall, violent squalls, gales and devastating floods. The civilization of Kojum-Koja was completely wiped out after days, as much rain fell it was merged under the sea water and it vanished from the earth.

This myth from the ecocritical perspective is a strong allegory of the relationship between Purusha (human consciousness/civilization) and Prakriti (Nature). If a man does not respect and preserve nature and take it for granted and uses its sacred things without control, then there is an apocalyptic reaction from Prakriti. It is not a random act of evil that the Kojum-Koja are destroyed, but rather an establishment of ecological boundaries, a clarion call to the world that mankind can survive only by maintaining a harmonious and non-exploitative relationship with Nature. The myth serves as a firm moral lesson that when the human will to dominate nature



becomes too strong, it will ultimately destroy itself, and that the possibility of civilization is called into question.

Nyanyi Myete: The Revival of the "Green Symphony"

After the demise of the Kojum-Koja, the myth brings in the symbol of hope and the ecological regeneration. Out of the tragic flood, one came out, a "lonely reed" or a "ray of hope"—Nyanyi Myete, the beautiful lady of the Kojum-Koja family who came out of the depths of the endless sky. She symbolizes the strength and resilience of nature, and the power of persistence in protecting it.

In a "beautiful silken white skirt with its emerald green border", Dai describes Nyanyi Myete, who is mesmerising, like a fairy tale. She took shelter in the midst of the Donyi-Dongor people (the ancestors of the human race). In exchange for their hospitality, Nyanyi Myete made their lives full of joy and happiness. She was their teacher and they learned to sing, dance and celebrate life from her, forming the cultural arts of the tribe. Much more importantly, Nyanyi Myete physically became part of the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh so that its fertility and beauty is maintained. Her emerald edged skirt became the rich vegetation of the land; her full range of colours brought life to the leaves, flowers, birds and butterflies that dance about in the air on many coloured wings. Her mying ga-le (skirt) turned into the green trees of the Doni-Dongors.

The weather and seasons are attributed to her emotional and physical states too. The rain and clouds are magically connected to the tears and sweat of this "celestial aunt." Today, the hum of insects, and the fresh voices of birds, echo what is left of her sweet songs and music in the forests. In this metamorphosis, Nyanyi Myete represents the idea of "kincentric ecology": an ecologic paradigm of an indigenous people in which humans, plants, animals, and weather are all part of an extended family. The natural is thus personalised and made sacred, the forest is not just a store of timber, but the living garment of the Sky Queen.

In their annual agricultural festivals like Unying Aran the Adis honor her memory and the lost Kojum-Koja civilization. These dances and songs are used for both purposes: they petition for blessings from the protective spirits and they are a collective 'institutioned communication' which maintains the memory of the ecological trauma (the flood) and the ecological salvation (the Sky Queen). "Nyanyi Myete never forgot that she was from a land deluged by a great flood, so that the pitfalls of ecological hubris were not lost from generation to generation, Dai



says. The narration of this myth by Dai is allegorical and serves as a reminder to her own tribe not to go against Nature and to not become its prey.

Nature as a Spiritual Teacher in a Speeding Up World

The myths documented in *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* are not only of a distant, static history, but are also highly relevant to the present day problems of the tribal peoples of Northeast India. The state of Arunachal Pradesh is in a state of flux, as a result of globalization, capitalism and administrative integration into the Indian state. The "bamboo houses" in which the "floating flames" of the hearth lit the night have been replaced by concrete structures, and the ancient rhythms of communal storytelling are being over-extended and broken up by the temptations of the laptop, cell phone and social media.

With a rapidly changing world, the Adis' traditional animistic belief centered on forest ecology and living in harmony with nature is facing significant danger. The modernistic aspect brings into the sphere of "anarchic oikos" the term coined by the ecocritics, which refers to the economic paradigm that sees nature as only a source of commercial exploitation. The forest is being cut down by timber entrepreneurs, the rivers are scarred with plastic and trash and the holy mountains are being blasted for development. The tribal youth are subjected to a tremendous "dissociation from the ecosphere" as they find themselves caught in a dialogue of money, threat and inducement, resulting in spiritual degeneration and a growing sense of purposeless.

In this sense, against the background of the erosion of ecology and culture, Dai's illustrated folklore puts Nature as the ultimate spiritual teacher. The myths are a reaffirmation of the philosophy of biocentric egalitarianism, which states that human beings do not rule the Universe, but are only one strand in the complex web of creation. According to the world view of the tribes, the elements of nature are active, have memory, and have a strong sense of moral responsibility. Trees are seen as the "priests and gods of a pre-human age" and their malicious destruction results in the loss of their homes, and their loss, of the people. Rivers are not only bodies of water, but "drowning spirits" and "strong-armed gods" that must be treated with respect and that can inflict terrible revenge if they are polluted or disrespected.

The folk tales prescribe a moral order with taboos to preserve the ecological balance. For example, hunting for survival is allowed, but hunting for profit or not following the proper purification rituals will arouse the wrath of the animal spirits. The myth of the weretiger also



underscores the fluid nature of man and beast. That a man could transform his spirit into that of a tiger and that the tiger's spirit is a 'brother' to man, evokes a great respect for wildlife. The tiger has to be mourned by the village and days of taboo are observed, as with a murdered human, compensation for its death is to be made. These traditional rhythms and beliefs teach respect for the environment, placing it on a sacred guard by curbing the destructive forces of man's greed.

In publishing *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime*, Mamang Dai is performing a powerful resistance against "epistemicide", defined by the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by dominant, colonial or mainland narratives. Oral traditions wither away and ancient rhapsodists vanish, and in such a society, writing is the new medium of cultural survival. Dai appropriates the English language, which has been the instrument of the coloniser, with the animistic rhythms, the names of local spirits (Biribik, Miti-Mili, Dimitayang) and the ecological concerns of her people. She sets out to reclaim tribal history, and turns the folkloric "myth of the lost script" into a triumphant narrative of the reclaiming.

Mamang Dai's illustrated folklore is a significant contribution to the strength of the ethnic identity in Arunachal Pradesh. *The Sky Queen* and *Once upon a Moontime* push beyond the confines of "children's books" and serve as sacred archives that tell the story of the cosmological origins, moral limits and ecological knowledge of the Adi people. They show a worldview in which the physical and the spiritual are intricately intertwined and where the guardians Donyipolo and the ancestors' spirits are always present.

The centre of this cosmological continuity is the miri, the shaman whose chants were once used as the only link between the human and the divine, the forgotten past and the living present. But with the traditional moshup (community hall) and rasheng (girls' dormitory) being replaced by modern urban isolation, Dai takes on the role of literary shaman. In her evocative storytelling, she makes sure that the mythic metaknowledge of the tribe is not silenced by the mountains' stillness.

Dai's work is a much needed paradigm for ecospirituality in a fast-changing world facing environmental destruction and cultural homogenization. Her folklore shows the humanity that nature is not a passive resource, but a sentient spiritual teacher that can bring severe retribution like the destruction of the Kojum-Koja as well as boundless grace as personified by Nyanyi Myete. These legends continue to be remembered and re-told, their legacy holding the tribe



together through the tumultuous "Pensam"-the in-between space of modernity, and assuring the survival of the tribe's soul for as long as the river, the sky and the forest remain.

Mamang Dai's illustrated folklore, especially the books *The Sky Queen* (2005) and *Once upon a Moontime* (2005), is a rich literary archive which helps to retain the cosmological and ecospiritual legacy of the indigenous Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. During the frenzied modernization that characterizes the time, the transformation from "bamboo houses," "floating flames," to "concrete" buildings, increasingly shaped by "laptop, mobile, and TV" has led to a crisis of cultural memory. History, identity and ecological wisdom have always been passed on orally in the Adis, who have traditionally been a preliterate people. This total dependence on oral memory is represented in the 'myth of the lost script', a tale of a time when an ancestor was very hungry and ate the tribe's written language, written on dried skin. Thus, their oral traditions, myths and legends have served as the cornerstone of their culture. In doing so, Mamang Dai functions as an auto-ethnographer, who is involved in the processes of documenting and archiving these myths, in written English, so as to prevent "epistemicide"—the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by dominant discourses. This essay examines how Dai's *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* lay the cosmological groundwork for the concept of tribal identity, how they express the essential function of the miri (shaman) as the keeper of metaknowledge, and how nature is an authoritative spiritual teacher of human morality in an increasingly dynamic and changing world.

The Adi creation myths are not just children's tales, but are elaborate ontological systems which explain the nature of the universe and the interdependency of humanity and the environment. *Once Upon a Moontime* is a book that reveals the elemental origins of the world to Dai. How the world was made" posits a primordial universe made up of all water. It speaks of the existence of human beings on earth, two brothers on the sky who had thought of it and directed the elements to create it. To create solid land, they "called the wind from the four quarters" - East wind bringing forth yellow dust; South wind bringing forth red dust; North wind bringing forth black dust; West wind, mixing them. In this myth, the land of Arunachal Pradesh is not just a physical space but also a sacred entity, a product of the work of the celestial gods and nature.

These stories help to build a strong sense of the environment, creating a new paradigm that sees people's lives existing in the natural world. In Dai's rendition of these myths, this "Ecospiritualism" or nature and spirituality are bound together is evident throughout the



animistic belief system that is part of the Adi world. For adults, these tales are filled with more than one meaning, while for children they provide a way to learn about their culture, with its imagination and mores embodying the true spirit of the Adi people. Moreover, folklore posits a fundamental identity that rests on the 'kincentric ecology' perspective, in which the earth, sky and humans are joined in a common inheritance. The natural elements (rivers and mountains) are allegorically used by Dai to "reveal the oneness and recognition of Adi tribes".

In this oral society, the knowledge of cosmological truths and communal history is all on the shoulders of the miri or shaman. The miri is the bearer of the tribe's collective memory and "institutioned communication" (recitations, rituals, and the observance of ancient customs) among the members of the tribe. The shaman plays an essential part in Dai's stories, especially in the performance of the sacred stories of origin (Abang) in communal dances such as the Ponung. During the long nights of the village storytellers in the moshup (village longhouse), "myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers", who are the shamans.

The shaman's chantings are deep knowledge of life going right back to Keyum, the state of absolute nothingness. This genesis is precisely recorded by Dai: "There was no darkness or light, there wasn't any colour, shape or movement, it was only Keyum, it was nothingness". From this faint glimmering of the far distant past, a "spark was born that was the light of imagination, which 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". Reciting these cosmological origins, the shaman creates a living bridge between this world and the transcendent, the very questions of the tribe's existence.

But this old tradition faces a great challenge towards modernity. Dai asks the poignant and melancholy question: "The old rhapsodists were all but extinct, and if they were gone, who would remember? When these traditional storytellers are not around, Dai herself takes on that role as a modern-day miri. Printing these oral chants, she makes sure that the "rhapsodist chants stories of ghosts and demons and human knowledge" are never forgotten, allowing for a bridge to be created between the oral transmitter and the modern literate recipient.

The Sky Queen is an ecospiritual allegory tracing the physical manifestation of the world, however, it is also a deep moral lesson about what it means to preserve, to destroy and to have the moral authority of nature. The story revolves around "Nyanyi Myete," the main character who is considered to be the "beautiful lady who floated in one day from the deep endless skies". This celestial figure is used by Dai to tell the tale of the Kojum-Koja, an imaginary people



group that was completely wiped out because of their misdeeds against the natural order. The story is a powerful reminder of the dangers of human pride and the breaking of natural laws.

For Dai, nature is not merely a setting but an active, righteous entity to be respected in his folk tales. Nature is a powerful force and when human beings interfere in the ecology or when they neglect the "ancient customs" and taboos, nature retaliates with a great force. Dai's portrayal of the natural environment is "vivid and poetic, with a reverence for the environment", but also "ruthless in the face of transgression". The example of the Kojum-Koja illustrates this kind of ruthlessness, it is a spiritual lesson: the domination and irresponsible use of nature inevitably leads to annihilation. It's a reminder about how fast a "tooth and claw" situation can get to those who don't respect the boundaries of the environment.

These folktales illustrate how nature serves as a strict spiritual teacher, imparting the lessons of self-restraint, respect and harmony to the tribal community. The myths state that the universe is governed by forces that are ever-present, such as the sun and moon, Donyi-Polo, "whose light shines on all equally," invisible forces that communicate with the people and help to dictate their fate. The Adi people's value system is one that promotes ecological balance over careless exploitation, and they have done this by remembering and retelling the story of the Sky Queen.

The need of Dai's literary project is accentuated by the swift socio-cultural changes that are transforming the state of Arunachal Pradesh today. The indigenous peoples live in an "in-between", what has been described as a "Pensam", a "Pensam" that reflects the "middle ground", the "hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows". It's a transitional world, anything can happen, everything can be lived. It is an interposition of the mythic past and the globalized present that is the in-between state today. Rapid modernization, the application of a foreign legal system, and the constant push for infrastructure has resulted in a lot of destructive and cultural dislocating effects. The pristine mountains face the "red gash" of roads, and the sacred landscape is being swept by the tide of plastic debris and broken glass.

Dai's folklore, documented in this context, is an important mechanism in cultural survival in this ever changing paradigm. The shift from an oral to a printed society is a signature gesture of "resistance" to the erasure of ethnic history. The absence of any written record of the tribal people's history means they have to go by "the stories that the older men and women remember" in order to establish their ancestry and claim ownership of the land. Dai has "restored" the



folklore with "modern sensitivities" making the resource of Arunachal Pradesh available to the world and ensuring it is available for generations to come.

Conclusion,

Mamang Dai's *The Sky Queen* and *Once upon a Moontime* venture beyond the limits of children's books to serve as important vehicles for the transmission of Adi cosmology and ecospiritual wisdom. These texts carefully build up the identity of the tribe, identifying it as a group that draws its roots from the elements of water, wind and sky. They remember the importance of the miri, who chanted Kejum and creation and were the community's only repository of metaknowledge. Moreover, Dai's folklore paints a picture of nature as an all-powerful spiritual teacher, both bestower of grace and apocalyptic bringer of destruction, offering a moral compass for the ecological and cultural challenges of the present day. While the times may change, Dai's literary renditions of orally transmitted myths attest to the fact that the soul of the land—the rivers, the mountains, the ancient memories—continues to resonate as the people of Arunachal Pradesh navigate the fragile “Pensam” between their animistic past and a globalized present.

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